

LINER NOTES

Ozzie Kotani

Kani Ki Ho'Alu (The Sound of Slack Key)

Ozzie Kotani is a respected teacher, arranger, composer and accompanist as well as a solo performer. He has played *ki ho'alu*, Hawaiian slack key guitar, for over 20 years, representing it on the Mainland, in Spain and Japan. Like the late slack key master Sonny Chillingworth, with whom he studied, he freely interjects his own personality into his playing, preserving and expanding the tradition.

Born in 1956, Ozzie grew up in the Honolulu neighborhood of Pauoa. He learned a little 'ukulele in the fourth grade as part of the statewide music and culture curriculum. His interest in *ki ho'alu* blossomed during high school, when he heard one of the great instrumentals from slack key guitarist Keola Beamer's album, *THE REAL OLD STYLE (Music of Polynesia 22000)*, on the radio.

"I was captivated by his sound," Ozzie recalls. "I somehow managed to learn some elementary slack key by listening to a tape of Keola over and over. Not having the faintest idea how to tune, I experimented. Some of the harmonics gave me a clue to the melody strings." Ozzie also developed a distinctive four-finger picking method. "Many people insist I'm a classically trained guitarist when they watch or hear me play. This could not be further from the truth!"

In 1975 Ozzie enrolled in Peter Medeiros' slack key class at the University of Hawai'i Continuing Education Program. In 1976 he began studying with the legendary Sonny Chillingworth. The 1970s were an exciting time in Hawai'i as many young people of all backgrounds began to look to *na kupuna* (the elders) for inspiration. Many of the legends of Hawaiian music and dance performed regularly and made albums, some for the first time. With the guidance of his teachers, the influence of recordings and long hours of practice, Ozzie established a style of his own. His completely unique guitar techniques are instantly recognizable to aficionados of *ki ho'alu*.

He recorded his landmark first album, *CLASSICAL SLACK (Pacific Sound Design 1001)* in 1988. It is an all-instrumental, mainly solo collection of his great interpretations of traditional pieces, such as **Ku'u Pua I Paoakalani**. He is currently recording a series of solo instrumental guitar albums for Dancing Cat Records, documenting his entire repertoire as well as other experimental pieces.

"I feel that every artist in an oral tradition sounds different," Ozzie says. "Slack key puts a premium on playing from your heart with your own special touch. That's why I'll show anybody anything they want to see." Five distinctive features of Ozzie's playing are his frequent use of the nylon string guitar, a distinctive, vocalizing approach to ballads, his use of atypical chord progressions, rolls played with the thumb and three fingers and a stand-up bass sound on the low strings on the first and third beats of the measure.

Ozzie returned to the University of Hawai'i at Manoa in 1986 to teach slack key for the College of Continuing Education and Community Service. "The main thing I want to do with my playing

and my teaching is to give back to others what Sonny so patiently shared with me." He is also working on an instruction book/cassette tape set, due to be released in 1995.

ABOUT THE SONGS

Set One

1. *Ku'u Kika Kahiko (My Old Guitar)*

Ozzie composed **Ku'u Kika Kahiko** in 1990 on the guitar the title refers to. "My sister had this old beach guitar," he says. "It had a big chip in the back of the body and a big crack by the sound hole, but the sound was nice and deep. Earlier I'd played all steel string, but this nylon was not bad. Next thing you know, I was playing it quite a bit."

In C6th Mauna Loa tuning (C-G-E-G-A-E, from the lowest- to highest-pitched string), **Ku'u Kika Kahiko** features Ozzie's trademark alternating bass, which evokes the sound of a Hawaiian stand-up bass player. "A lot of my early compositions sounded more contemporary," Ozzie says, "but here I really try to center into the *ki ho'alu* sound and use some of the characteristic techniques." Ozzie recorded this on his beloved old beach guitar, and the song's end features two more of Ozzie's musical signatures; beautiful rolling cascades and an altered chord progression.

