

[Keola Beamer](#)

Soliloquy - Ka Leo O Loko

For over thirty years, Keola Beamer's artistry has helped breathe new life into slack key guitar music while remaining true to the soul of its deeply Hawaiian roots. In many ways, slack key is an individualistic style of music, handed down through imitation but honed through long hours in which a player is encouraged to express personal feelings, develop trademark techniques and improvise as needed to bring a song to life in the here and now. A mature slack key style is as instantly recognizable as the voice of a family member or close friend. Developing that style often starts with watching, listening and imitating. "I think we all begin by emulating the people we admire," Keola says. "In my case, it was the family and older players like Auntie Alice Namakelua."

Time spent observing and playing leads to the confidence needed to begin the challenging but satisfying process of finding a personal style. "You work and work practicing the music," says Keola. "You live with it and it lives with you, and then one day something magical happens: your music suddenly sounds like you." For Keola, this voyage of discovery combines technical mastery and an organic, non-competitive honesty. "I believe that style is always there in the human heart," he says. "Everybody has their own and has to find it for themselves before they can share it with others. For me it happened in my late teens. That's when I first felt that what I was playing was coming from inside."

Born February 18, 1951, in Honolulu, Keola grew up in one of the most famous families in Hawaiian music. The Beamers can trace their involvement in Hawaiian music, dance and chant at least as far back as the 15th Century; to illustrious figures such as Ahiakumai Ki'eki'e, queen of the island of Hawai'i, and Ho'olulu, one of the *kapu* (scared) twins of Kameiamoku, wife of Kamehameha Nui. In traditional Hawaiian society, the sounded word possesses *mana* (spiritual power) and music plays a significant role in all aspects of life. *Ali'i* (royalty) have always actively supported music and dance as means of accomplishing specific goals. Music maintains spiritual, as well as political, stability and disseminates information. "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 chants."

Throughout the generations, the Beamers have maintained a high level of accomplishment in the performing arts. In the last several generations, important public figures include Keola's great-grandmother, noted songwriter and hula teacher Helen Desha Beamer; his grandfather, composer Pono Beamer; his grandmother, hula teacher Louise Beamer; his cousin, falsetto great Mahi Beamer; his brother, guitarist and composer Kapono Beamer; and, of course, his mother, one of the leading figures in the Hawaiiana movement, chanter and teacher Nona Beamer.

Not surprisingly, Keola plunged into music early. "I got serious around age nine," he says. His main instruments were guitar and piano, though he also mastered *'ohe hano ihu* (traditional bamboo nose flute). Glee club and hula came in with his studies at Kamehameha Schools in Honolulu, which began in kindergarten and first grade, then resumed from sixth grade through

graduation in 1969. At that time, thanks to the efforts of Keola's mother and others, Kamehameha was finally implementing Hawaiian culture into the curriculum. "For a long time there was nothing," he says. "But by the time our generation arrived, Mom's songs were getting into the system, and more of the teachers were encouraging us to learn the culture." Opportunities to gain knowledge and experience arose from playing at family gatherings, jamming with friends and providing the music at the Beamer family hula studio.

In 1973, Keola recorded the beautiful and very influential slack key guitar album **HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY IN THE REAL OLD STYLE** (Music of Polynesia 22000). In many ways, this release, along with the early Sunday Manoa albums with slack key guitarist Peter Moon and Hui 'Ohana with slack key guitarist Led Kaapana, the two other most influential slack key guitarists of that generation, represented the advance guard of a movement of Hawai'i's rock-era guitarists to investigate the work of older, more traditional masters, like Gabby "Pops" Pahinui, Atta Isaacs, Leonard Kwan, Sonny Chillingworth, Ray Kane, Fred Punahoa and others. The youth reinvigorated the form with their own ideas, just as every generation had done before. From the beginning, Keola, while respectful of the *kupuna* (elders), has sought to expand the music. "I don't feel that culture's just some natural phenomenon," he says. "We all have a responsibility to help guide it in a good way that keeps things *pono* (moral or virtuous)." Already, at a young age, Keola felt part of his responsibility included teaching.

"In my early twenties, I was making guitars with George Gilmore and Donald Marienthal," he says. "We had the wild idea we could make nice guitars out of koa and mango wood so we took out a loan from the Small Business Administration and started the Guitar and Lute Workshop on Waimanu Street in Honolulu. People started coming in to ask about slack key. There were very few teachers back then, so I agreed to try it." Keola also published an instruction manual entitled **HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY**. Teaching became his main job for several years until he turned to full time performing and composing.

