

LINER NOTES

Leonard Kwan KE'ALA'S MELE

Leonard Ke'ala Kwan has been playing *ki ho'alu*, Hawaiian slack key guitar, for over fifty years. He has proven to be a creative artist as well as a trailblazer. Along with late slack key greats Gabby Pahinui and Sonny Chillingworth, he is one of the three most influential slack key players in history. A quiet man with great depth of feeling, his personal philosophy of respect for others embodies the spirit of *nahenahe* (gentleness).

In the late 1940s Leonard was one of the first to take the style outside of Hawai'i, and in the 1950s he released some of the first *ki ho'alu* singles. In 1960 he recorded his classic first album, SLACK KEY (Tradewinds 103, known as "the red album"). This was the first Hawaiian album to feature all instrumental slack key tracks. In 1974 he released his second full album, THE OLD WAY (Tradewinds 1128), and during the 1970s he compiled one of the first slack key instruction books.

Leonard was born in Honolulu in 1931. His mother, Rose Hau'oli, sang traditional Hawaiian music. His grandfather, Reverend Ambrose Hau'oli Kaua, directed the choir at Glad Tidings Church. "When I was about six," Leonard says, "I'd listen to him sing the scale and go around singing it too." He also started picking out tunes by ear on the piano at his aunt's house. At around the age of ten, Leonard began to learn 'ukulele and guitar from his grandfather and his uncle, Joseph "Pete" Hau'oli. "The first slack key tuning they showed me was Taro Patch (Open G Major, D-G-D-G-B-D, from lowest- to highest-pitched string)," he says. "All together I learned at least ten tunings." Leonard's favorite tuning is the C Wahine (C-G-D-G-B-D), known among slack key players as "Leonard's C."

Uncle Pete played *ki ho'alu* in downtown Honolulu. During World War II, when business was booming, he started taking Leonard with him. "I got the chance to play with Genoa Keawe, Benny Rogers, Andy Cummings, all the union guys," says Leonard, "so many I forgot. From then on I was hooked."

Leonard calls this experience one of the most important contributions to his development as a musician. But he also received a solid musical training in the public school system. "At Kalakaua Intermediate I joined the band and orchestra," Leonard recalls. "I played bass and alto sax. We learned to read music and all the basics. At Farrington High School, Moses Sato, our music teacher, used to let us come in after school for extra instruction in music theory. There were three of us who used to stay all the time. The other two eventually joined the Royal Hawaiian Band."

At age sixteen Leonard joined Charlie Kaniyama & His Merry Melodeers, a fifteen-piece dance band, as the stand-up bass player. "I was underage but my mother signed for me," he says. "We played dance music, the popular hits of the day, both Hawaiian and pop." Leonard also often filled in with other groups when a bass player was needed. "I played with big bands like The Torches, lots of smaller combos, and Hawaiian players like Sonny Chillingworth and others."

In 1957 Leonard recorded his first 45 rpm single, **Hawaiian Chimes** (Island Recording Sound 314). About a year later Margaret Williams asked Uncle Pete to record slack key for her new Tradewinds label. Instead he recommended Leonard. "I respected my uncle," Leonard says, "so when he told me to do it, I did it. Gabby had already done his version of **Hi'ilawe** where he sang and played slack key, so I did instrumentals." Leonard's first single on Tradewinds, '**Opihi Moemoe**, became a local hit and he became a frequent visitor to the studios. "All together I recorded about sixty songs with Tradewinds," he says. "Either instrumentals or backing up Linda Dela Cruz, Noelani Kanohe, and others. The way I see it, you might as well make use of what you can while you're living. You can't take it with you. Even if you don't sell, I figure, your children will be proud to hear you on record."

In the 1980s Leonard left the public limelight. Except for an occasional benefit performance on O'ahu or his mother's home island of Maui, he stayed home, teaching his sons and his grandson how to play slack key. In the 1990s he returned to the studio for the first time since 1974 to make a series of solo recordings for Dancing Cat Records, aimed at documenting his entire repertoire. This is Leonard's first release in this ongoing project, and features him playing completely acoustic and solo for the first time. The intimate format allows us to enjoy Leonard's distinctive style to its fullest. It represents a very special event in the career of one of slack key's most influential and beloved figures.