2. *Aloha Kaua'i*

Kumu hula (hula teacher) Ma'iki Aiu Lake's tribute to the Garden Isle of Kaua'i sends love to the mokihauna entwined with the small leaf maile as well as to friends. Ozzie begins this rendition with a beautiful minor key introduction. "I'm not sure which version inspired me," he says. "There are so many great ones, but to my knowledge this is the first slack key instrumental arrangement. I did it on nylon string in G Major tuning (D-G-D-G-B-D, also known as Taro Patch, and a favorite of Ozzie's), phrasing with lyrics in mind. I love Kaua'i and really enjoy staying there. This is for the people of Kaua'i and their island."

Ozzie became concerned about breaking from the vocal aspect of the slack key tradition, so he sought the advice of Dr. Elizabeth Tatar, noted author, ethnomusicologist and Chairperson of the Department of Anthropology at the Bishop Museum. "She said to consider what culturally defines the music," he recalls. "In Hawai'i, the language is most important and elements of it must be kept in the music, even in instrumentals, to identify it as Hawaiian. So I try to phrase in the manner it would be sung. But I especially remember these words of hers which have affected my music ever since, "Traditions change!"

3. *Medley: 'Opae E/Kaho'olawe*

Medleys have always formed a major part of many slack key guitarists' repertoires. The

joining of similar melodies represents an artist's ability to recognize connections and to maintain fluidity, a quality highly prized in Hawaiian art. '**Opae E** is a children's song that discusses life in the sea. **Kaho'olawe** is a *mele pana* (song of place), and is attributed to Emma Bishop. It tells of the small but significant island near Maui that has become an important symbol of *aloha 'aina* (love of the land) since the 1970s. "I put them together instrumentally in a traditional mode," Ozzie says. "I like the way they fit melodically." Tuning: G Major on nylon string.

4. ***Kani Kipaipai***

Kani Kipaipai (the sound of inspiration) honors Sonny Chillingworth. It is in G Major tuning on steel string guitar. "Sonny's my *kumu* (teacher), my mentor, my source," Ozzie says. "He was great in so many ways, a real class act. I turned to some of the speed movements he used in some of his great recordings like **Whee Ha Swing** and **Slack Key #1** for this composition. Sonny heard the piece just before he passed away and commended my effort, adding, 'It's special because it's from you, Oz.'"

"Someday I want to write a ballad which reflects my deep feeling of aloha for Sonny. He will always be an inspiration to me, and not only musically."

5. ***Ku'u Lei Poina'ole (My Unforgettable Lei)***

Losing a family member or someone you have a special relationship with is a tragic experience that only time can heal. Inspired by the grace and dignity of this composition with music composed by Charles E. King, Ozzie dedicates it here to two important people in his life to whom he has had to say a final farewell. Tuning: C Wahine (C-G-D-G-B-D) on the nylon string guitar.

6. ***Birdie's Slack Shake Key***

Ozzie learned this song back in the days when it was the theme song of Alapa'i's Back Porch, a popular show on KCCN, the Hawaiian music radio station in Honolulu. Written by slack key guitarist and multi-talented musician Nelson Hiu in the 1970s, it was originally conceived while listening to birds singing as he played guitar at his grandparents' home. He worked the tunes and rhythms they were singing, in addition to other bird song, into a new tune. The "shake" part of the title came later, when Nelson played the tune for his calabash Auntie Laura, because that's what she did when she danced to the song. Although Nelson composed this on the steel string guitar, Ozzie plays here on nylon string in G Major tuning.

7. ***Ione's Theme (Joan's Mele)***

Ione's Theme leans toward the contemporary side of the slack key spectrum. It features Ozzie overdubbed on three instruments. "The steel string plays the background," Ozzie explains, "the nylon plays the lead and then the 'ukulele takes over the lead in the middle, so that there's always two instruments playing." Like all of Ozzie's originals, it was conceived as an instrumental. "I listen to many vocalists but I see myself as mostly an

instrumentalist. Words are important to communicate ideas, but you can communicate emotions by playing a certain way. Sometimes it's hard to express something verbally, but music frees you of that. However, whenever I play a song that has lyrics, always, in the phrasing I try to retain a sense of the words." Both of the guitars are in G Major tuning, and the 'ukulele is in standard 'ukulele tuning, G-C-E-A.