In the mid-1970s, Keola and his brother, Kapono, formed the Beamer Brothers, mixing Hawaiian and pop to create many Island standards, including Keola's best known composition, **Honolulu City Lights**. Throughout the 1980s, Keola turned increasingly to a solo career, which by the 1990s included recording for Dancing Cat.

KA LEO O LOKO is Keola's fifth Dancing Cat album. "It's totally guitar focused," he says. "No singing, no other instruments. It all originates from a guitarist's point of view." Keola says that much of the inspiration comes from his recent return to teaching. This album features more of his solo guitar (eight songs) and more original compositions by Keola (nine) than any other he has done. For the past several years, he has participated in the master-apprentice program at the Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts. "It's allowed me to work very closely with one student, Nobuyuki Yoshida. This builds very solid bonds and allows more of the context behind the music to unfold. In slack key you have to learn more than notes, it's based on the whole relationship to Hawaiian culture."

Keola and fellow guitarist Mark Nelson have also established the Aloha Music Camp, at Kalani Honua near the volcano on the island of Hawai'i, to hold intensive workshops several times a year. In 2001, Keola invited George Kahumoku, Jr., and Ozzie Kotani as guest instructors. Keola

and his lovely wife and performing partner, Moanalani, maintain a busy schedule of touring and teaching throughout Hawai'i, North America, Japan and Europe. "It's really been a struggle all these years to get slack key recognized," he says. "But to meet people from all over the world with such beautiful intentions and see them honoring the culture is so fulfilling and inspiring. It keeps me going."

THE SONGS

Part 1

1. *Pailolo*

Tuning: Solo steel string guitar in G Wahine "Double Slack" (D-G-D-F#-B-D)

A new original named for the channel off Maui, **Pailolo** explores the tuning Keola refers to as G Double Slack, which is a variation of the G Major "Taro Patch" Tuning (D-G-D-G-B-D). The third string is tuned down from G to F#, which makes it a Wahine tuning, one that forms a major seventh chord or has a major seventh note in it.

2. *Kapalua Bay*

Tuning: Solo nylon string guitar in C Wahine "Keola's C" (C-G-D-G-B-E)

Keola's tribute to the region of Maui where he used to play, **Kapalua Bay** reflects the colors of sunset over the water. He plays a nylon string guitar in what many slack key players call "Keola's C," since he is the one who has most prominently recorded in it. In this Wahine Tuning the major 7th note is the 2nd string B note.

3. *Kaulana Na Pua*

Tunings: Two nylon string guitars, both in C Wahine "Keola's C," played in the key of G, and one steel string guitar in C Wahine "Leonard's C" (C-G-D-G-B-D), played in the key of G

Written by Ellen Keho'ohiwaokalani Prendergast in 1893, **Kaulana Na Pua** protests the illegal overthrow that year of Queen Lili'uokalani by American missionary descendants and their allies, who created the Republic of Hawai'i. Blending traditional Hawaiian poetics, an open call to resist annexation and a stirring melody, the song quickly became a rallying cry for the Queen's supporters. This *mele ku'e* (song of resistance) continues to resonate with supporters of Hawaiian sovereignty more than a century later. It is the ultimate Hawaiian lament and blues.

"I made the arrangement in 1971," Keola says, "going for a soulful feel that honors the subject and mood of the song." In this version, Keola uses overdub to create a guitar trio. The steel string guitar tuning is often called "Dropped C" because it is the same as the popular G Major Tuning, with the lowest pitched 6th string tuned down from D to C. It is sometimes also called "Leonard's C" because it has been recorded in most prominently by the late Leonard Kwan (1931-2000), one of the three most influential slack key guitarists of all time (along with the late Philip "Gabby" Pahinui, 1921-1980, and the late Sonny Chillingworth, 1932-1994).

4. ***Kolowaka***

Tuning: Solo nylon string guitar in G Major "Taro Patch" (D-G-D-G-B-D)

This beautiful ballad was originally published by Keola Beamer in his first slack key instruction book from 1973, KEOLA BEAMER'S FIRST METHOD FOR HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY GUITAR (which was expanded and issued with a flexi-disk including this song in 1977 on Oak Publications with the title HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY GUITAR). **Kolowaka**, a beautiful lullaby type piece in Keola's signature *nahenahe* (soft and gentle) style, explores the idea of theme and variation. "I wrote it for my students as a kind of etude," he says. Simple on the surface, it opens up a lot of possibilities for growth and for playing one's own variations.