Although Leonard is best known for playing and recording on his uncle's old Gibson F hole electric guitar, on this album he plays a Martin acoustic. Except for the track **Akaka Falls**, played on the electric guitar on his album THE OLD WAY, these are his first solo recordings.

Slack key guitarists Ledward Kaapana, Peter Moon, George Kuo and many others cite Leonard's recordings, especially "the red album," as an influence. Despite this, Leonard says he plays primarily for enjoyment, and the ups and downs of the music business never worry him. "The music business is like a clock," he says. "The hands might be up at the top awhile, but they'll slide back down again. The main thing is to just keep spinning." He is still actively enjoying Hawaiian music, writing new songs and arrangements for slack key.

In 1993 in recognition of his many contributions, Leonard received the Bank of Hawai'i Ki Ho'alu Award from the Hawai'i Academy of Recording Arts. In 1994 he was officially named a Living Treasure by the City and County of Honolulu.

ABOUT THE SONGS

Set One

1. *New 'Opihi Moemoe #3*

Leonard wrote the original '**Opihi Moemoe** as a modulation showpiece sometime around 1958. It remains his most requested song. An 'opihī is a limpet, a type of snail that sticks to tidal rocks. In Leonard's repertoire, '**Opihi Moemoe** (the sleeping 'opihī) belongs to a

trilogy that starts with '**Opihi Bounce** and ends with '**Opihi Momona Nui** (the large 'opihī). In proper sequence they tell a story celebrating the cycle of life. However, it is open to several interpretations if you use *kaona* (hidden meaning), an important aspect of Hawaiian art. Leonard also recorded another piece called **New 'Opihi Moemoe**, in a Bb Wahine tuning (F-Bb-D-F-A-D) on THE OLD WAY. Wahine is the term for a tuning containing a major 7th note, hammered up with the index finger to produce the tonic note, which is one of the characteristic sounds of Wahine tunings.

New 'Opihi Moemoe #3 exemplifies Leonard's style. "I use a lot of variations," Leonard says. "They make what you're playing sound more interesting. It's like when you're cooking. When you put the spices in, it tastes better than just cooking plain. The principle is the same in music. You need the variations to keep it from getting monotonous."

Leonard says that variations are particularly important for an instrumentalist. "For me it's always easier to play when somebody is singing," he says. "The voice'll be the center of attention and take the melody. But when you play a slack key instrumental, to make it sound full, you have to play the bass, the melody and the harmonies, do the picking and keep the rhythm. That's the hard part."

Like most slack key musicians, Leonard continues to experiment with variations even after he's created an arrangement. He plays this piece at a moderate pace in G Wahine tuning (D-G-D-F#-B-D), and the rhythm reflects a subtle Latin influence.

2. *Medley: Pretty Kehaulani & Ipo Hula*

Medleys have always enjoyed a special status in *ki ho'alu*. The skillful joining of similar melodies represents an artist's ability to recognize connections and to maintain fluidity, a quality highly prized in Hawaiian aesthetics. Leonard has fashioned this medley of the traditional **Pretty Kehaulani** and **Ipo Hula**, two hulas he recalls from his childhood, in his trademark C Wahine tuning ("Leonard's C," C-G-D-G-B-D). "You have to arrange them by the rhythm, so they'll fit smoothly," Leonard says. "**Pretty Kehaulani** goes way back. I remember people singing and dancing to it when I was young."

Lena Machado's popular classic, **Ipo Hula**, tells the story of a lei and a *wehi* (an adornment, such as a song, given as a gift) that bring two people forever close. Leonard says he learned the song from The Halekulani Girls. "They did it with such feeling," he says. "I loved playing with them."

3. *Yellow Bird*

In the 1950s calypso songs attracted the attention of musicians around the world. This Caribbean classic, credited to Luboff, Keith, and Bergman, has become something of a staple in Hawai'i, and has crossed over into slack key.