Set Two

8. *Kani Ki Ho'alu*

The title track, in G Major tuning on steel string, goes back to the late 1970s when Ozzie began teaching. The title refers not only to the music, but also to the composer. **Kani Ki Ho'alu** (the sound of slack key) is a name that was given to me when I was studying Hawaiian language at the University of Hawai'i," Ozzie explains. "**Kani Ki Ho'alu** introduces the alternating bass, hammer-ons, slides, chimes; major ornamentations all slack key guitarists use. It starts off simple, pretty much the basic exercise, then expand, open it up so to speak, to show where it can take you."

"I started with Taro Patch tuning (G Major)," Ozzie says, "and I sure haven't exhausted it. There's tons of repertoire to open in it. My mentality is to open up in a favored tuning and really become strong in it. Sonny once told me, 'A good slack key player isn't measured by how many tunings he knows -- it's being able to play almost any song in one tuning that's impressive.' Like most teachers, I share Taro Patch first." A simple version of this song will be transcribed in Ozzie's forthcoming instruction book.

9. *Kamalani O Keaukaha*

Many of Hawai'i's entertainers have performed this popular Lena Machado composition about a *kamalani* (chief's child, or, more generally, someone you want to pamper). The song reminds Ozzie of singer and social activist George Helm. "He was a main inspiration for me trying to play songs associated with vocalists," Ozzie says. "He had superb phrasing to supplement his falsetto. I remember the one time when I heard him in person at a 'Protect Kaho'olawe' rally. Kaho'olawe, off the southern coast of Maui, was used as a target for bombing exercises by the U.S. Navy. George was president of the 'Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana' which sought to end the bombing practice and reclaim the island and its surrounding waters from the military. This became a reality in May of 1994.

"At the performance, there were many *kupuna* in the front row and there was his beautiful falsetto soaring majestically over his great guitar accompaniment. I wish he had lived to share more of his *mana'o* (philosophy) and music with all of us. Shortly after he left us, his album THE MUSIC OF GEORGE HELM came out. There were so many beautiful songs on the record I had to learn some."

On this original arrangement, Ozzie plays on nylon string in G Major tuning. His

beautiful introduction gives deep conviction to this ballad. "I break completely from the slack key tradition," Ozzie says. "For example, the bass is there but it's no longer alternating."

10. *Ki Ho'alu*

In 1961 Dave Guard of the Kingston Trio produced the landmark PURE GABBY sessions, which featured Gabby Pahinui in an intimate trio setting with the focus on *ki ho'alu*. Guard financed this project himself, inspired by his longtime love of the man and his music. They were finally released in 1978 on Hula Records (567), a double album all lovers of *ki ho'alu* cherish. The album notes provided helpful information on the tunings and lyrics. The sweet, flowing music inspired countless musicians. "I learned this listening to PURE GABBY," Ozzie says. "He plays in C6th and does such great work with the tunes that make up the piece. This was one of my first forays into C6th Mauna Loa (C-G-E-G-A-E). The third string serves as part of the alternating bass, so I had to switch my picking from a four-finger to a three-finger style. The only time I switch back is when I flesh out some of the chords down at the bottom of the neck. It was a chance for me to get a feel for positions in the tuning." Ozzie plays this traditional piece on the nylon string guitar.

11. *Maika'i Ka Makani O Kohala*

Maika'i Ka Makani O Kohala (Fine is the Wind of Kohala) is attributed to William Sheldon and David Nape, and was composed in the late 1800s. It honors a remote district on the Big Island known for its steady tradewinds. Most lovers of Hawaiian music know the song at least well enough to join in on the *hui* (chorus): *ko aloha , ko aloha ka'u mea nui / he makana, he makana na ka pu'uwai* (I cherish your love, a gift from the heart). Ozzie learned it from the GUAVA JAM album by the Sunday Manoa, a groundbreaking group that mixed Hawaiian music and instruments with contemporary sounds.