5. ***Li'i's Song***

Tuning: Solo nylon string guitar in "Gabby's Hi'ilawe" (C-G-E-G-B-E)

Li'i's Song recalls a stray dog with a lot of spirit. "We found it one day alongside the road," Keola says. "Somebody must have abandoned it. Its hind legs were crippled but it had the nicest smile. We really fell in love with that dog and kept it for years." **Li'i's Song** is performed in the same tuning that Gabby Pahinui used for his signature piece, **Hi'ilawe** (the song that, for many musicians and historians, launched the modern slack key era in 1946).

6. ***Mino'aka***

Tuning: Solo steel string guitar in G Major "Taro Patch"

Another student exercise by Keola, **Mino'aka** seeks to develop the flowing quality so highly valued in Hawaiian aesthetics. "Good slack key flows in a relaxed, smooth and connected fashion," Keola says. "The Hawaiian term is *nahenahe*." A transcription of **Mino'aka** can be found in Keola's new instruction book, KEOLA BEAMER TEACHES THE HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY GUITAR.

7. ***Moana's Laundry Basket***

Tuning: Solo steel string guitar in G Major "Taro Patch"

Another Keola original transcribed in his new instruction book, this playful serenade, like much Hawaiian music, comes from an observation of daily life.

PART 2

8. ***Na Hala O Naue***

Tunings:

Keola Beamer: Steel string guitar in F Wahine (C-F-C-G-C-E)

George "Keoki" Winston: Steel string guitar in G Major "Taro Patch" (D-G-D-G-B-D), tuned down to F

A duet with Keola's long-time friend and co-producer George Winston, **Na Hala O Naue** is J. Kahinu's melody based on a longer chant describing Queen Emma's 1871 trip to

Kaua'i. The text describes the hala trees at Naue by the sea, along with lehua trees and birds with eyes focused on flowers. "My great grandmother, Helen Desha Beamer, did a transposition on the melody so it was in the family," Keola says. "One day I was noodling around on it, and George asked to join in. I love his enthusiasm for the music."

9. ***Wai Ulu***

Tuning: Solo nylon string guitar in F Wahine, capoed up four frets to A flat

E awaiāulu i ke aloha (a love securely bound) is the subject of this popular *mele ho'oiipoipo* (love song) attributed to Lala Mahelona and George Kalelohi, Sr. Often played at weddings, the song is popular with slack key guitarists. Gabby Pahinui recorded it with Eddie Kamae and the Sons of Hawai'i on THE FOLK MUSIC OF HAWAII (Panini 1001), Sonny Chillingworth recorded it on SONNY SOLO (Dancing Cat 38005), and Led Kaapana recorded it with Hui 'Ohana on ONO (Poki 9010) and with the Ho'opi'i Brothers on ALOHA FROM MAUI (Mountain Apple 2053).

This gentle yet subtly powerful performance in F Wahine Tuning includes an original bridge Keola added, which is one of his trademarks and fortes. "I can't keep from wandering off sometimes," he says. "Our family has always encouraged that. We say that some melodies go off looking for a place where they can be free, and when that happens you just have to follow where they lead you."

10. ***Pauahi 'O Kalani***

Tuning: Two nylon string guitars, both in C Wahine "Keola's C"

Queen Lili'uokalani (1838–1917) composed this lovely *mele inoa* (name song) in 1868 for High Chieftess Bernice Pauahi Bishop, great-granddaughter of Kamehameha I and Lili'uokalani's *hanai* (adopted) sister. It recounts a visit by the Princess to Mana. The lyrics poetically praise her beauty, dignity and exalted position, and the *hui* (chorus) wishes her long life.

When the Princess died of cancer in 1884, at 52 years of age, she bequeathed her entire estate of more than 400,000 acres to establish schools for Hawaiian youth. The Bishop Estate, her ongoing legacy, maintains the Kamehameha Schools. Keola used to sing **Pauahi 'O Kalani** with the choir at Kamehameha. "This arrangement dates a few years back when there was a controversy at the Bishop Estate," Keola says. "During all the political stuff, I thought it was important to keep the focus on the Princess and her vision."

Slack key guitarist Ozzie Kotani has also recorded a solo instrumental version in another C Wahine Tuning(C-G-D-G-B-D) on his 2002 album TO HONOR A QUEEN (E HO'OHIWAHIWA I KA MO'I WAHINE)—THE MUSIC OF LILI'UOKALANI (Dancing Cat 38018).

