

LINER NOTES

Dennis Kamakahi

PUA'ENA GLOW BRIGHTLY

The Reverend Dennis Kamakahi is one of modern Hawai'i's most prolific and popular songwriters. A longtime member of 'ukulele virtuoso Eddie Kamae's group The Sons of Hawaii, Dennis is also well known as a warm and evocative singer and a gifted slack key guitarist. His sure and sweet touch takes the listener to a bygone age of back porches, family gatherings and courtship serenades. Dennis' music touches the heart and transcends the barriers of time, linking the generations in an unbroken bond of love for each other, for the Islands and for *na mele o Hawai'i*.

Dennis was born in 1953 and grew up in Honolulu in a house where the state capitol building stands today. "After dinner our family and neighbors would come outside on our porches, play music and talk. You didn't have TV, you had each other. The last thing you'd hear at night was music lulling you to sleep." Like many slack key masters, Dennis comes from a long line of guitarists. At age three he began picking up his mother's old Martin 'ukulele. When his fingers were long enough to cover the fretboard, his family gave him a guitar. Dennis' grandfather, David Naoo Kamakahi, and father, Kenneth Kamakahi, were his teachers.

"listening to slack key over and over, it's planted like an instinct. As you grow up, you want to play. It comes natural. Between eleven and thirteen years of age I used to play eight hours a day," Dennis says. During that time he learned several slack key tunings, Standard tuning, and how to improvise. "It was the traditional way of learning. You watch the *kupuna*, then go off on your own and try to do the same thing. You come back, they correct you, and you go off and experiment some more. After you do that a few times you come back with something to share with your dad or grandfather or whoever is teaching you. It's a great form of respect for the teacher and it builds more confidence in the student."

Outside of the home, Dennis' strongest musical influences were Gabby Pahinui, Sonny Chillingworth, Leonard Kwan, Atta Isaacs, and Ray Kane. "They were the grandfathers of us all," Dennis says. "The majority of us growing up at that time learned from those five masters. You'd just hear a riff and you'd know it was them." I heard Sonny on the radio and saw him play occasionally, as well as Atta. Dennis heard Leonard and Ray on recordings, but saw Gabby perform live on television "On Sundays he'd play with Eddie Kamae and The Sons of Hawaii on Lucky Luck's show. What an extraordinary band they were."

Dennis absorbed other styles of music as well. "At that time in Hawai'i it wasn't strange to go to one house and they'd have Portuguese music playing, another would have Puerto Rican music, and another would have Japanese." Besides Hawaiian music, Dennis cites rock as the major influence in his early years, and like many local kids, he played in a rock band. His freshman year at Kamehameha High School (a school for children of Hawaiian ancestry), Dennis joined two new friends, Aaron Mahi and Kalena Silva, to form Na Paniolo. "At that time the trio sound with acoustic instruments was popular; Kahauanu Lake Trio, The Sunday Manoa, and so on. Like them, we did three part harmony, some slack key, a mixture of the old and the new."

The late 1960s were a very exciting time in Hawai'i, and renewed interest in traditional culture and values sparked a renaissance that inspired people of all ages. Gigs were plentiful and audiences supported a wide range of artists and styles, and at this time Na Paniolo began playing in Waikiki. The group also got to meet and learn from some of Hawai'i's most respected performers. "Kahauanu Lake's stylings taught us how to blend and complement each other," Dennis says. "He was a great influence. And then, of course, The Sons of Hawaii inspired me a lot."

Dennis met Eddie Kamae, the Sons of Hawaii bandleader, in 1972. At the time Eddie was devoting himself primarily to field research in Hawaiian music, and Dennis was studying music composition and orchestration at Leeward Community College. "I call that my Beethoven period," he says. "I was writing a lot of symphonic music, which is something I've always loved." He was also playing with a loose collection of young musicians who called themselves Na Leo O Nu'uano. Members included Aaron Mahi, Cyril Pahinui, Danny Akaka Jr., Bruce Spencer and Brian Hussey. They recorded with Palani Vaughan on IA 'OE E KA LA – VOLUME 1, Palani's first of three albums devoted to the music of King David Kalakaua.

