

LINER NOTES

Dennis Kamakahi 'OHANA (FAMILY)

This album is dedicated to my father Kenneth Franklyn Kamakahi (1930 –1998)

Ki ho'alu (Hawaiian slack key), like traditional music the world over, is firmly rooted in the family. Most of the leading slack key players received their first inspiration, encouragement and opportunity to play from parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins or siblings. Dennis Kamakahi firmly believes slack key comes naturally to him because of his *'ohana* (family). His grandfather, from the Moloka'i side of the family, played slack key on an old Martin guitar. "That's a sound I'll never forget," Dennis says.

Dennis' father, a member of the Royal Hawaiian Band, played slack key and trombone. "He was a very musical man," says Dennis. "He loved Hawaiian music, but he was also into the big band sound. He was an excellent trombonist." From a young age, Dennis attended as many of the band's concerts as he could. Dennis especially liked Boat Day: "When the band struck up **Aloha 'Oe** there on the dock, I tell you, there wasn't a single person without tears in their eyes."

Dennis was born in 1953. When he was very young, his family lived where the state capitol building now stands. Dennis recalls, "After dinner our family and neighbors would come outside on our porches, play music, and talk story. You didn't have TV, you had each other. The last thing you'd hear at night was music lulling you to sleep." Dennis considers this time a blessing and cites it as one of the important factors in his musical development.

Later the family moved to Kaimuki and Dennis' father joined the National Guard band. By then Dennis was playing trombone too. According to Dennis, "Kids want to play drums, but my dad convinced me to take up the trombone instead. I think in a lot of ways my singing style comes from the trombone, from the sliding and the tone." Dennis' father also made sure he learned how to read music and that he stuck with slack key, which he started getting serious about around age eleven. He learned *ki ho'alu* in the traditional way, watching the *kupuna* (elders). Outside his *'ohana*, Dennis drew inspiration from many other musicians, including Gabby Pahinui and Sonny Chillingworth. In Hawai'i's multi-cultural environment, Dennis absorbed other traditions as well, such as American folk music.

Attending Kamehameha Schools (for children of Hawaiian ancestry) kept Dennis in touch with his roots. In his freshman year, he joined Aaron Mahi (now bandmaster of The Royal Hawaiian Band) and Kalena Silva (now a professor of Hawaiian studies) in a trio called Na Paniolo. When Na Paniolo joined the *'ohana* of professional Hawaiian musicians and began playing gigs in Waikiki, they learned from the *kupuna* working the clubs.

More than any other group, The Sons of Hawaii pointed the way to subsequent generations of slack key players. An all star ensemble, featuring Eddie Kamae, Gabby Pahinui, Feet Rogers and Joe Marshall, The Sons combined the feeling of a backyard lu'au with the virtuosity of a concert hall. They specialized in traditional music and a free wheeling approach that left lots of room for

spontaneity and *pa'ani* (soloing). Their repertoire, aesthetics, instrumental lineup and loose flowing interplay have all been very influential.

In 1972, Dennis met Eddie Kamae, the leader of The Sons and one of the greatest virtuosos ever of the 'ukulele. At that time, Dennis was studying music composition and orchestration at Leeward Community College, and playing with a loose collective of young musicians, including Cyril Pahinui, Danny Akaka, Brian Hussey and Bruce Spencer, who called themselves Na Leo O Nu'uanu. In 1973, Eddie Kamae asked Dennis to join The Sons. He was looking for a slack key player who would be true to both the group's style and spirit. This was a big honor and a big challenge for a young musician. As a member of The Sons, Dennis began to develop his songwriting.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, The Sons maintained a high profile and high musical standards. Their albums of that era, like their earlier recordings, became local classics. Many of their songs became standards, including the Kamakahi originals, **Wahine 'Ilikea, Koke'e, Pua Hone, Ka 'Opae** and others.