11. ***Kawohikukapulani***

Tuning: Two nylon string guitars, both in C Wahine "Keola's C"

Keola's great-grandmother, Helen Kapuailohia Desha Beamer (1882-1952), played a very active role in the cultural life of her times, as a hula teacher, singer, composer and more. "She is the backbone of the Beamer family," says Keola. "There is a timelessness to her work that transcends generations." As she is known in the Beamer *'ohana* (family), Sweetheart Grandma drew inspiration from dreams and close observations of life, embroidering her *mele* (chant or song text) with richly poetic nature imagery and *kaona* (hidden meaning). In the Hawaiian tradition, she created many of her best known songs as *ho'okupu*, gifts for special people.

Kawohikukapulani dates from 1941 and was written for the wedding of Sweetheart Grandma's youngest daughter, Helen Elizabeth Kawohikukapulani Beamer, known affectionately as "Baby." According to the Beamer family, Sweetheart Grandma debuted **Kawohikukapulani** at the wedding ceremony, accompanied by her aunt, Ida, and her sister, Harriet. The bride, who was surprised by the song, wore an embossed velvet *holoku* (dress) and one hundred strands of highly aromatic pikake flowers, a gift from Princess Kawananakoa. With the scent of these flowers filling the air, the proud mother told her daughter: *He lei 'a'i 'oe na ke kupuna / A he milimili 'oe na ka makua / Pulama 'ia 'oe me ke aloha / Hi'ipoi 'ia 'oe ma ku'u poli* (You are a neck lei for the grandparents and a darling for your parents. Cherished with love you are cradled on my bosom.)

"I wanted to take a fresh look at the 1971 arrangement," Keola says. "To me it's fascinating how much time changes your playing. Even if you're following the notation exactly and keeping the same tempo, you don't play it exactly the same. Every performance is the encapsulation of a moment."

12. *The Myna Bird's Dobro*

Tuning: Two nylon string guitars, both in C Wahine "Keola's C"

In the true spirit of Hawaiian tradition, Keola's composition draws deep meaning from nature, its spiritually profound beauty as well as its abundant humor. "In Lahaina there's a big Banyan tree about one hundred fifty years old," Keola says. "Every dawn and every sunset, the myna birds fill the branches and make the most incredible cacophony. Think about that when you listen to this overdubbed duet."

13. *Papa's 'Okolehao*

Tuning: Solo nylon string guitar in C Wahine "Keola's C"

Keola wrote this paean to Hawaiian homebrew for his grandfather, whom the family called Papa. "He made pineapple swipe," Keola says, "and would tie a jug full to his rocking chair so that every time he rocked, it swirled around and got a little tastier." The transcription can be found in KEOLA BEAMER TEACHES THE HAWAIIAN SLACK KEY GUITAR. Sorry, it doesn't include a recipe, only the music!

14. *Ka Makani 'Ula'ula*

Tuning: Two steel string guitars, both in G6th (D-G-D-G-B-E)

An evocative instrumental duet in the beautiful G6th Tuning, similar to the G Major

"Taro Patch" Tuning except the highest pitch is tuned up to E and the top four pitched strings are the same as the Standard Tuning (E-A-D-G-B-E). Composed by Keola, **Ka Makani 'Ula'ula** describes the red wind caused when volcanic ash rises on the Big Island of Hawai'i. "The melody comes from memories of the family ranch," says Keola. "When the billows of red wind roll, it is so dramatic and colorful." Slack key guitarist Cindy Combs, who's first *kumu* (teacher) was Keola, also recorded this song on her 2001 album SLACK KEY LADY (Dancing Cat 38041).

15. ***Pua Lililehua***

Tuning: Two nylon string guitars, both in C Wahine "Keola's C"

A gorgeous *mele ho'oipoipo* (love song) by the legendary performer Kahauanu Lake and scholar Mary Kawena Pukui, **Pua Lililehua** translates as "sage blossom." The song takes place in O'ahu's Palolo Valley, where two suitors court a cherished sweetheart. One is a human being, the other a *mo'o* (ancient Hawai'i's legendary dragon). As the third verse says, *hilo pa'a ia ke aloha* (love is bound fast)..., *'a'ohe mea e hemo ai me a'u 'oe a mau loa* (there's nothing to separate you and me forever).

"My inspiration comes from the Kahauanu Lake version," says Keola. "I admire it very much. It's so startlingly beautiful, a very advanced sound in its day, coming out of some great connection Kahauanu must have made somehow." In tribute to the Kahauanu Lake Trio's stunning vocal harmony, Keola's arrangement features two guitars.

Liner notes by J.W. Junker and George Winston

Produced by George Winston

Engineered by Howard Johnston

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Direction: Mana, Bones, Kultur Management, 831-466-3327, mbkirk@ix.netcom.com

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For more information on the music of Keola Beamer, video clips, guitar tablature and free online slack key guitar lessons, please visit the website www.kbeamer.com