

“Hula Medley”—Gabby Pahinui (1947)

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by J.W. Junker (guest post)*



Gabby Pahinui

Among the first commercial recordings to showcase *kī hō`alu* (Hawaiian slack key), “Hula Medley” is extraordinarily significant. It is one of four performances the small Honolulu-based Bell record label released in the late 1940s featuring Philip Kunia “Gabby” Pahinui (1921-1980).

William Bell Fredlund, an avid music buff working for a dredging company as a dynamite expert, and his wife, singer Alice Pualeialoha Davis Fredlund, launched Bell in 1944. This was the perfect time for a Hawai`i-based “indie” to try and make a go of it.

The Pacific War was cutting off access to the big mainland record labels that had controlled the recording of Hawaiian music since the earliest days. Shellac needed for making discs was in short supply. But the local scene was booming. With a studio close to Waikīkī, veteran engineer Young O. Kang, a private stash of shellac located by chance in downtown Honolulu, and good personal contacts, the Fredlunds attracted many top artists, including Alvin K. Isaacs and The Royal Hawaiians, John K. Almeida, Bill Ali`iloa Lincoln, Napua Stevens, Alfred Apaka Jr. and Andy Cummings.

When he recorded for Bell, Gabby Pahinui was a member of The Hawaiian Serenaders, the hot band Cummings was leading at the time. They were adept at *nahenahe* (sweet) ballads as well as Swing, and Pahinui was especially versatile. He could play steel guitar, bass, ukulele, mandolin and standard-tuned rhythm guitar. He could sing harmony or lead. Besides Hawaiian music, he had a keen interest in jazz and what he described as progressive music. Of course, he could also play slack key.

Turning slack key into commercial music was a very innovative idea in the 1940s. For almost a century it had been considered “backporch” music, fine for after-hour jams, parties, personal relaxation or when courting, but inappropriate for paying customers. The musicians did their part to keep slack key out of the spotlight. They were very protective of their secrets, sharing them only within the family or on very rare occasions with someone they believed was committed to the style.

This makes sense when you consider how much Hawaiian culture had already been appropriated and exploited by outsiders. It also helps explain how so many different tunings came about and why, up to the present, people can argue about what is or what isn't slack key as well as who is entitled to play it and who is not.

Loosening the strings, usually to create an open chord, gives slack key its name. There are estimated to be about 500 tunings, each with a distinctive fingering, sound and feel. The open tunings deepen the resonance, creating a shimmering halo effect that selectively reinforces overtones. Some tunings, like open G (taro patch) are widely used, while others are unique to one player or family.

The use of open tunings is quite common in guitar playing around the world. Techniques are a better way to identify slack key as distinctively Hawaiian. These include a strong contrast between bass and melody notes; the use of finger picking; slides, runs, slurs and harmonics; a supple rhythm; and often subtle shifts in dynamics. All of these reflect slack key's close ties to Hawaiian vocal forms as well as sensitivity to the sounds of nature. Also central to the music is a sweet feel often referred to by older musicians as the Hawaiian Touch.

Pahinui plays “Hula Medley” in a *wahine* tuning, a tuning based on a 7th chord. The first song is “Nani Wale Lihu'e” (Beautiful Is Lihu'e), by Prince Leleiōhoku. Leleiōhoku (1855-1877) was the youngest of four royal siblings that included King Kalākaua, Queen Lili'uokalani and Princess Likelike. Known collectively as Nā Lani `ehā (the Royal Four), each was an accomplished musician, singer and composer. They exerted an unparalleled influence on the music of their time, encouraging new ideas and, at the same time, reviving traditional Hawaiian chant, hula and repertory suppressed by American missionaries after their arrival in 1820. Songs by Nā Lani `ehā have always been important as well as popular within the Hawaiian community.

After “Nani Wale Lihu'e,” Pahinui alternates between two popular waltzes of the early 20th Century, “Wai`alae” by Mekia Kealakai, and “Hālona” by J. Elia. Both reference specific locations in Hawai`i, a common practice for local composers.

Unlike Pahinui's other Bell recordings, “Hula Medley” is completely solo. It clearly illustrates the slack key guitarist's ability to sound like several people playing at the same time along with Pahinui's mastery of the form.