In the 1990s, Dennis has performed most often with other players who share a love for the classic songs and style of The Sons of Hawaii, including fellow Sons guitarist George Kuo and bassist (and Gabby's son) Martin Pahinui. At many of his gigs he is now joined by his own son, David, on 'ukulele. "I never pushed him into music," says Dennis, "but he kept playing in his room and with his friends. That's the best way to learn because you all start on the same level and when one picks up something new you all discover it together." Dennis loves to give David opportunities to develop his playing, just as his father and grandfather did for him. "Every time we play I notice he's gotten so much better," his father says proudly. David's main influence and inspiration has been Eddie Kamae.

In the mid-1990s, Dennis started playing solo after joining the Dancing Cat 'ohana. "Solo to me is a growing experience," he says. "It can bring a lot of risk into the music but a lot of freedom as well. It can also be a magical way to interact person to person with an audience, especially in a live setting." In 1996, Dennis issued his first Dancing Cat CD, PUA'ENA - "GLOW BRIGHTLY" (Dancing Cat 38036). This warmly romantic, nahenahe album featured a blend of original pieces by Dennis, Hawaiian classics, and songs by Queen Lili'uokalani, one of his favorite composer.

As its title, 'OHANA, suggests, Dennis wants this album to express the continuity between generations. "Father to son, father to son, father to son, passing on the feeling, the aloha for each other, for music, this is so important," he says.

ABOUT THE SONGS

1. **'Ulii E** (vocal)

Dennis: 6 string in C Mauna Loa Tuning (C-G-E-G-A-E)

David Kamakahi: 'ukulele in Standard Tuning (G-C-E-A) playing in C

This traditional Hawaiian standard describes a tattler bird running along the shore of a calm, deserted beach. The father-son performance honors the classic Gabby Pahinui and Eddie Kamae duets in *The Sons of Hawaii*, whose version can be heard on their classic album *GABBY PAHINUI WITH THE SONS OF HAWAII* (Hula 503). "Their version...oh man! That was responsible for getting me into wanting to play Hawaiian music full time," says Dennis. "It is so radical: the solos, fills, timing, the ending. One of my biggest thrills has been playing it with Eddie. We do that ending and we look at each other and just crack up. And now getting to play it with my son makes it even more special. In the studio I told David 'You be Eddie, I'll be Gabby.'"

2. ***Aloha Ko'olau*** (vocal)

Dennis: 12 string in C Mauna Loa Tuning tuned down to Ab

Not to be confused with the Auntie Alice Namakelua *mele pana* (place song) of the same name, this original composition by Dennis describes the beautiful valleys on the windward side of the island of Moloka'i. "It's for my grandfather and his love for the island. He was born in Honouli Wai and raised in Halawa, so our family has a lot of ties there." Like his grandfather, Dennis feels a strong connection to the Friendly Isle. "I go back there to find peace," he says. "It doesn't change. Time has a different meaning there."

3. ***No Ke Aha*** (instrumental)

Dennis: 6 string in G Major "Taro Patch" Tuning (D-G-D-G-B-D) tuned down to F

A favorite flirting song by Maddy Lam and Mary Kawena Pukui, **No Ke Aha** asks why did you whistle at me, wave at me and wink at me. It goes on to say that it's too late since the bird so eagerly sought has already been caught. "The first time I heard it was on Sonny Chillingworth's *WAIMEA COWBOY* (Lehua 2003)," says Dennis. "Sonny is another guy I really love: his playing, his voice, his personality. He was great." Dennis plays this song in his second favorite tuning, G Major, which is the most popular tuning in Hawai'i.

