

LINER NOTES

Keola Beamer

MOE'UHANE KIKA

TALES OF THE DREAM GUITAR

Keolamaikalani Breckenridge Desha Beamer was born February 18, 1951, in Honolulu. He grew up in Waimea on the Big Island of Hawai`i and can trace his roots in Hawaiian music at least as far back as the 15th century; to illustrious *kupuna* (ancestors) such as Ahiakumai Ki`eki`e, queen of the Big Island, and Ho`olulu, one of the *kapu* (sacred) twins born of Kameiamoku, favored wife of Kamehameha Nui. In traditional Hawaiian society, *ali`i* (royalty) such as these recognized that sounded words possess *mana* (spiritual power). They encouraged musical expression as a way to preserve information and communicate with one another or the gods.

“I think that’s why my family is so serious about music,” Keola says. “We have been, are, and always will be. We came from a history of oral tradition in which music played a big part. Our genealogies, land boundaries, and navigational information were all in the chants. If a Polynesian navigator were to disassociate from the mnemonic overlay that he employed to remember the positions of thousands of stars, he and his companions would soon perish at sea. We are only now beginning to realize the wealth of that knowledge, how much has been lost, and are finally making some serious footholds in regaining some of these meanings.”

Throughout the generations, the Beamers have maintained a high level of involvement in the musical arts. In the 20th century they have produced a large number of influential performers, composers and teachers. These include songwriter and hula exponent Helen Desha Beamer (Keola’s great-grandmother), composer Pono Beamer (his grandfather), master teacher Louise Beamer (his grandmother), falsetto singer and pianist Mahi Beamer (his cousin), and chanter and teacher Winona Beamer (his mother). Keola continues this proud legacy. “That’s part of being in the Beamer family - trying to live up to your own heritage,” he says.

From a young age, Keola has played guitar, piano and *ohe hano ihu* (bamboo nose flute). He studied hula and sang in glee clubs while attending Kamehameha Schools in Honolulu. He also began to play for dancers at his mother’s hula studio. Since the early 1970s, he has been recording albums, ranging from cutting edge Hawaiian pop to slack key in his own unique style. In 1972, he released his groundbreaking solo slack key album, HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY IN THE REAL OLD STYLE (Music of Polynesia 22000), which featured his beautiful instrumental arrangements of Hawaiian standards, vocal pieces backed up by slack key guitar, and his original compositions. The recording has had significant influence on many slack key guitarists of the younger generation, most notably Ozzie Kotani.

Keola was also an active teacher of *ki ho`alu* in the early ’70s, and compiled a book, HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY GUITAR (Oak Publications; originally issued as Keola Beamer’s FIRST METHOD FOR HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY GUITAR). It was the first comprehensive teaching manual to be published on the subject. His teaching continues today with an instructional video, THE ART OF HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY GUITAR, which also features a booklet containing music and tablature. Along with the recordings of older performers like Gabby Pahinui, Leonard Kwan, Atta Isaacs, Sonny Chillingworth, and Ray Kane, as well as

younger players Ledward Kaapana (with his group Hui Ohana) and Peter Moon (with his group The Sunday Manoa), Keola's contributions to slack key during this time also helped spark public interest in *ki ho`alu*, launching a statewide revival of the tradition.

Keola is especially noted for his ability to recontextualize ancient Hawaiian *mele* (songs) into contemporary settings, in which he has created a beautiful style uniquely his own. He has fashioned stirring instrumental arrangements of many traditional pieces for one or more guitars by adding innovative, often complex introductions, bridges and endings to fill in simple melodies. Keola's solo guitar technique is characterized by his use of hammer-ons and pull-offs (see song #11, **Au Kai**) and his marked use of the nylon string guitar in addition to the more common steel string guitar. He has also brought the evocative sounds of the *ipu hokiokio* (gourd whistle) and *'ohe hano ihu* (bamboo nose flute) into his arrangements.

After twenty-two years of recording and many hit albums later, Keola returned to the studio in 1994 to produce the critically acclaimed WOODEN BOAT, an album of original and traditional songs that skillfully navigate the deep waters of both slack key and world music trends. Keola continues his slack key journey with MOE`UHANE KIKA, a collection of instrumental tales from *ka moe`uhane kika*, the dream guitar.