In 1973, Dennis was invited to join The Sons of Hawaii. He was assigned the slack key spot previously held by Gabby Pahinui. "Everybody idolized Gabby and he was my idol too. The first thing that came to mind was this is a big shoe to fill." Dennis found the atmosphere in the group very comfortable and creative. "With other groups you'd rehearse six or seven hours, work out arrangements. With The Sons, you play how you feel. We'd sit down, look at each other and just know exactly what we're going to do. The music would transcend, it went to a different level. The music just flows and you don't want to stop." Since 1986, the group has included a second slack key guitarist, George Kuo. "George inspired me to get back to the old way," Dennis says. "On the road there's jam sessions till the sun comes up. That's the type of experience I'd like the younger generation to have," he says. "I've learned a lot from our association."

Dennis has also developed his songwriting while in the group. "Eddie really supports my writing," Dennis says. So did noted scholar, composer and teacher Mary Kawena Pukui. "I would take songs to her, she'd read them and say, 'This is beautiful. You're writing not from today, but from some other lifetime.' I keep that as a special memory."

Dennis started writing songs in junior high school. His output increased along with his interest in traditional Hawaiian composition. "When I got into the poetic side of the language, that made a difference," he says. "I wanted to learn how to write in the old style, and I found that Queen Lili'uokalani was one of the most prolific writers in the poetic style. Another was Sam Li'a from the valley of Waipi'o."

Dennis explains, "In the late Monarchy era through the 1920s, elements of poetry were still strong in the spoken language as well as the written. Just like we have a Romantic period in classical music, this was the Romantic period in Hawaiian music. There's a lot of *kaona* (hidden meaning), it's not a direct reference. You compare the person to an object you find beautiful. For instance, in a lot of songs you have rain or mist. Well, these things touch the skin like an embraceable lover. Flowers that bloom in Hawai'i are beautiful to the sight and so is a woman who attracts you. As a composer, you look at the woman, you look at the flower and you write

that the woman is a flower that blooms in your heart, touched by the rain, embraced by the mist. Nothing is said directly, you use the right images and the person will know. Those old songs are very subtle and although they may seem simple, their simplicity is actually very difficult to achieve."

Dennis remains very grateful for the help and inspiration he received as an aspiring songwriter. "I've been fortunate that some of the composers in the old style were still alive when I was starting out," Dennis says. "Kawena Pukui will always be the catalyst in my writing," Dennis says, "and another would be Palahi Pahi. She encouraged me to write about today. She said your present time is someone else's past, so if you can document that, you'll be leaving it for future generations. Another gracious lady was Iolani Luahine. I got to meet her through Eddie and found her the most fascinating person that I ever met in my life. She could express such a great sense of pride to be Hawaiian."

Like the composers he admires, Dennis writes from life. "Most of my songs have happened to specific people," he says. "Of course, in the Hawaiian way of writing you're very discrete; you describe without giving away the identity." Dennis feels that sharing stories in song is one of the deepest forms of communication. "When you write a song you come away with such a great feeling knowing that someone has shared a true life story with you and you'll share it with the world."

PUA'ENA "GLOW BRIGHTLY" is Dennis' first entirely solo slack key album, and it marks his first recording in over ten years. He also continues to perform, touring throughout Hawai'i and beyond with The Sons of Hawaii, George Kuo, and others. He is also still composing. His latest interests revolve around the Hawaiian chief Kalama, who traveled through Alaska and the West Coast and eventually settled on the Olympic Peninsula in the village named after him.

"Everybody who knows I write always asks the same question, 'Are you still writing songs.' Well, I think if you're a composer, you never stop because every place you go, you meet new people, see new things, and write about what you feel. I've written songs about other places, but most of the songs I've written are about the love and beauty of Hawai'i and about special people."

ABOUT THE SONGS

SET ONE

1. *Ahe Lau Makani*

Composed by Queen Lili'uokalani in 1868, **Ahe Lau Makani** (The Breeze That Wafts Through the Leaves) poetically describes someone's yearning for a loved one. As Dennis says, "In the figurative Hawaiian, this breeze is actually the breath of one who I admire, carried by the wind. Whoever the Queen wrote about, she got right into that person and conveyed it through the whole song."

Dennis first heard **Ahe Lau Makani** performed by The Sons of Hawaii on the album

THIS IS EDDIE KAMAE. "I loved that version. It's a lively feeling. To me, the treatment sounded like mariachi. Eddie said he got the idea of mixing 3/4 time against 6/8 from going to Mexico. What I did was take the same 3/4, 6/8 meter and slowed it down to medium tempo."