4. ***He 'Ai No Kalani*** (vocal)

Dennis: 6 string in G Major Tuning tuned down to F

This *mele*, which lovingly describes different foods enjoyed at a gathering, was written by Queen Lili'uokalani. "She's one of the most prolific writers in the poetic style," he says. "The famous songs are justifiably well known, but there's so many others she wrote that are also great. I enjoy discovering music of hers that hasn't been recorded, also reading about the contexts in which she wrote her songs." Dennis learned **He 'Ai No Kalani** from Eddie Kamae and performed it with *The Sons of Hawaii* on his first album with them, *EDDIE KAMAE PRESENTS THE SONS OF HAWAII* (Hawaii Sons 1001). The song was also included in a beautiful 'ukulele medley on an out-of-print classic album that Eddie produced for National Geographic.

5. *E Pupukanioe* (vocal)

Dennis: Taylor 12 string in C Mauna Loa Tuning tuned down to Ab

The *pupukanioe* is a land shell (*Partulina physa*) that the *kupuna* (elders) say can sing. Dennis notes, "I wrote that when Eddie was making the movie LISTEN TO THE FOREST. Uncle William and Uncle Joseph, the two brothers in the film, were talking about their father, who was a hunter on Kaua'i for years. He was still hunting when he was a hundred. When they'd go out with him they used to listen to the singing shells and that got me interested." Dennis remembers hearing the *pupukanioe* up in Koke'e on Kaua'i and in the forest on the third or fourth bend in the road to Hana on Maui. "There's a great scientific debate about whether it's the land shell or the crickets you hear," says Dennis, "but if you're from Hawai'i, you know it's the shell."

6. *Ka 'Opae* (vocal)

Dennis: 6 string in G Major Tuning tuned down to E

Dennis composed this good humored tale of clean living in the early 1970s. He first recorded it with the Sons of Hawaii in a rollicking country style on EDDIE KAMAE PRESENTS THE SONS OF HAWAII (Hawii Sons 1001). This time around it has acquired a strong South African beat.

"An '*opae* is a shrimp," Dennis says, "but the song is about a time in Moloka'i when my small cousins and I were walking along the stream. We heard laughing and giggling up ahead, so I went through the brush to see what it was. Well, there in the stream were all these nude hippie women. The kids asked what it was and I said "Nothing for you to worry about, just some '*opae*.' That's the great thing about kids. They're so innocent. They accept whatever you say!"

7. *Around the World* (instrumental)

Dennis: 6 string in C Mauna Loa Tuning

David: 'ukulele in Standard Tuning playing in C

This appropriately buoyant melody from the 1956 film, AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS, was composed by Hollywood veteran Victor Young. The song perfectly supported the colorful and light hearted action in the movie and spun off into three top 40 recordings by Bing Crosby, Mantovani and the composer himself. The catchy main theme ties perfectly to the waltz tempo, which was also a favorite of Monarchy composers in Hawai'i. "We slowed it down," he says. "The lullaby tempo really highlights David's technique. What came out was a beautiful exchange, real sweet."

8. *Moanalua* (vocal)

Dennis: 12 string in C Mauna Loa Tuning tuned down to Bb

Moanalua is one of many Hawaiian traveling songs created as a kind of musical home video. According to Eddie Kamae, who researched the song, Queen Lili'uokalani wrote it

in 1864. The destination in the song is the area called Moanalua. The route passes through Kalihi, Kapalama and several other westside neighborhoods in Honolulu.

Although the lyrics of **Moanalua** have usually been performed with a melody by David Nape, this is the first time that Lili'uokalani's melody has been recorded. In traditional *mele hula* (chant or song with choreography based on the text) style, Dennis sings each verse twice. The instrumental breaks between the verses are pure slack key. "I learned it through Eddie Kamae," Dennis says. "He's the person who first made me want to do the Queen's songs."

