

LINER NOTES

Sonny Chillingworth **ENDLESSLY**

When slack key master Sonny Chillingworth passed away on August 24, 1994, Hawai'i newspapers carried the story on their front pages and local television aired footage on the evening news. Hawaiian music radio in the Islands and elsewhere broke into regularly scheduled programs to play Sonny's recordings and broadcast testimonials. Honolulu's mayor even opened Honolulu Hale, the city hall, for a public wake. But the flowers we receive while we're living smell the sweetest, and it's very gratifying to report that Sonny also received abundant attention and affection during his life.

From the beginning of his career, in the early 1950s, Sonny had the respect of the slack key community. In the 1960s, club dates and recordings brought him wider recognition, culminating in his classic first album, *WAIMEA COWBOY* (Mahalo 4011). For a while, he was also a member of 'ukulele master Eddie Kamae's very influential group, the Sons of Hawai'i. In the 1970s, Sonny kept busy with his own band and as a member of the Gabby Pahinui Hawaiian Band. He also began sharing slack key *mana'o* (knowledge) with students, including George Kuo, Ozzie Kotani and others.

Sonny felt strongly that slack key was personal music and always encouraged self-expression in his students. Now a slack key instructor at the University of Hawai'i, Ozzie says, "I'll never forget the patience and kindness Sonny showed me. There's no question why I'm so committed to teaching – Sonny shared with me in such a memorable way." Sonny shared the spirit of slack key as well as the mechanics. "He taught us to treat each other like a family," Ozzie continues, "sharing in the aloha spirit."

In the 1990s, Sonny received many honors. In 1991, the Second Annual Big Island Slack Key Guitar Festival was held in his honor. For the opening, Kalena Silva composed and chanted a *mele inoa* (name chant) for him. This very traditional Hawaiian tribute touched Sonny deeply. In 1992, the Bank of Hawai'i gave him their Lifetime Achievement Award for Slack Key. In 1993, the Gabby Pahinui and Atta Isaacs Slack Key Festival in Honolulu was dedicated to him. In 1994 the Hawai'i State Legislature presented him with a proclamation acknowledging his many contributions to Hawaiian music. Typically, Sonny received it all with aloha, humility, and a special sweetness that was uniquely his.

Sonny was one of the three most influential slack key guitarists in history, along with the late Gabby Pahinui and Leonard Kwan. His original approach to bass patterns, chord voicings, bass runs and vamps made his style easy to identify. Like his close friend and mentor, Gabby Pahinui, he both preserved and extended the tradition, learning from a multitude of sources, adding his own techniques and serving as a guide for generations to come. "If it wasn't for my dad, Atta Isaacs and Uncle Sonny, I wouldn't be here today," says slack key guitarist Cyril Pahinui. "They were the ones that showed us the way."

Like most slack key masters, Sonny came from a large, musical family. "We had great parties in Hawai'i back then," he once said, "and everybody did something; played an instrument, sang or

danced." Two aunts played in the old Wahine tunings. Two uncles were particularly influential. Jimmy "Kimo" Chillingworth dazzled Sonny with his flashy approach. Harry Purdy, Jr., a *paniolo* (cowboy) on the famous Parker Ranch, dazzled him in a different way, with the old *paniolo* slack key and songs about ranch life. Since Sonny was related to both the prominent Purdy and Linsey families, many famous *paniolo* songs were composed by or about his relatives. "Whenever we'd visit the Big Island, we stayed with both families," he said. "That way you got to hear it all."

Sonny first took up guitar at age twelve while living with his grandfather, Harry Purdy, on Moloka'i. "I was sliding down a hill and got hurt," says Sonny. "While I was recovering, my grandfather came out on the porch and played for me. He must've seen I liked it cause a couple days later he brought out two guitars." Hawaiian style, Sonny learned by listening, watching and imitating. Soon, he was playing constantly, carrying his guitar to school, parties and the plantations where he loved to jam with Puerto Rican and Filipino musicians.