Dennis plays the song in the C Mauna Loa tuning on the 6 string guitar, tuned down two half steps to the key of B flat, a common practice in the slack key tradition and one he uses frequently on this album. Mauna Loa tunings are based on a major chord with the top two thinnest strings tuned a 5th interval apart. This way, these two strings can be played in 6th intervals, producing a distinctively sweet sound. "That's probably my favorite tuning," Dennis says, "because of Gabby. There are different names for it. On Ni'ihau they call it *Ki Malie*. Slack key guitarist Malaki Kanahale says when he was a boy there, they played in that tuning to lullaby the kids to sleep."

2. *Sweet By and By*

Sweet By and By was inspired by the tradition of courtship. "I think we should bring back courting," Dennis says. "That's how you won the heart of your loved one and the respect of your in-laws." Dennis wrote the song in high school to help a friend impress his girlfriend. "He decided he wanted to go over to her house and serenade her, so another guy and I were his musicians." It worked, and of course they invited Dennis to the wedding.

Sweet By and By is played on the 6 string in the popular G Major "Taro Patch" tuning (D-G-D-G-B-D), tuned down to the key of F.

3. *Kapela*

Dennis composed **Kapela** for his friend Eugene Kaupiko's mother. She lives in the remote fishing village of Miloli'i on the Big Island. "The song," Dennis says, "is a *ho'okupu*, a friendship thing. It's like a *mele inoa*, a name song. The only difference is that it's not *kapu* (forbidden), anyone can use it. It talks about her ties to one of the precious places left on earth, Miloli'i, which is still connected to ancient times. Going there is such a peaceful thing, one of those true places of relaxation." **Kapela** is played in C Mauna Loa tuning on the 12 string.

4. *Hilo Rag*

Composed in 1994 at the Hilo Slack Key Festival, **Hilo Rag**, in C Mauna Loa tuning on the 6 string, celebrates the jam sessions that go on backstage and anywhere musicians gather with their guitars. "When you get a bunch of musicians together, there's gonna be music," Dennis says. One memorable jam session occurred at the Waimea Music Festival in 1974. "After the concert, Gabby Pahinui, Atta Isaacs, and Sonny Chillingworth had music going all night long. That was the experience of a lifetime, everybody enjoying the spontaneity and the camaraderie. That's the kind of music I like to play."

5. *Kaua'i O Mano*

Dennis wrote this popular *mele pana* (place song) for Wai'ale'ale, the highest mountain on the island of Kaua'i, and plays it here in C Mauna Loa tuning on the 6 string. "The first time I went up to Koke'e," he says, "I saw the top of Wai'ale'ale, clear as a bell. It was just beautiful. That's what the song talks about, how the mist comes out from the sea, travels over the forest to linger below the mountain peak." Dennis has written many songs for Koke'e and the surrounding area. "That's my favorite place," he says. "I feel very inspired when I go up there."

6. *'Apapane*

Queen Lili'uokalani's 1874 *mele ho'oipoipo* (love song) compares the object of her affection to the lovely crimson bird of the mountain rain forests. Dennis plays it in G Major tuning, tuned down to the key of E on the 6 string. "The first time I read the lyrics and the music," he says, "I knew exactly what tuning I'd be using." It's possible that the Queen wrote it on guitar. As Dennis points out, "Not too many people know this but she was a pretty good slack key player."

7. *Koke'e*

One of Dennis' best-known songs, **Koke'e** honors his special spiritual area. "On most of the islands I have a place where I'm inspired to write, but in Koke'e it's like my soul has been there before." This song has become a de facto anthem for the residents of the area. "The first time The Sons of Hawaii did it there, we had the whole town of Waimea singing along and dancing to it. Each *halau* (hula school) was dancing it in their own style. It blew me away. The people were so ecstatic. I'm glad I got the feeling I wanted to convey over to them." **Koke'e** is played in C Mauna Loa tuning on the 6 string.

8. *Ipo Lei Manu*

Written in 1891 for King David Kalakaua by his wife, Queen Kapi'olani, **Ipo Lei Manu** paints a musical portrait of love, using the image of an 'i'iwi bird high in the upland forests. The Queen intended the song to be a welcome home gift for the King on his return from a visit to California, but he died in San Francisco and never heard it. It has been popular in Hawai'i since its debut. "I love Gabby's version," Dennis says. "It's an old interpretation, but with the Gabby touch, and that grabbed me. The only difference was that I slowed it down just a little. It's a sad song but so poetic and appropriate because I love San Francisco." **Ipo Lei Manu** is played on the 12 string in C Mauna Loa tuning, tuned down to the key of A.

