

LINER NOTES

Led Kaapana **Black Sand**

The year 2000 marks Led Kaapana's thirty–seventh year as a professional musician. In that time, Led's hard work and easy going attitude have earned him a reputation as one of Hawai'i's most beloved traditional musicians. A master of *ki ho'alu* (slack key guitar), Led is also accomplished on 'ukulele, autoharp, bass, steel guitar and other plucked string instruments. He plays the slack key guitar in at least eight tunings, six of which are represented on this recording. He is a fine, emotional singer as well, in both baritone and *leo ki'eki'e* (falsetto). Perhaps most importantly, Led blends his virtuosity with an infectious joy for performing, a generous spirit and a *kolohe* (rascally) sense of humor. This makes him not only a pleasure to hear, but also good fun to be around.

Born August 25, 1948, Led grew up in a very musical family in the tiny village of Kalapana on the Big Island of Hawai'i. His brothers and sisters, parents, aunts, uncles, cousins and neighbors all played something. "We didn't have electricity, no television, not even much radio," he says. "So we entertained ourselves. You could go to any house and everybody was playing music."

Kalapana parties were famous for *kanikapila* (playing music), that sometimes went on for days. "People played in shifts, taking over when somebody went to bed," Led recalls. "You'd fall asleep to the music, wake up and the music was still playing. That was the best alarm clock I ever had! Even today when I play, I still picture all the *'ohana* (family) getting together and sharing their songs and their aloha."

Like most Hawaiian musicians, Led learned to play at a young age by watching, listening and imitating. Encouraged by his *kupuna* (elders) and disciplined about practicing, he developed a seemingly inexhaustible ability to improvise. Led says that, from the beginning, improvisation came natural to him. "I was doing it before I knew what it was," he jokes. He adds that, as he sees it, the best improvisation is based on two things: the song itself and the mood of the moment, which changes each time you play the song. "Everything you play, every time you play, there's a mood, an energy. If you plug into it, the music just flows. Even in a simple song, there are so many different ways to play the melody, the rhythm, the harmony. It never stops if you stay open to it."

Led's improvisational skills help him fit in with a variety of musicians and styles. He is a favorite of singers, especially *leo ki'eki'e* singers such as Aunty Genoa Keawe, Uncle Joe Keawe, The Ho'opi'i Brothers, David Chun and others. He also likes to team up with other slack key guitarists, especially Cyril Pahinui, with whom he has toured Europe and the Mainland. Since Led first jammed with steel guitarist Bob Brozman in 1986, these two virtuosos became close friends, on stage and off. "He's like a brother to me," says Led. Under the auspices of the National Council for Traditional Arts, Led has toured nationally three times with a host of top country, blues and jazz guitarists. Of these great players, he feels especially close to dobro wizard Jerry "Flux" Douglas. "Flux always blows me away," Led says. "He's a master of the metal bar." In the last year, Led has opened for Bob Dylan, at the request of Dylan's band, and for bluegrass sensation Alison Krauss, with whom he's recorded. Many performers make a point

of catching Led's act when they're visiting the Islands, including members of the wonderful Cajun band BeauSoleil and country troubadour Steve Young.

Led's flexibility has also made him a regular in the local media. For example, last year, he appeared on four Hawai'i Public Television shows: as slack key accompanist for Aunty Genoa and The Ho'opi'is, as a jamming partner with Bob Brozman, as an 'ukulele soloist in a tribute to 'ukulele virtuosos, and as a featured performer in his own right. "He's in a class by himself," says public television producer Stuart Yamane, "an awesome player and so easy to work with. He fits into just about any music project you can think of." Producer George Winston says, "Led plays with great soul, happiness, gratitude, virtuosity, respect for his influences and peers, and love of his audiences. He enjoys playing more than anyone I've ever seen. And to see him with the reunion of the original members of his trio I Kona, with the equally joyous Bernard Kalua and the great supportive rhythm guitarist Alika Odom, is so exhilarating."