9. **He'eia** (vocal)

Dennis: 6 string in C Mauna Loa Tuning tuned down to Bb

David: 'ukulele in Standard Tuning tuned down two half steps

He'eia takes place at a well known surfing spot. Popularly attributed to J. Kalahiki, the melody is adapted from a chant which honors King David Kalakaua, praising his abilities as a surfer. As with many Hawaiian songs about the sea, the *kaona* (hidden meaning) here reportedly alludes to another more pleasurable activity. In typical slack key fashion, both players get plenty of room for *pa'ani* (instrumental solos). "I picked it for the counterpoint of guitar and 'ukulele," Dennis says. "It really brings you back to the old style with all the interplay." Versions in slack key have also been recorded by The Sons of Hawaii, Gabby Pahinui and others.

10. **'Ohana Slack Key** (instrumental)

Dennis: 6 string in C Mauna Loa Tuning tuned down to Bb

Dennis created this instrumental spontaneously in the studio. It started out as one song, then turned into a new one. The nice rolling pattern gives **'Ohana Slack Key** a nice 19th Century feel. "I love the Romantic Era in classical music and in Hawaiian music," Dennis says.

11. **Pua Hone** (vocal)

Dennis: 6 string in Dropped D Tuning (D-A-D-G-B-E), played in D, capoed up to Eb

One of Dennis' best known and frequently performed songs, **Pua Hone** was written as a musical proposal to his then-girlfriend, Robin. It came from a trip The Sons of Hawaii took to perform at a lu'au at the federal prison on McNeil Island. "It was the first time they'd tried anything like that and the warden was really tough. He said if there was any trouble at all this would be the last time. But there was no trouble at all. There was so much aloha, not only from the Hawaiian prisoners but from everyone. When we left they were all waving goodbye and, I tell you, there's nothing like hearing a steel door slam. It really makes you stop and think. That's when I knew I was ready to settle down." Dennis often tells this story in concert and loves to watch the newly weds react: "A lot of them start to cry a little and then I say that I guess I'm just a prisoner of love. Then they laugh." Dennis first recorded **Pua Hone** on THE SONS OF HAWAII (Hawaii Sons 3003). It quickly became a local standard.

12. *Ka Hanu O Ka Hanakeoki* (vocal)

Dennis: 6 string in C Mauna Loa Tuning tuned down to Bb

David: 'ukulele in Standard Tuning tuned down two half steps

Another composition by Lili'uokalani, **Ka Hanu O Ka Hanakeoki** tells the story of a canoe whose name can be translated as "working George". "She must have seen it at Kipahulu on Maui," Dennis says. "In the song the canoe serves as a symbol for a loved one." Father and son perform **Ka Hanu O Ka Hanakeoki** in a style reminiscent of the classic playing of Eddie Kamae and Gabby Pahinui.

13. *'Ike Ia Ladana (Queen's Jubilee)* (vocal)

Dennis: 6 string in C Mauna Loa Tuning tuned down to Ab

Composed while she was still a princess, **'Ike Ia Ladana** is one of Lili'uokalani's most beautiful and memorable melodies. She wrote it, as *Ladana* (London) suggests, about a trip to England with her sister-in-law, Queen Kapi'olani, to visit Buckingham Palace. "It talks about how great Queen Victoria is and how she opened her heart to the Hawaiians," notes Dennis.

The music was used for two sets of lyrics. "It's the same melody as **Queen's Jubilee**, but by reading the words you can see it probably came earlier. As far as I know, this is the first time this set of lyrics has been recorded," he says. "I want to put an unreleased song by the Queen on each album. That's a real honor to be able to share her music this way." (On [PUA'ENA](#), Dennis included the first ever recording of **'Apapane**).

14. *'Ike Ia Ladana (Queen's Jubilee)* (instrumental)

Dennis: 6 string in C Mauna Loa Tuning tuned down to Ab

Fellow slack key guitarist, and Dennis's sometimes duet partner, [George Kuo](#) has said that one can make the guitar cry in this tuning. This very beautiful arrangement ends with Dennis's striking and weeping guitar, some of the best evidence of that ever heard.

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For additional albums with Dennis Kamakahi, visit Dennis' website at <http://hometown.aol.com/naukilo1/index1.html>