"The concept for this recording," Keola says, "comes from the way that my guitar intonates. In the last year or so I've been concentrating on the solo aspects of my performance and some interesting things became apparent to me. One of the first things I noticed is that in some of these tunings, the vibrating of sympathetic strings creates a beautiful overtone series. The overtone series, of course, has been around since time immemorial but actually embracing it, working with it, and within it is something I tried to focus on in this recording. It is probably most apparent when I use the low C Wahine tuning. If you listen very carefully, you can hear a high spectral or ghost-like presence. The mysticism and spectral shadowing inherent in this halo, or veil, reminds me of what one may experience in a dream. That's how the idea for this recording came into being."

"I have a guitar design philosophy where I have instrument makers move the main brace about six inches up toward the neck," says Keola. "That's why instead of there being a sound hole in the center, there are two smaller holes on the sides. This frees up six more inches of sound board to vibrate and produce sound. Also, I use close grain spruce for the guitar top. If the grain is tight and straight, then the molecules in the sound board more easily align and there's a uniformity of vibration." Even under ideal conditions, acoustic instruments can be kind of cranky for the first few minutes they're handled. "The molecules have to set up," Keola says. "When they begin to align, that's when the tone begins to get real sweet. If cherished, well taken care of, and played constantly, an acoustic instrument will also sound better with age. This is in keeping with the Hawaiian sense of things: that the instrument becomes so infused with human spirit, or the *mana* of the player, that it begins to have a soul of its own."

Like all experienced artists, Keola acknowledges that some performances seem to sparkle with more life than others. Like all great artists, he is humble enough to acknowledge his own sense of mystery about this. "Magic just sort of happens," he says. "You can be as prepared as possible but sometimes that's not enough or maybe it's too much. What is that intangible thing that makes

a good performance and can that be controlled? I don't think so, it just sort of happens. I believe that there are quite a few of those moments on this recording. I'm proud of it."

ABOUT THE SONGS

Set One

1. *E Ku`u Morning Dew*

'Ukulele virtuoso, researcher, and filmmaker Eddie Kamae, his wife Myrna, and Larry Kimura collaborated on this lovely *mele ho`oipoipo* (love song) about a romance that remains as fresh as morning dew. Keola performs solo on a nylon string acoustic guitar in C-G-C-G-A-D, and he begins this piece with an original introduction. The lightly diffused *ho`opapa* (harmonics) heard in the middle and at the end delicately evoke the first blush of morning light pushing through the leaves of trees.

Keola says he found the inspiration for this impressionistic arrangement in the misty uplands of Waimea on the Big Island, where he spent his youth. "Our little house, *Pu`unani* (Beautiful Hill) was in a small clearing in the forest. In the very early mornings, only the soft hush of the wind would speak in the complete silence of the forest. I often think that one of the most precious things in the world is the space between things. The air that lives amid the strings, the space that sings between the notes."

2. *Lei 'Awapuhi*

This popular standard speaks of an *'awapuhi* (ginger) lei that binds two lovers securely. Royal Hawaiian Band leader Mekia Kealakai is said to have composed the melody in 1893 on a train en route to the Chicago World's Fair. At the fair, Kealakai apparently made quite an impression: John Phillips Sousa offered him a job with his band. He chose instead to return to Hawai'i, where this song still circulates widely. It is a particular favorite of slack key guitarists.

"I'm old enough to remember when we all thought slack key would die," Keola says. "There were many reasons for that. One of them was that our *kupuna* (ancestors) had lost so much, their land, their religious system, their sense of place in the universe. The last thing they wanted to lose was their music, so tunings became very cultish and protected. The irony was that by way of holding the secrets so close, this art form was actually dying, suffocating because the information wasn't being communicated. Maybe there is truth in the saying that one should hold the things that one loves with an open hand. Now we talk of these tunings and share them on records with total strangers, and we want to do that, but in the old days, no, never."