The Moloka'i house had no electricity, but one day Sonny's father, Edwin Bradfield Chillingworth, Sr., brought him a Victrola and some records. One of them was the first ever recording (1946) with slack key guitar, **Hi'ilawe** by Gabby Pahinui (reissued on THE HISTORY OF SLACK KEY GUITAR – Hanna Ola 24000, a collection of the earliest recorded slack key tracks dating from the 1940s and early 1950s). "This is the song that really turned me on to slack key," Sonny says. Grandpa Purdy was very strict about correct pronunciation of Hawaiian. "When I played the record for him he smiled until Gabby made a mistake in the lyrics. Soon as he heard that, he yanked the record off the turntable and threw it out the window." From then on, Sonny was very careful to pronounce *'olelo Hawai'i* (Hawaiian language) properly.

At fifteen, Sonny visited Honolulu. His mother, Anna Purdy, took him to meet Gabby. "He was playing at a bar and I was underage," says Sonny, "so she went in and got him during a break. He listened to me play and must've liked what he heard cause he went back in, got his guitar and came back out. We played all night. That was Gabby."

After high school, Sonny moved to Honolulu, joining Gabby, Andy Cummings and others at clubs, lu'aus and more all-night jam sessions. In 1954, he made his first 78 rpm record, **Make'e 'Ailana**, with the legendary Vickie Ii Rodrigues. For the next forty years he stayed at the forefront of the local music scene. Contemporaries such as singers Myra English, Leinaala Haili and Marlene Sai frequently called Sonny for gigs and recordings. Older artists enjoyed his playing because it reminded them of their roots. "The first time Aunty Alice Namakelua came to see me," Sonny recounts, "she sat right up front and stared. That put fear into me, I'll tell you, but afterward she said my playing brought back memories. And she said she liked my singing cause she could hear every word clearly. That really encouraged me."

Sonny's repertoire was always diverse, encompassing Hawaiian standards, original compositions, country, Portuguese, rock oldies, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and R & B. As his many recordings suggest, he was strongly committed to Hawaiian music but enjoyed playing other styles as well. For Dancing Cat, he wanted to record as full an archive of his music as possible. The first album, **SONNY SOLO** (Dancing Cat 38005), was released in April 1994. **ENDLESSLY** is the second album, and focuses on older music Sonny heard in his youth. Some of the songs and playing

styles date back three quarters of a century or more. Still, everything on ENDLESSLY bears the imprint of Sonny's special touch.

As Ozzie puts it so well: "Sonny was a true virtuoso. His style was unique with wonderfully original movements. He was able to execute extremely difficult passages with speed and fluidity, and yet he was able to capture an unmistakable sweetness and cleanness in his playing and singing. He leaves us a wonderful legacy in his music, an inspiration to everyone who loves slack key."

THE SONGS:

1. ***Slack Key #1*** (instrumental)
Tuning: G Major "Taro Patch" (D-G-D-G-B-D)

One of Sonny's best known originals, **Slack Key #1** focuses on three of his signature techniques: soulful slides, fiery bass runs and beautiful chimes (delicate, bell-like overtones produced by lightly touching and releasing the string at certain places on the fretboard, rather than depressing it all the way down). An earlier version can be heard on WAIMEA COWBOY (Mahalo 4011). The G Major Tuning (often called "Taro Patch") is favored by many slack key guitarists, especially for songs with a lot of improvisation as well as instrumentals.

2. ***Aloha Hale O Ho'oponopono*** (vocal)
Tuning: G Major tuned down to F

By Big Island singer Diana Aki and the late Kalapana guitarist Elias Kuamo'o, this recent composition honors a school on the Big Island. The prominent vibrato Sonny uses in his vocal here and throughout the album reflects the influence of *'i'i* (a quavering tone highly valued in Hawaiian chant). The tremulous, sometimes guttural effects heard in *ki ho'alu* (slack key) and *kika kila* (steel guitar) also demonstrate the continued importance of *'i'i* and other traditional Hawaiian vocal ornaments. In Sonny's instrumental breaks between the vocal verses he prefers to stay close to the melody while adding subtle variations.

3. ***'Olu O Pu'ulani*** (vocal)
Tuning: G Major tuned down to F#

This heart wrenching *mele pana* (song of place) expresses the closeness of family bonds and *aloha 'aina* (deep spiritual attachment to the land). It dates from the days when victims of *lepela* (leprosy) were taken to live in permanent quarantine at Kaulapapa on the northern tip of Moloka'i. Except for a few caregivers, such as the famous missionary Father Damien, no one was allowed to leave once they arrived at Kaulapapa and no one was allowed to visit. For Hawaiians, with such strong attachments to *'ohana* (family) and *ku'u one hanau* (place of birth), this made the disease doubly devastating.