"I listened to them all the time and tried to figure out a lot of their songs," Ozzie says. "Peter Moon is a great virtuoso on 'ukulele and guitar. I based my arrangement of this song pretty much on theirs. I figured it out off the record, in G Major tuning, and recorded it here on the nylon string. Peter is such a great slack key player. He's definitely been a major influence on my style."

12. *Medley: 'Ahulili/I Ka Po Me Ke Ao/Mauna Loa*

Attributed to Scott Ha'i, '**Ahulili** tells the tale of a widow courted by two suitors. One is a hard working *paniolo* (cowboy) who rides the range every morning, the other is a *kolohe* (rascal) musician who sits under a mango tree playing guitar. '*Ahulili* refers to a mountain on Maui, *lili* means to be jealous, and the *mele* (song) puts this coincidence to good use. **I Ka Po Me Ke Ao** (Night and Day) makes sly reference to flirting with the eyes and moves on from there to a discussion of a fish. Composed by Lena Salla and Vicky Silva, the words to this song always evoke a response from adult audiences familiar with *kaona* (hidden meaning). **Mauna Loa**, one of the most frequently recorded slack key standards, is attributed to Helen Lindsey Parker, the Lark of Waimea. It demands that the interisland

ship mentioned in the title return an escaped lover to the Big Island.

Ozzie put together this medley in G Major tuning to honor Gabby Pahinui. He debuted it a few years back at the annual Gabby Pahinui/Atta Isaacs Slack Key festival in Honolulu. "I play this on a nylon string guitar," says Ozzie. "These are three songs Gabby's well-known for. He's the greatest influence on most of us because of the great recordings he put out. Gabby played a beautiful style with great feeling for the music. No one else has ever done it quite the same. That's why I consider myself still a student. I can always look forward to listening to him and trying to figure out more. Once the players are gone, you have to just use your ears. Listen, try to figure it out, listen again. It's not easy to figure out tunings; especially in a group when there's so many great guitarists playing together."

13. *Kokoni Sachi Ari (Here Is Happiness)*

Since it is a performance tradition more than one of composition, *ki ho'alu* easily lends itself to adaptations and interpretations. Theoretically, any melody can be performed in *ki ho'alu*. **Kokoni Sachi Ari**, with a melody written by Saburo Lida, was a Japanese pop song first. "It was real big in Hawai'i in the 1950s and '60s," Ozzie says. Tuning: G Major on steel string.

14. *Mahinahina (The Pale Moonlight)*

An original by Ozzie in G Major tuning on steel string, tuned down to F.

Notes written by Jay W. Junker, Ozzie Kotani and George Winston.

Ozzie Kotani's Tunings:

On this album:

G Major Taro Patch (D-G-D-G-B-D from lowest- to highest-pitched string) - for all songs except as listed below:

C6th Mauna Loa (C-G-E-G-A-E) - for Ku'u Kika Kahiko and Ki Ho'alu

C Wahine a.k.a. Dropped C, or "Leonard's C" (C-G-D-G-B-D) - for Ku'u Lei Poina'ole

Other tunings:

G Wahine (D-G-D-F#-B-D)

Dropped D (D-A-D-G-B-E)

D Major (D-A-D-F#-A-D)

D Wahine (D-A-D-F#-A-C#)

Bb Mauna Loa (F-Bb-D-F-G-D)

"Gabby's C Wahine," a.k.a. "Hi'ilawe tuning" (C-G-E-G-B-E)

"Gabby's F Wahine" (F-C-E-G-C-E)

Produced by George Winston.

Recorded, engineered and mixed by Howard Johnston.

Additional engineering by Adam Muñoz and Nancy Scharlau.

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This album is dedicated to the memory of three special people in my life: Sonny Chillingworth, my teacher who will forever inspire me; my older sister Jeraldine, who provided the push and direction I needed when I started to play slack key; and Roland, my brother who showed such great promise and who I will always look up to.

-- Ozzie