No one in Pahinui's family played slack key. As a child around ten or twelve, he picked up the basics from two older men, Herman Keawe and another he knew only as Manu. Pahinui learned in the time-honored manner, by watching and listening carefully, then trying to reproduce the music accurately through diligent practice. In this approach, everything was done by ear. Once the essentials were internalized, the player was expected to be unique, yet remain faithful to the tradition.

Because he is playing solo, Pahinui is free to flow through a variety of picking styles, soundscapes, moods and tempo changes. In his arrangement you hear a wide range of sounds local audiences would recognize, from the opening free rhythm, reflective of *mele oli*

(unaccompanied chant) to the marches of the Royal Hawaiian Band and the lilting strains of social dance. You can also hear discrete dabs of jazz and Latin music.

The origins of slack key are believed to date back to the early 19th Century when guitars and other string instruments were being introduced to Hawai`i. Slack key developed gradually through the mixing of Hawaiian practices and values with a variety of outside influences. The most significant early influence came from *nā paniolo* (Mexican vaqueros), who brought their guitars and musical ideas to Hawai`i in the 1830s. Starting around 1900, slack key guitarists easily found ways to adapt ragtime and then jazz to their needs as well. This is especially evident in the use of syncopation, augmented chords and an increased emphasis on improvisation.

Bell did not only record Pahinui playing slack key. A number of others, including Alice's brothers, Willie and George Davis, also made discs for the label, and soon the demand for slack key records increased. Some players, like Tommy Solomon, only made a few, while others, like Leonard Kwan, became in-demand studio musicians performing instrumentals and accompanying singers, including Alice's trio The Halekulani Girls, who were Hawaii's most popular female trio in the 1950s. By then the Bell label had folded, as mainland labels resumed operations and other local labels entered the market.

Pahinui continued to record prolifically on a variety of labels and in a number of settings, mainly instrumentals, until 1960 when he joined forces with Eddie Kamae (ukulele), David "Feet" Rogers (lap steel guitar) and Joe Marshall (bass) to form the popular group The Sons of Hawaii. With the Sons, and later with his own groups, Pahinui went on to become a leading figure in the 1970s, a period often referred to as the Hawaiian Renaissance. His ascendance to such a lofty status is closely connected to the entry of slack key into the mainstream of Hawaiian music. During the Renaissance, slack key was front and center in Hawaiian music; emblematic of local roots, yet flexible enough to keep absorbing new ideas.

In many ways Pahinui was the ideal person to lead slack key into the mainstream. A virtuoso musician, singer, charismatic entertainer, and innovative thinker with just enough of the *kolohe* (rascal) to seem larger than life, he appealed to both sides of the gap that often emerges between folk culture and commercial music.

One of the great "ifs" has always been what if Pahinui had toured outside of Hawai`i. Certainly his music as well as his persona could have appealed to folk audiences, and, in fact, Honolulu-born Dave Guard of the Kingston Trio recorded Pahinui in 1961 hoping to interest a mainland label. The album went unreleased until 1977. By that point slack key was attracting the attention of guitarists in other genres, such as Chet Atkins and especially Ry Cooder, who in 1974 recorded with The Gabby Pahinui Hawaiian Band. Cooder also had Pahinui and longtime playing partner Leland "Atta" Isaacs recorded on his 1976 album "Chicken Skin Music," named after the Hawaiian slang term for things that can cause goose pimples. This greatly increased Pahinui's fan base in world music circles, however, he decided not to go on the road.

Gabby Pahinui died October 13, 1980, while playing golf with Andy Cummings and Sonny Chillingworth, a younger slack key master who was inspired to play by Pahinui's Bell

recordings. His death was headline news throughout the Islands. His wake was held at Honolulu Hale, the city hall.

After Pahinui's passing, slack key finally began attracting a wider following outside of the Islands, as more artists began to tour, various teaching materials became more widely available and record labels with international distribution began documenting the music, especially George Winston's Dancing Cat Productions, based in Santa Cruz, California.

In many ways Gabby Pahinui's Bell recordings played a vital role in this process. They were the first intimation that "backporch" Hawaiian music could appeal to the general public. It is no coincidence that Israel Kamakawi'ole introduces his iconic 1993 recording of "Over the Rainbow/Wonderful World" with the dedication: "kay, this one's for Gabby."

Since the 1970s, J.W. Junker has had the privilege to work with many legendary traditional musicians in Hawai`i and elsewhere, including most of the leading slack key masters. He also teaches in the Ethnomusicology program at the University of Hawai`i.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.