Led cites his mother, singer Tina Kaapana, and his uncle, slack key guitarist Fred Punahoa, as his main influences. "I feel a strong connection to what they and the other *kupuna* shared with me," he says. Despite the isolation of the town of Kalapana, he also heard and absorbed many outside sources. "I've always listened to country, jazz, Latin music, even rock and roll. Sometimes back in Kalapana, I'd sneak a little **Pipeline** or **Walk Don't Run** into the Hawaiian music. My dad would say 'Hey, that's not slack key.' But nobody ever stopped me. They just said to play what you feel and play with aloha."

In 1972, Led formed Hui 'Ohana with his twin brother, bassist Ned and his cousin, falsetto singer and rhythm guitarist Dennis Pavao. Through fourteen albums and countless live appearances, they proudly maintained Kalapana's musical traditions. Afterward, Led stayed with the trio format, creating I Kona, who have released six albums to date.

Led's relationship with Dancing Cat began in 1989. To document Led's diversity, releases on Dancing Cat have spanned a wide spectrum. First came LED LIVE - SOLO (Dancing Cat 38008), a collection of solo performances recorded at concerts in California, where he has built up a strong following. Next, KIKA KILA MEETS KI HO'ALU (Dancing Cat 38031) paired Led with Bob Brozman for a series of sizzling, improvised duets. For 1998's WALTZ OF THE WIND (Dancing Cat 38016), Led took his guitars, 'ukuleles and autoharp to Nashville for an all-star session with Jerry Douglas, Ricky Skaggs, Alison Krauss, her brother – bassist Viktor Krauss, her husband – guitarist Pat Bergeson, Sonny Landreth and others. "That was a real dream come true," he says. "It was a real honor to meet them all and to share the music. That's something I'll never forget. I just want to say *mahalo* (thanks) to all of them."

BLACK SAND brings Led back to the solo setting to explore Hawaiian classics, originals and old family favorites. "It all goes back to the '*ohana*,'" he says. "My mom and dad, Uncle Fred, all the musicians back home in Kalapana. They shared the music with me and I've been lucky enough to share it with others all around the world." Through the hard times and the triumphs, Led has steadfastly maintained his aloha for the music that first inspired him to pick up an instrument and play. He has been richly rewarded for his loyalty to his art. "I got more good memories," he says, "than the Big Island has black sand." His trio, I Kona, is currently playing regularly at the Hawaiian Regent Hotel on the Diamond Head end of Waikiki in Honolulu.

THE SONGS:

1. ***Punahoa Special*** (instrumental)

Led: 6 string guitar in Bb Mauna Loa Tuning (F-Bb-D-F-G-D, from the lowest pitched string to the highest)

A tricky six-part instrumental, **Punahoa Special** was a signature song for Led's late uncle and teacher, Fred Punahoa. Uncle Fred recorded it as **Slack Key Instrumental #1** on the 1974 recording THE WAIMEA MUSIC FESTIVAL (Panini 1006). To honor him, Led changed the title for a 1976 version with his trio Hui 'Ohana on the album ONO (Poki Records 9010) and on the 1983 slack key instrumental-based recording LIMA WELA (Leahi 2001). "Every time I play it, I think of him flicking the strings, and playing those runs," Led says. The song also reminds Led of the late slack key great Sonny Chillingworth and his famous instrumental showpiece which he wrote and recorded in 1958, **Whee Ha Swing**, which Led recorded in 1994 on [LED LIVE - SOLO](#) (Dancing Cat).

Led plays here in the sweet sounding Mauna Loa Tuning. In a Mauna Loa tuning, the two highest (thinnest) strings are tuned a fifth apart so they can be played in a sixth interval. In other tunings, the sixth is played on the first and third strings. Using the thinner second string gives this tuning its sweet sound.