"I learned **Yellow Bird** when I was playing with the combos back in the 1950s or early '60s," Leonard says. "I keep the gist of the song, but I bounce the tempo and take it in a smooth way. When I play I always try to make it sound sweet. The tone you take can

change the meaning of a song. If you say to your *wahine* (woman) 'Come here' in a nice humble way, she'll come, but if you yell at her in a harsh voice using the same words, she'll run away. For me, slack key has a sweetness in the tone. Maybe that's why the old-timers used to play it first thing in the morning when they woke up."

This song features Leonard's characteristic vamps and his trademark low string bass sound. "Leonard's thumb, 'the sub,' is one of the wonders of nature," says producer George Winston. Here Leonard plays in C Wahine tuning with a hint of Latin rhythm, evoking the image of an *'i'iwi*, a honeyeater, or perhaps an *'o'o*, native Hawaiian birds with colorful plumage.

4. *Old Mauna Loa*

Originally arranged by Leonard for his album THE OLD WAY, the traditional **Old Mauna Loa** showcases his playing in a rare G tuning sometimes referred to as Old Mauna Loa, or Ni'ihau tuning, after the island (D-G-D-E-A-D). In this tuning, the second and third strings are "hammered on" after plucking them, which gives this tuning its characteristic sound, especially when two notes are hammered on the third string E note producing the notes E, F#, and G. The open E note on the third string also plays a prominent role. "I learned that tuning and the melody from my grandfather," Leonard says. "I don't know where he learned it. He never talked about who taught him."

5. *Kananaka*

A traditional *mele hula* (dancing song), copywritten by John Kalapana, **Kananaka** mentions the Ma'a'a wind of Lahaina, and the *lipoa* (a delicious edible seaweed) that can be gathered offshore. It also describes the moon serenely floating along the cliffs and the sensation of love. Leonard picked it up from the late Sonny Chillingworth, with whom he played on many occasions. Sonny's version changed keys from G to C and back, but Leonard stays in G and plays variations on the main theme. He remembers Sonny warmly, and feels they shared a similar attitude about music, common among traditional Hawaiian musicians. "We don't hold anything back," Leonard says. "That way you can be sociable with one another. Even now I go to Maui when my friends call me, just go to enjoy the music." Tuning: G Major (D-G-D-G-B-D).

6. *Ke'ala's Mele*

Leonard's middle name, Ke'ala, translates as sweet-smelling or fragrant, and mele means song. In this epic instrumental created by Leonard, he tells a profound story using many of his favorite musical phrases. Leonard plays **Ke'ala's Mele** here in its recording debut in C Wahine tuning.

Set Two

7. *Mauna Loa*

Many wonderful songs are attributed to Helen Lindsey Parker, The Lark of Waimea, including this one. In the words of this very adult *mele hula*, a woman asks the famous interisland ship of the song's title to return her lover. Leonard plays here in F Wahine tuning (C-F-C-G-C-E), which is played with fingering similar to his C Wahine, except that what is played on the highest-pitched string in the F tuning is played on the second string in the C, and so forth. Several Hawaiian tunings are related to each other in this way. He learned this signature song of Gabby Pahinui's from a slack key recording with vocals by Gabby. "I never did play with Gabby," Leonard says, "but I like the way he played. And he had a great voice. It's hard to play and sing like that at the same time."

8. *Medley: Puamana & Mi Nei*

One of Maui's most beloved and popular *mele pana* (songs of place), **Puamana** describes the Farden family estate in Lahaina. Irmgard Farden Aluli composed the song to give musical form to her cherished memories of a childhood spent in Lahaina with a large, close family full of music and dance.

A gentle *mele ho'oipoipo* (love song), **Mi Nei** is often performed with the accompaniment of a solo hula dancer who sings along, and is credited to Charles E. King. Leonard learned both songs back in the days when he was performing as an accompanist. Tuning: C Wahine.

9. *Kanaka 'O Mose*

Leonard learned this *himeni* (hymn) that recounts the story of Moses from his grandfather, a minister who left Maui to found a church in Honolulu. "I grew up in the Christian way," Leonard says. "My grandfather was a minister, then my mom, and now my brother is a minister." Leonard arranged this traditional piece in his C Wahine tuning.

10. *Medley: None Hula & He Aloha No 'O Honolulu*

Another Lena Machado classic, the highly flirtatious **None Hula** describes a pest who receives a certain amount of encouragement from the person who claims to be complaining. Many performers have recorded it.