Helen Lindsey Parker composed **'Olu O Pu'ulani** when her sister Mamie's son (a relative

of Sonny's) was taken to Kaulapapa. In the song, she describes the family's Moloka'i home as a hill in heaven, a place of welcome. She calls her nephew a *punahale* (special child) and tells him to always wear the pride of living at Pu'ulani as a lei given from the highest powers above. She says to look back to Waiakoa as the gentle rain falls and birds circle the mist-cooled ferns. Sonny's boyhood friend, Clyde "Kindy" Sproat says Helen first sang '**Olu O Pu'ulani** as the authorities tore the boy from Mamie's arms.

4. **Hula Blues** (instrumental)
Tuning: G Major

Hula Blues debuted in 1920, the year Johnny Noble assumed leadership of the dance band at the world famous Moana Hotel. Sonny Cunha supplied the lyrics to Noble's melody. Technically, the song is neither hula nor blues but a fusion of Hawaiian music, Tin Pan Alley pop and jazz. It's also a sensational tune that has enjoyed global appeal.

One of Sonny's signature tunes, he first recorded it on WAIMEA COWBOY. He gives this arrangement a bounce bordering on ragtime and throws in many of his trademark slides and slurs.

5. **Na Pua Ka 'Ilima** (vocal)
Tuning: G Major tuned down to F#

Closely associated with *kumu hula* (hula teacher) Kauai Zuttermeister, **Na Pua Ka 'Ilima** celebrates the 'ilima flower, a symbol of *ali'i* (royalty) and the island of O'ahu. This mele refers to O'ahu's high chief Kakuhewewa and describes an '*ilima lei as ha'aheo i ka maka ke 'ike aku* (a source of pride in the eye of the beholder). Although **Na Pua Ka 'Ilima** is frequently performed and danced, Sonny's inclusion of *pa'ani* (instrumental solos) in this version precludes hula accompaniment. The movements in hula provide a visual representation of the words, hence there are no instrumental breaks when Hawaiian musicians perform with hula dancers. Sonny's performance of this piece on the twelve string guitar soulfully incorporates a deep Hawaiian blues feeling.

6. **Kananaka** (vocal)
Tuning: G Major

This traditional *mele hula* (chant or song with instrumental accompaniment and choreography based on the text) is set on the island of Maui. It mentions the Ma'a'a wind of Lahaina, *lipoa* (a delicious seaweed) that can be gathered offshore, and a more generally Hawaiian scene: the moon serenely floating along the cliffs and the sensation of love.

Sonny first recorded **Kananaka** with his band in the 1960s for his second album, SONNY CHILLINGWORTH (Makaha 2014). This solo version shifts attention to Sonny's guitar, especially his hammer-ons and pull-offs. A hammer-on is made by plucking a note, then fretting on it to produce a second tone. Pull-off refers to plucking a string, then pulling the finger off the fret, which also creates a second tone. The G Major to G Augmented to G6 chord progression is unique to Sonny's arrangement.

7. *Slack Key #2 (Mahina's Trot)* (instrumental)

Tuning: G Major

Sonny loved Portuguese and Latin music. For **Slack Key #2** he plays a bass run he said reminded him of *fados* (soulfully bittersweet Portuguese songs). On the first beat Sonny plays his bass note on the fifth or sixth string. On beats two-& and four, he plays a higher bass note on the fourth string. "This was Sonny's favorite bass," says George Winston. "He was the first musician to record this rhythm on slack key guitar, in 1964, on the songs **Malasadas** and **Hawaiian Lullabye** on the WAIMEA COWBOY album." On ENDLESSLY, this bass also appears on **Aloha Hale O Ho'oponopono**, **Endlessly** and **Liloa's Mele**. Sonny's daughter, Mahina, created the sixth and eighth verses of this arrangement using the E, Eb and D notes as the melody. Her proud papa recorded it to express his aloha for her and his happiness that she chose to carry on the family's guitar heritage.