For this recording, Keola uses his trademark C Wahine tuning (C-G-D-G-B-E), but plays in the key of G on a nylon string acoustic. He begins the song solo, then adds a second nylon string voice, symbolically uniting the lovers portrayed in the song.

3. *Winter Tide*

On this original composition for solo steel string, Keola plays in a variant of a C Major tuning: C-G-C-G-D-E. He draws his inspiration from the sights and sounds of the ocean in winter. "Some people think Hawai`i doesn't experience seasonal changes," Keola says. "But that isn't true. We definitely have seasons. Winter in Hawai`i brings huge swells from the Northern Pacific. It's a time of darkened skies and powerful waves rolling toward the shore. Like the winter tide, the guitar's tonality here changes into an almost brittle, shard-like quality, as if a series of waves has appeared, disintegrating like glass against the sharp lava rocks of a windy, black coastline.

4. *He Punahale No `Oe*

This song, written by Albert Nahale`a, has become a popular Island favorite. You often hear it being dedicated to loved ones over the radio and even at weddings or a baby's lu`au. Keola performs it solo in C Wahine tuning on the nylon string guitar, adding a beautiful bridge with a bittersweet F minor to C Major progression. Throughout the performance he interjects extremely subtle tempo variations to evoke the image of a beautiful child asleep in a softly lit room. "The guitar whispers," he says, "rising and falling like the gentle breathing of a small soul."

5. *Slack Key Music Box*

The arrangement for this dulcet original centers on two steel string guitars in F Wahine tuning (C-F-C-G-C-E) capoed up to the 9th fret to sound in the key of D. A third guitar, also tuned to F Wahine, is occasionally added and played in the key of C while capoed to the 2nd fret to sound in the key of D. The song reflects both a man's love for his wife and a musician's heightened sensitivity to sounds. As Keola explains, "My wife, Moana, has a small collection of Hawaiian music boxes. As she gets ready for work, she enjoys lifting the lids of the little koa boxes and hearing the music waft through the house. One day I sat down and imagined what a little slack key music box would sound like if it were sitting on the dresser in her room."

6. *Ku`uipo Ku`u Lei*

Many Hawaiian *mele* (songs) use poetic images of flowers to express affection. The title of this traditional lovely old melody, which translates as "my beloved sweetheart, my beloved lei," typifies this romantic custom. Keola plays it solo in C-G-D-G-B-E, a C Wahine tuning that has come to be known in slack key circles as "Keola's C," since he has used it most prominently. "Wahine" is the term for a tuning that contains a major 7th chord or has a major 7th note in it (in this case, the second string, B). A characteristic of Wahine tunings is the open major 7th note that is hammered on to produce the tonic (here, the C note) and produces a resonant open (V) chord G. Some say these tunings are referred to as "Wahine" (which is also Hawaiian for "woman" or "femininity") because of their sweet flavor. Others say the tuning got its name in older days, when women used to favor this tuning in their playing.

7. *Sweet Singing Bamboo*

`Ohe (bamboo) of various types has grown in Hawai`i since the earliest human settlement, and ancient Hawaiians used it for the instrument *ka`eke`eke* (bamboo pipes held in the hands and struck against a firm surface). Depending on the strength of the wind blowing through it, bamboo seems to be whispering, sighing or singing. Prolific composer Maddy Lam wrote this charming *mele hula*, inviting us to listen as the bamboo sings about a rendezvous where tradewinds softly kiss the cocoa palms on flower scented nights.

The term *mele hula* refers to a *mele* (song) in which *hula* (dance) provides visual embellishment for the text. Because the words are the central focus (as they are in all traditional Hawaiian music and dance), *mele hula* leave little or no room for instrumental breaks. To aid in hearing and remembering the words, melodies tend to have repeating refrains. With the arrival of a wide variety of melody instruments in the 19th century, Hawaiian musicians began to expand the role of instrumental music, building on, rather than abandoning, this *logogenic* (word based) focus. Scholars and artists alike often point to the voice-like qualities of *ki ho`alu* and *kika kila* (steel guitar). The single note phrasing, frequent slides up to pitch, subtle alterations of volume, love of contrast, and other stylistic features all perpetuate aspects of Hawaiian chant.