Hula master Lot Kauwe wrote **He Aloha No 'O Honolulu** (Farewell to Honolulu) ostensibly about a boat ride from O'ahu to the Big Island with a stop in Maui. Considering the number of songs about boats that use *kaona* (hidden meaning) to discuss a more intimate subject, there are probably other meanings. Many Hawaiian singers have recorded this popular classic. Gabby Pahinui, Sonny Chillingworth, Ledward Kaapana, Keola Beamer, and Moses Kahumoku have all done slack key versions.

"These are both old songs," Leonard says. "They go way back. I used to play them with my uncle. Doing them solo I took the gist of the songs and just filled in the gaps, shooting the passing note to make it sound sweet." Leonard plays this medley in F Wahine tuning.

11. *Medley: E Lili'u E & Ki Ho'alu*

Although best known for his instrumental stylings, Leonard also enjoys singing occasionally. He makes his recorded vocal debut here with John Kaulia and Charles E. King's popular adaptation of a traditional *mele inoa* (honoring song) for Queen Lili'uokalani, Hawai'i's last reigning monarch (so far). According to Elbert & Mahoe, hula master Antoine Ka'o'o created the original song, which he called **He Inoa No Lili'u**, as a tribute to Lili'u. He based the melody and most of the text on another *mele inoa*, **He Inoa No Kina'u**, which was composed in the mid-1800s to honor Kina'u, the infant son of Princess Ruth Ke'elikolani.

The traditional slack key standard, **Ki ho'alu**, is played as the instrumental break between the vocal verses. Often played in G Mauna Loa tuning (D-G-D-D-G-D), Leonard plays it here in D-G-D-E-G-D, producing the sweet sound of the 6th tone E note on the third string. This is known as G6th Mauna Loa or "Maori Brown Eyes" tuning, since that song is often played in this tuning. Mauna Loa tunings are based on a major chord tuning with the top two (thinnest) strings tuned a 5th interval apart. This way these two strings can be played in 6th intervals (as the first and thicker third strings usually are in several other tunings), producing the recognizably sweet Mauna Loa sound. The top two strings can also be "frailed" (strummed rapidly with the index finger), producing another characteristic sound of this tuning.

"All of the years I've been recording, I never did sing a song," Leonard says. "So I thought to myself, well, it's time for me to sing now."

12. *Ki Ho'alu Chimes*

One of the most distinctive aspects of *ki ho'alu* is the use of harmonics, also known as chimes, to gently ring out the overtones. Played here in D Wahine tuning (D-A-D-F#-A-C), this original composition, which makes extensive use of chimes, dates back to around 1957 and was Leonard's first recording (under the name **Hawaiian Chimes**). His way of playing the harmonics here is unique, beautiful, and difficult. He touches the string lightly and plucks various natural harmonics with his right hand on the 12th, 7th, and 5th frets (a move usually done with two hands), then sometimes hammers his left index finger on the second or third string on the 1st fret, producing the characteristic sound of this technique. "The gist of the song is the chimes," Leonard says, "and I like this new arrangement, it sounds more full."

Notes by Jay Junker and George Winston.

LEONARD KWAN'S TUNINGS:

On this album:

C Wahine, a.k.a. "Leonard's C" (C-G-D-G-B-D from lowest- to highest-pitched string) - for all songs except as indicated below.

Open G Major [Taro Patch] (D-G-D-G-B-D) - for Kananaka
G Wahine (D-G-D-F#-B-D) - for New 'Opihi Moemoe #3
G Old Mauna Loa, or Ni'ihau (D-G-D-E-A-D) - for Old Mauna Loa
G6th Mauna Loa (D-G-D-E-G-D) - for E Lili'u E/Ki Ho'alu
F Wahine (C-F-C-G-C-E) - for Mauna Loa and None Hula/He Aloha No 'O Honolulu for Ki Ho'alu Chimes

Other tunings:

G Mauna Loa (D-G-D-D-G-D)
C Mauna Loa (C-G-C-G-A-F)
Bb Wahine (F-Bb-D-F-A-D)

Produced by George Winston.

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