8. *'Imi Au Ia 'Oe (King's Serenade)* (vocal)

Tuning: G Major tuned down to F

This Charles E. King standard is often translated as "I search for you," and takes place in Puna on the Big Island. Using *kaona* (hidden meaning), the final verse makes cryptic reference to preferring the company of a red 'i'iwi bird. Sonny's version evokes the 1920s, when the song was written. He sings the opening in a haunting a capella verse.

9. *Endlessly* (vocal)

Tuning: G Major tuned down to E

A 1959 hit for R & B singer Brook Benton, **Endlessly** perfectly fits Sonny's deep vocal range and passion. He recorded it previously on his Latin-tinged album from the 1960s, LOS HAWAIINOS (Lehua 2019).

10. *Moana Chimes/Pa'ahana* (instrumental)

Tuning: G Major

M. K. Moke, a steel guitarist with Johnny Noble's Hawaiians at the Moana Hotel, composed and recorded the classic **Moana Chimes** around 1928. Recorded many times by steel guitarists and by slack key players (including Gabby Pahinui, [Led Kaapana](#), [Ray Kane](#) and others), it became one of Sonny's signature pieces. Sonny's arrangement was possibly influenced by Benny Rogers' version (49th State 233). Sonny has recorded **Moana Chimes** twice previously as a medley with **Pa'ahana**, another song from the 1920s: on WAIMEA COWBOY and on a 45 rpm at his second ever recording session around 1958 (reissued under the title **Slack Key Medley** on the compilation album, HAWAII ALOHA - Waikiki 107).

In this new, feisty update, Sonny opens with soulful slides. After three verses he plays a verse of **Pa'ahana**, which has some interesting C to E7 to A7 chord changes in the

bridge. These may be Sonny's innovations or he may have gotten them from steel guitarist Jules Ah See, from the version on Bell Records (LKS 335 - no artists listed on record). Sonny goes on to play two more verses of **Moana Chimes**, one more verse of **Pa'ahana**, and a closing verse of **Moana Chimes**.

11. ***Ipo Lei Manu*** (vocal)

Tuning: G Major

In this Monarchy Era classic composed as a welcome home gift for King Kalakaua, Queen Kapi'olani compares her husband to an 'i'iwi bird in the uplands. Poignantly, the final verse describes him as *hele loa* (gone forever), as he died on January 20, 1891 in San Francisco, never returning to Hawai'i to hear the song. Sonny plays it here in the old, ballad style.

12. ***Keiki Slack Key*** (instrumental)

Tuning: G Major

Love of a *keiki* (child) has inspired countless Hawaiian songs. This original is divided into three sections. The first showcases Sonny's mastery of hammer-ons and pull-offs, and features a pronounced alternating bass. In the second section, Sonny uses harmonic chimes produced by lightly slapping the fretboard twelve frets above the fretted or open melody notes to create a charming melody reminiscent of the childhood favorite **London Bridge**. In the last section he adds beautiful Spanish style picking.

13. ***Hilo Hanakahi*** (vocal)

Tuning: G Major

Often attributed to Keola Nalimu, **Hilo Hanakahi** describes the famous Big Island harbor town and its surrounding area.

14. ***Mai Poina 'Oe Ia'u (Not To Be Forgotten)*** (vocal)

Tuning: G Major tuned down to F

Anyone who has looked up at night in Hawai'i has probably been struck speechless at least once by the sight of enormous billowy clouds, illuminated by the moon, majestically making their way across the heavens. In this old favorite, Lizzie Doerin calls her lover *ka 'opua hiki ahiahi* (the cloud that comes at night). She requests more frequent visits and makes the title plea, "Don't forget me." Note the beautiful and unusual bass pattern.

15. ***Liloa's Mele (Grandson's Lullaby)*** (instrumental)

Tuning: G Major tuned down to F

Written for one of Sonny's grandchildren, **Liloa's Mele** features beautiful hammer-ons and pull-offs, and two bass patterns. Since Liloa was also Sonny's Hawaiian name, the song takes his music full circle, from listening to his grandfather play for him to playing for his own grandchild.

Liner notes by Jay W. Junker and George Winston

Produced by George Winston

Engineered by Howard Johnston

Additional engineering by Justin Lieberman, Porter Miller and Nancy Scharlau

Mastered by Bernie Grundman at Bernie Grundman Mastering in Los Angeles, CA

Art Direction & Graphic Design by Joanie K.Y. Chan

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