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[←--back to story](#)

MAUI BEAT: Henry Kapono unleashes 'The Wild Hawaiian'

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It's been a long time coming. Finally Henry Ka'aihue Kapono has released "The Wild Hawaiian," his first album sung entirely in Hawaiian.

Bearing little resemblance to anything he's ever recorded before or, for that matter, what anyone in the islands has created before, Kapono has crafted a landmark recording, the most bold, radical and innovative album of his entire career.

At the age of 57, he's completely shifted musical direction, interpreting a handful of Hawaiian classics as contemporary rock songs, and composing a couple of new rocking, Hawaiian language compositions that pay heartfelt tribute to his culture.

As if channeling the ferocious power of the Red Hot Chili Peppers and the scorching guitar of Jimi Hendrix, Kapono opens "The Wild Hawaiian" with a stunning version of Kui Lee's "Na Ali'i," rendered as a slamming, hip-hop flavored rocker.

Article Photos



Henry Kapono channels the ferocious power of the Red Hot Chili Peppers and the scorching guitar of Jimi Hendrix on his latest CD.
HOWARD WELLS photo

"For many years people have been asking me why I haven't done a Hawaiian album," Kapono explains. "Once I got the arrangements for 'Na Ali'i,' that solidified the direction I was going. 'Na Ali'i' really rocks; it's really hard rock. I thought that was a good start, and I wanted to keep that energy and be diversified, to expand the target to not only older folks but younger kids as well.

"Kui Lee does a really happy, free spirited version," Kapono continues. "The lyrics speak about paying respect to our ancestors, the kings and queens, and they talk about King Kamehameha's battles. That gave me a different perception of what the song meant and it definitely fit the rock genre."

Initially he had begun recording some years back employing traditional instrumentation and working with chanters including Charles Ka'upu.

"I tried using the ipu and pahu drum, but I've heard it done so many times and I've done it already," he says. "I really wanted to do something different, adding an edge and power to Hawaiian music.

Hawaiian music is so beautiful and flowing and graceful that if I was going to do something different then I needed to go all the way."

Did he ever feel apprehensive about launching into such radical territory?

"I wasn't nervous, just thinking a lot about whether this was the right thing to do, the right direction to go," he suggests. "I basically followed my heart, which is what I do with all my music."

For more than three decades Kapono has played a major role in the islands. One half of Hawaii's supergroup C&K, he was one of the first local entertainers to write a song fusing reggae and Hawaiian influences on his debut 1981 solo album, "Stand in the Light," foreshadowing the influential Hawaiian movement. A few years later he expanded his creative reach with a more global perspective on the landmark recording "Same World." Surrounded by guest artists like vocalist Michael McDonald, reggae stars Third World and the Tower of Power horns, Kapono artfully blended rock, R&B, jazz and Caribbean influences.

Pursuing an innovative solo path, over the years he's sung everything from Hawaiian classics to rock 'n' roll, acted in a major Hollywood movie, produced a TV documentary on sovereignty, and composed many songs that remain island favorites.

"I'm always looking for something new," he says. "Music is an adventure for me of experimenting and discovering different things."

Primarily known as an acoustic guitarist, Kapono shows his growth as a gifted electric guitarist on this album, and his playing on the song "He'eia," a radical revision of an old chant that honors King Kalakaua, is particularly striking.

"I was afraid of it when I first started because the acoustic guitar is so friendly," he reveals. "The electric guitar can be scary. I always listened to Jimi Hendrix and Stevie Ray Vaughan, and I picked up stuff and became more confident."

He credits the recording's grand, dramatic sound to Steely Dan's Grammy-winning engineer Dave Russell, and the surprising influence of punk rockers Green Day.

"Green Day's 'American Idiot' album came out and I'd never heard a sound like that first note," Kapono reports. "I wanted a big sound like that and I had it in mind when I went in the studio (in Ulupalakua). We pretty much isolated ourselves from civilization and just focused on what we were doing. It was an amazing experience and we all blew ourselves away."

During the recording sessions another inspiration came from a poem composed by a Maui girl that Kapono heard while facilitating a workshop at the Ritz-Carlton Kapalua's Celebration of the Arts festival.

"I was hosting a poetry workshop where people would come in and read their poetry," he explains. "I learned a lot about the pent-up anger that Hawaiians have. This girl of about 12 read a poem that blew me away; it was saying that one day everything would be taken away. It had a big impact on me, and how I was going to pursue this project and the show.

"I want to make sure that never happens. I want to empower the next generation to go beyond themselves so we never have to face that situation."

Respecting the essence of the traditional material he interprets, Kapono closes the album with two Hawaiian classics – a stately, almost anthemic version of Sam Li'a's "Hi'ilawe," and Queen Liliu'okalani's "Ke Aloha O Ka Hawaii" (The "Queen's Prayer").

With so many recordings released of "Hi'ilawe," Kapono wondered what he could bring to it. "Gabby (Pahinui) is the king of 'Hi'ilawe,' what do you do next? I thought I'd have to do it in a way that pays respect to Gabby.

"Musically it gets bigger and more powerful and the keyboard (played by Pearl Jam's Boom Gaspar) gives it more space. To me it has a U2 vibe."

Treating Queen Liliu'okalani's signature song as a plaintive ballad, he starts acoustically and gradually builds tension to a rousing electric guitar finale. With its powerful message emphasizing compassion and forgiveness it's a perfect ending to a brilliant record.

"She's one of my favorite songwriters and such a courageous leader," he notes. "In the song she was saying, though things happened and it might not have been right, we've got to forgive. If we don't do that we'll never be able to perpetuate our culture. In some ways it was saying to me if we can do this we can free her. Our images are of her in prison and we can let go of that and set her free, and the only way we can do that is as her people setting ourselves free. The universal truth is that if we don't forgive people we never move on."

Drawing rave reviews for the album, Kapono feels heartened that everyone he meets has responded so enthusiastically. "It's awesome what this is doing," he enthuses. "I was on Kauai and the governor was at the airport and she says, 'Tell me about this Wild Hawaiian?'"

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