2. ***Koke'e*** (instrumental)

Led: 6 string in Bb Wahine Tuning (F-Bb-D-F-A-C) down to the key of Ab

One can feel the very depth of Led's soul in this beautiful slow version of a modern Hawaiian standard. "Nevermore to say good-bye" ends the refrain of this *mele pana* (place song) composed by the great composer and slack key guitarist Dennis Kamakahi for a beautiful and spiritually powerful spot on the island of Kaua'i. Dennis' own solo version appears on his album [PUA'ENA](#) (Dancing Cat). Dennis first recorded **Koke'e** with the great 'ukulele master Eddie Kamae's group, the Sons of Hawai'i, on the 1980 Sons of Hawai'i album GRASSROOTS MUSIC (Hawaii Sons 6006). Led played the song on autoharp on his recording [WALTZ OF THE WIND](#) (Dancing Cat), and on guitar on LIMA WELA (Leahi 2001), playing the melody in Standard Tuning with accompaniment.

Here, Led uses the guitar to showcase his trademark, soulful, slow tempo, double-thumbing bass. He plays in a Bb Wahine tuning of his own invention, which includes a major 7th note. Often in a Wahine tuning, the major 7th is hammered on to produce the tonic. Hammering on involves playing a note, then creating a second note (while the first is still sounding) by forcefully fingering the string in another position on the fretboard. "I've always loved this melody," says Led. "Dennis writes a lot of great songs, but this is the one I play the most."

3. *Ninipo Ho'onipo* (instrumental)

Led: 6 string in G Major "Taro Patch" Tuning (D-G-D-G-B-D)

Ninipo Ho'onipo dates back to an 1876 trip then-Princess Lili'uokalani took to Puna. A love song, it draws from the legend of Hopoe, who was turned to stone by Pele. Led's arrangement sports a very traditional double-thumbing rhythm, in which the thumb plays bass notes on the first and third beats, and plays rhythm on the higher strings for the second and fourth beats. Listen also for the lovely syncopation, especially in the eighth verse. "As I was growing up, my Uncle Ka'ai used to sing it at family parties and all the Aunties would dance hula," says Led. "This is for all of them and all those happy times."

4. *Mokupuni Nui* (vocal)

Led: 6 string in C Wahine "Leonard's C" Tuning (C-G-D-G-B-D) capoed up 4 frets to sound in the key of E

Led's friend, O'ahu-based songwriter, journalist and performer Keith Haugen, wrote **Mokupuni Nui** to honor the island of Hawai'i, which is affectionately referred to as the Big Island by many local residents. Haugen's original version appears on CHASING RAINBOWS (Pumehana 4914). "I really love this song," says Led. "Being from the Big Island, I like the story and the melody has a nice flow to it."

Led often performs this song live and first recorded it in 1991, using the same tuning, with his trio I Kona on their album NAHENAHE (Kahale 2201). For this solo recording, he plays in a C Wahine tuning closely associated with the great and influential slack key master, Leonard Kwan. "The low bass in the C Tuning really helps fill in the sound," says Led.

5. *Aloha Ia No O Maui* (instrumental)

Led: 6 string in G Major Tuning tuned down to the key of E

A tribute to the valley isle of Maui, by beloved Maui singer Alice Johnson, **Aloha Ia No O Maui** has long roots in Kalapana slack key circles. Led's uncle, Abraham Konanui, recorded it in the late 1940s as part of an incredible medley entitled **Maui Serenade** (available on THE HISTORY OF SLACK KEY GUITAR - Hana Ola 24000). "My mom and dad used to sing it," Led adds. "I've been playing it ever since I was old enough to back them up on slack key. I also do it on steel guitar."

Led dedicates this song to The Ho'opi'i Brothers, from Kahakuloa on Maui. Since first becoming close with the brothers at the 1989 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, Led has shared his talents with these two *leo ki'eki'e* greats on their recordings and at major concerts. "I always enjoy playing with them," he says. "They have a lot of aloha and they're very down to earth."

This song, again played with the double-thumbed bass, features many beautiful improvised choruses. Especially note the great variations with the double-note intervals in 3rds during the 4th through 7th measures (the V7 chord) in several of the choruses

starting in the middle of the song. Led previously recorded it in the same tuning, under the title **Slack-Key #1**, with I Kona on KA LUA O KA MANAWA (Pumehana 4922).