SET TWO

9. *Ninipo Ho'onipo*

Also inspired by the Big Island, the lively **Ninipo Ho'onipo** dates back to an 1876 trip Queen Lili'uokalani took to Puna. "Leleiohoku is often credited with writing this song, sometimes Kalakaua, but the original is from Lili'uokalani. It's a little different in the melody line than other versions but the words are mostly the same." A love song, it draws from the legend of Hopoe, who was turned to stone by Pele. Dennis plays it on the 12 string in C Mauna Loa tuning.

10. *'Ahulili*

Scott Ha'i composed this well-known *paniolo* (cowboy) song of love and jealousy on the island of Maui. "This is my favorite," Dennis says, "because I was taken one time by the cowboys of Kaupo Ranch up to 'Ahulili. We rode up the horse trail and when you sing on horseback, boy, you really get the feeling for this song." Dennis says that if he had anything to do with it, he'd be a *paniolo*. "I really love that lifestyle. Being out in nature, talking story, playing guitar around the campfire, that's when slack key sounds best. I wish more kids could have that experience. You come away with a different view of the world." Played in C Mauna Loa tuning on the 6 string.

11. *Waikiki Hula*

Isaac Keola's popular song describes a boy who waits for a girl who attends Kamehameha School. Dennis says, "She finally shows up late, as usual." Played in C Mauna Loa tuning, tuned low to the key of A flat on the 12 string.

12. *Wahine 'Ilikea*

Another standard by Dennis that is frequently performed around Hawai'i, **Wahine 'Ilikea** describes the white mist of Kamakou, a mountain on the island of Moloka'i. "At a place called Kamalo, the mountain reveals the beauty of eleven waterfalls," he says, "like a woman who reveals her beauty to the one she loves." Played in G Major tuning on the 6 string.

13. *Na Kupa O Wai'anae*

This song is a tribute to O'ahu's Wai'anae Coast. "I composed it during a time when many negative things were happening to this beautiful area," he says. "The lyrics call for the youth of today to uphold the values of the *kupuna*; righteousness, justice, law and order, and love." Like many traditional musicians, Dennis stresses in his words and actions the importance of guiding and encouraging the young. "They're the key to the cultural survival of the Hawaiian way." Dennis plays this song in C Mauna Loa tuning on the 12 string.

14. *Promises*

Dennis wrote this beautiful love song for his wife Robin on their first anniversary in 1978. The year prior he'd written **Pua Hone** to propose to her. "It pledges that our love will grow stronger each year." **Promises** is played on the 6 string in G tuning, tuned down to E flat.

15. *Lei Kupukupu*

Played on the 6 string in G tuning, Dennis composed **Lei Kupukupu** for those who enjoy making wili and haku leis.

Liner notes written by Jay W. Junker and George Winston.

REV.DENNIS KAMAKAHI'S TUNINGS FOR THIS ALBUM

Dennis often tunes a whole step below concert pitch, thus a G tuning sounds in the key of F and a C tuning in the key of Bb. This is common in the slack key tradition.

C Mauna Loa (C-G-E-G-A-E) for Ahe Lau Makani, Kapela, Hilo Rag, Kaua'i O Mano, Koke'e, Ipo Lei Manu, Ninipo Ho'onipo, 'Ahulili, Waikiki Hula, and Na Kupa O Wai'anae

G Major "Taro Patch" (D-G-D-G-B-D) for Sweet By and By, 'Apapane, Wahine 'Ilikea, Promises, and Lei Kupukupu

Other tunings used by Dennis:

G Wahine (D-G-D-F#-B-D), **D Wahine** (D-A-D-F#-A C#), and **Dropped D** (D-A-D-G-B-E)

This album is dedicated to the memory of two very special people in my life: Mary Kawena Pukui, who encouraged me to write my songs and to express them in the Hawaiian language; and my grandfather, David Naoo Kamakahi, who taught me to play slack key.

Mahalo nui loa: To my wife, Robin Kamakahi, for supporting my music career; and to my children James, David, and Marlene Kamakahi, who are the inspiration of my music.

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