This arrangement nicely illustrates the vocal attributes of slack key. Keola created it around a trio of guitar voices in C Wahine tuning. A nylon string guitar carries the main melody, while an electric adds harmonics and texture effects. A second nylon guitar adds harmonics and softly muted percussion. For Keola, the three guitars evoke feelings of the land, the sky, and the vastness of the ocean.

Set Two

8. *Medley: Ke Ali`i Hulu Mamo & Kimo Hula*

In this medley, Keola pays tribute to the compositional genius of his great-grandmother, Helen Kapuailohia Desha Beamer (1881-1952). "She is the backbone of the Beamer family," Keola says. "There is a timelessness to her work that transcends generations." A very well-known singer and hula dancer, 'Sweetheart Grandma,' as she was affectionately known, composed many songs that have become Hawaiian standards. She skillfully combined Western ideas of melodic structure with thoroughly Hawaiian attitudes about the function of songs and the primacy of words. She drew inspiration from dreams, journeys, or events of significance. She embroidered her *mele* with imagery from nature and *kaona* (hidden meaning), writing most often to honor particular people or commemorate events.

Ke Ali`i Hulu Mamo honors Princess Elizabeth Kahanu Kalaniana`ole, wife of Prince Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana`ole. The title proclaims her the "mamo-feather *ali`i*." The verses convey images of the mamo and `o`o birds (whose feathers adorned the traditional cloaks of the *ali`i* or monarchy), as well as love in the delicate soft brush of the *lehua* (a blossom

from the ohia tree).

Kimo Hula was written for James `Kimo' Henderson and his lovely estate, Moanike`ala, in the uplands of Pi`ihonua above the town of Hilo. Helen clearly expresses a sense of appreciation in the third verse, which says, "*Mahalo ia `oe e ka hoa aloha i ka ho`okipa e na malihini* (Thank you, dear friend, for your gracious hospitality to visitors)."

Keola begins the medley with a beautiful impressionistic passage in the key of A minor before ascending to the C Major key in the bridge. This use of the relative minor key (three half steps down from the major key) is rooted in traditional Hawaiian *oli*, or chant. Keola plays solo on the nylon string guitar in the C Wahine tuning.

9. *Roselani Blossoms*

This Johnny Almeida classic celebrates Maui's official flower, the *lokelani*, or rose. The song is said to have been inspired by a lei given to a woman friend. It speaks in typically poetic language of the author's desire to sip the delicious waters of `Iao Valley on Maui. Keola plays it as a steel string solo in a F Wahine tuning, (C-F-C-G-C-E), which is sometimes referred to as `Leonard's F' because the first recordings in this tuning were made by slack key master [Leonard Kwan](#).

10. *Haole Hula (Alekoki)*

This song is actually Haole Hula, composed in 1928 by the great Hawaiian composer R. Alex Anderson in (1894 - 1995), and it describes his love for Hawaii, and for playing music. It is sometimes called Alekoki, because of the use of that word in the song (and there are two other songs called *Alekoki* as well).

Keola plays solo in C Mauna Loa tuning (C-G-E-G-A-E) on the nylon string. Mauna Loa tunings are based on a major chord with the top two thinnest strings tuned a 5th interval apart. This way these two strings can be played in 6th intervals, producing a distinctively sweet sound. The top two strings can also be "frailed" (strummed rapidly with the index finger, as Keola does in the introduction), producing a very characteristic sound of this tuning. Here Keola adds his own original bridge to the song.

11. *Au Kai*

Another original inspired by the subtly swirling ocean tides, this solo steel string guitar composition in F Wahine tuning distinctively displays many of Keola's trademark ornaments. His use of hammer-ons and pull-offs can almost be felt as well as heard. A "hammer-on" is an ornament produced by plucking a note and immediately fretting above that note to produce a second tone. "Pull-off" refers to plucking a string and immediately pulling the finger off that note, producing a second note that is either open or fretted by another finger.