6. ***Nui Papa (Tahitian Slack Key)*** (instrumental)

Led: 6 string in G Major Tuning tuned down to the key of E

Many centuries ago, Tahitians crossed the uncharted vastness of the Pacific Ocean to establish themselves in Hawai'i. Although ties are not as strong as they once were, the two Polynesian cultures continue to share many common features, including musical taste. "I love Tahitian music," Led says. "It's very close to Hawaiian music, but has its own flavor; especially in the rhythms. We also share a lot of the same words and talk about the same things in the *mele* (lyrics)."

Written by Tahitians Michael Poroi and Patrick Noble, **Nui Papa** speaks of birds that fly from island to island. "I learned it from my friend Petoit, when I Kona went down to Tahiti in 1985," Led says. He recorded a different arrangement of this piece in Standard Tuning in the key of G with a nice added E minor chord on his 1989 album *STILL PRESSIN'* (Kahale 2001) with I Kona. Led dedicates this solo arrangement to his friend to say mahalo for all the hospitality Petoit has extended to him. "He makes you feel right at home, just like Hawaiian style. I'm ready to go back to Tahiti anytime."

7. ***Tue Hey*** (instrumental)

Led: 6 string in C Wahine Tuning (C-G-D-G-B-E) tuned down to the key of Bb.

Tue Hey is another great Tahitian melody Led learned from Petoit. "He's one of the top guitar players in Tahiti," Led says. "He came to I Kona's show there in 1985 and joined us on stage for a song. In the *hana hou* (encore), he played with a cloth covering his guitar. I tied a paper bag to my hand and played that way. We got our picture on the front page of the newspaper for that!" This song especially showcases Led's great improvisational ability and incredibly flowing phrasing.

8. ***Kanaka Waiwai/O Maria*** (instrumental)

Led: Autoharp

Most likely, German immigrants introduced the autoharp to Hawai'i in the mid-19th Century. It soon became quite fashionable, especially in the Royal Court where, according to various sources, it was the favorite instrument of Queen Lili'uokalani. For Led, the autoharp brings back fond memories. "A lot of the aunties and uncles back in Kalapana played it," he says. "I love the way they would finger-pick. When I play, that's the sound I'm after." As producer George Winston says, "Led plays the solo autoharp in his unique finger-picking style with great feeling and beauty."

(Iesu Me Ke) Kanaka Waiwai (Jesus and the Rich Man) is one of Hawai'i's best-known religious songs. The text is based on the famous Bible story in which a rich man asks Jesus how to gain eternal life. When Jesus tells him to give his riches to the poor, the man quickly departs. Jesus then makes the oft-quoted remark that it's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. Legendary musician and

band leader John Kameaaloha Almeida (1897-1985) reportedly composed **Iesu Me Ke Kanaka Waiwai** in 1915 for the Mormon Church, but was told at that time it sounded too much like a hula. Since then, it has gone on to enjoy great popularity. Artists who have recorded it include The Sons of Hawai'i, The Makaha Sons of Ni'ihau, Olomana, Melveen Leed and Led's previous trio Hui 'Ohana. Slack key guitarist Cindy Combs also recorded it on [KI HO'ALU CHRISTMAS](#) (Dancing Cat).

Less well known, **O Maria** is another religious song Led grew up with. "We used to sing them both at church," Led says. "I wanted to do some *himeni* (hymns) for the album because that was a big part of growing up in Kalapana, and, to me, these two melodies fit together really well."

9. ***Waiakanaio*** (instrumental)

Led: Taylor 12 string in G Major Tuning

Kaua'i-based George Huddy, best known for **Sweet Lei Mokihana**, composed **Waiakanaio**, for Hui 'Ohana. They recorded it in G Major "Taro Patch" Tuning on the album KE KOLU (Lehua 7012) in 1974. "George wrote a lot of songs for us," Led says. "He'd come to the house in Kane'ohe, look up at the Ko'olau Mountains, next thing you know he'd have a new song. It would take him ten, fifteen minutes. He was such a talented guy. I just want to thank him for everything he did for us."

In the improvised introduction, Led showcases his great improvisational ability and feeling for the song. Note also the beautiful and soulful rubato "waterfall" style introduction. Especially powerful is the way he ends most of the choruses with the same phrase on the V7 (D7) chord. This is the first time Led has recorded on a 12 string guitar. He again plays with the double-thumb bass.

10. ***Highway to Hana*** (instrumental)

Led: Taylor 12 string in C Wahine "Leonard's C" Tuning

This original composition grew out of a powerful studio improvisation Led created. "The tape was running and I was just jamming," Led says. "At the end, we decided we wanted to keep this tune, so we had to call it something. I said that all the little twists and turns in the melody reminded me of the famous winding road to Hana, and that name stuck." Note how he gradually builds and builds the intensity in this odyssey. He ends the song with a beautiful sunset sounding chord progression of Bb9 to C Major.

11. ***Salomila/New 'Opihi Moemoe*** (instrumental)

Led: 6 string guitar in G Major Tuning

Leonard Kwan: 6 string guitar in G Wahine Tuning (D-G-D-F#-B-D)

On this track Led plays a pure duet with one of his prime influences and inspirations, the great slack key guitarist and *kupuna* Leonard Kwan. Leonard has been one of the three most influential slack key guitarists in history along with the late Philip "Gabby" Pahinui (1921-1980) and the late Sonny Chillingworth (1932-1994). This song features both players playing different songs that have similar structures at the same time. These two

pieces work together miraculously well, both players not straying too far from the melody, with beautiful interplay between the guitars. Led plays the traditional song **Salomila** with the double-thumb bass, which he also recorded in this tuning in 1980 on the recording with Ned Kaapana and Bernard Kamala, NI'HAU HAWAII (Pumehana 4919). He has previously recorded **Salomila** in a Bb Mauna Loa Tuning (F-Bb-D-F-G-D) tuned up to the key of C on LED LIVE - SOLO (Dancing Cat) and in the G Major Tuning with Hui 'Ohana on the 1973 recording YOUNG HAWAII PLAYS OLD HAWAII (Lehua 7006).

Leonard plays his composition **New 'Opihi Moemoe**, which he recorded on his Dancing Cat CD [KE'ALA'S MELE](#), with his characteristic style of often plucking the bass note on the first beat of the measure, then concentrating on variations on the upper pitched strings on beats 2, 3 and 4. His playing here reflects a subtle Latin influence. Both guitarists are in different tunings, creating a strong and beautiful texture, since each tuning has its unique voicings and strengths. In the slack key tradition it is common, when there is more than one guitarist, for each one to use a different tuning.

12. **'Akaka Falls** (instrumental)

Led: 6 string guitar in Standard Tuning (E-A-D-G-B-E) in the key of G
George Winston: piano

One of the most familiar melodies in Hawaiian music, **'Akaka Falls** was a special favorite of Led's mom and dad. It describes a lover's rendezvous at a beautiful *waialele* (waterfall) near Hilo on the island of Hawai'i. Helen Kauinohea Lindsey Parker composed it. Producer George Winston joins Led here on piano. "It wasn't planned," says Led. "He just got inspired listening to me rehearse in the studio. There was a piano there, so he just hopped on. I like the colors he adds. They sound like waterfalls." Led also recorded this song on his duet album with Bob Brozman, [KIKI KILA MEETS KI HO'ALU](#) (Dancing Cat) in Standard Tuning in the key of F.

13. **Black Sand** (instrumental)

Led: 6 string in G Major Tuning

Led learned and adapted this traditional melody from his father, who called it **Portagee Slack Key**. Led's title for the piece honors the famous black sand beach on Route 137, near the Kaapana family village of Kalapana. "We used to go to Black Sand beach all the time," Led says, "We'd throw net, body surf, swim." Black sand beaches are formed from lava. With volcanic activity still common on the island, several new beaches have formed recently and others have been taken away. In 1992, lava wiped out much of Led's home village of Kalapana. Parts of the original beach were covered by a flow that extends more than a mile out to sea.

Led first recorded **Black Sand** in 1978 in G Major "Taro Patch" with his group, I Kona, on NA LEO KANI O PUNAHELE (Pumehana 4908), the album that also featured his first recording of what became his signature tune, titled **I Kona**.

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Mahalos

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