12. *'Alekoki*

Maintaining Polynesia's strong poetic tradition, Hawaiian composers brilliantly make use of a wide variety of literary techniques to craft songs of richly layered meaning. This well-known mele hula uses images of a blocked stream and a storm at sea to tell the story of a spurned offer of marriage. The lyrics are attributed to either Prince William Lunailo or King David Kalakaua. The melody is attributed to Lizzie Alohikea, one of the best-known singers with the Royal Hawaiian Band in the early 20th century and wife of the noted Kaua`i composer, Alfred Unauna Alohikea.

Through the years, this song has had five different musical settings. Keola performs the most commonly known version and in the tradition of this ever-changing song, has again added his own original bridge. He plays solo in C Mauna Loa tuning (C-G-E-G-A-E) on the nylon string. Mauna Loa tunings are based on a major chord with the top two thinnest strings tuned a 5th interval apart. This way these two strings can be played in 6th intervals, producing a distinctively sweet sound. The top two strings can also be "frailed" (strummed rapidly with the index finger, as Keola does in the introduction), producing a very characteristic sound of this tuning.

13. *Medley: Bali Ha`i & Stranger in Paradise*

For nearly two centuries, the South Pacific has been one of Western popular culture's favorite Edens; an idealized paradise of green cliffs, white beaches, and blue lagoons. Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote **Bali Ha`i** for their 1947 musical SOUTH PACIFIC, an enormous hit in cold, competitive New York. Robert Wright and George Forrest skillfully adapted the music of Russian composer Borodin for their 1953 musical KISMET. **Stranger in Paradise** was one of the show's biggest hits. Played solo in a C Wahine tuning on the nylon string, the ghost-like overtones of the dream guitar are very apparent. For Keola, the arrangement suggests a stark, desert island.

14. *Medley: Ku`u Lei `Awapuhi Melemele & Pua Be Still*

Ku`u Lei `Awapuhi Melemele (My Yellow Ginger Lei) is another song for the lovely, heavily scented ginger lei. It is variously attributed to Darby and Emily Taylor, Abbie K. Wilson, and John Keawehawai`i. **Pua Be Still**, by falsetto and hula legend Bill Ali`iiloa Lincoln, takes us to his boyhood home in Kohala as the morning breeze wafts the fragrance of the Be Still flowers to two people who are so close that only the breeze is there to join them. Keola notes that the Be Still flower is often planted alongside graveyards as a loving testament to the departed, and as solace for both those who visit, and those whose souls are forever still. Keola plays this solo medley in F Wahine tuning on the nylon string. In the middle of the first song he modulates to Bflat, which is unusual in this tuning.

15. *Sanoë*

Keola built this poignant arrangement of **Sanoë** for four guitars; a steel string acoustic in F Wahine tuning, and three electric guitars in C Wahine tuning, played in the key of F. Keola refers to the electric as his "water guitar," because its sound expresses his strong connection to the ocean. He also weaves in the *`ohe hano ihu* (nose flute), a traditional

Polynesian instrument he has long championed and often features in his performances. "It has a gorgeous sound and texture," says Keola.

Attributed to Queen Lili`uokalani and Kapeka Sumner, this serenade chronicles a romance in the court of Lili`u's brother, King David Kalakaua. "I have tremendous aloha for the compositions of the Queen," says Keola. "**Aloha `Oe, Ku`u Pua I Paoakalani, Queen's Jubilee, Queen's Prayer, Manu Kapalulu, Pauahi `O Kalani, He Inoa No Ka`iulani**, and many others. She was one of the greatest songwriters in history." (Extensive research is being done on the 150+ songs that Lili`uokalani composed, and more of these pieces will be recorded.) "She was a very, very special person. She made music of soulful heart and tenderness held in the arms of her own personal melancholy. She knew in her heart that her kingdom was lost. After all these years, one can still feel her sadness singing in the quiet spaces between the notes."

Notes written by Jay W. Junker and George Winston.

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Keola Beamer performs exclusively on John Pearse Strings, 1-800-235-3302. He plays custom guitars made by Steve Grimes of Grimes Guitars, Kula, HI, and by Ervin Somogyi of Oakland, CA.

For biographical information, video clips, audio samples, guitar tablature, information on guitar design and other subjects relevant to the music of Keola Beamer, please see website and homepage location www.kbeamer.com on the internet.