

GRACIE TERZIAN'S
HARP UKULELE

UKULELE GUILD
OF HAWAII

VINTAGE UKE
DESIGN DETAILS

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SEVENTHS LESSON

Ukulele

FALL 2022

KANEKOA HAWAIIAN TRAILBLAZERS

NEW UKES

OHANA
CK-570G
CONCERT

IBANEZ
UKS100
SOPRANO
& UKC100
CONCERT

SONGS

GRATEFUL
DEAD
FRIEND
OF THE
DEVIL

JIM BELOFF
CAN'T HELP
BUT SMILE

EDITOR'S NOTE

Do you say “ookoo-lay-lay” or “yookoo-lay-lee”? I get this question a lot, and it’s one that confronts me, often multiple times, every time we put together a new issue of this magazine. In the simplest explanation, the “ook” pronunciation is preferred in Hawaii—it’s a Hawaiian word and the Islands were, of course, the birthplace of the instrument. But much more common on the mainland U.S. and much of the English-speaking world is “yook.” I am personally an “ook” guy and have been for years, but I certainly don’t think “yook” is wrong in any way, any more than pronouncing the capital of France “Pariss” instead of the French “Paree.”

The way it often comes up in the magazine is in the context of a quote, where you want to accurately reflect the speaker’s actual words. Some interviewees will say, for instance, “My father gave me an ukulele for my third birthday.” The article “an” is the tip-off that the speaker pronounces it “ookulele”; you would never say “an yookulele.” Likewise, if a speaker or writer says, “I’m getting my son a ukulele for Christmas,” rules of grammar and pronunciation demand that it be “a yookulele.”

My feeling is that both are fine, and indeed you’ll see both in the magazine, depending on the writers’ and interview subjects’ preferences. My brain has no problem switching back and forth. Hopefully it’s not too annoying or distracting to you, but at least now you know why the inconsistency exists in our pages. That said, we have chosen *not* to use Hawaiian diacritical marks such as the *okina* (glottal stop)—’—at the beginning of some words, like ‘ukulele, as it is written throughout the Islands; nor the Hawaiian *kahako*—*ō, ā, ē, ī, ū*—which are used to differentiate between long and short vowels. No disrespect for this beautiful language is

intended, of course. And don’t worry, none of this will be on the final!

I first heard of the Maui band Kanekoa, whose two ukulele players grace the cover of this issue, when two of its members played informally at a small backyard gathering hosted by former *Acoustic Guitar* managing editor Marc Greilsamer maybe half a dozen years ago. I couldn’t tell you which two guys it was, but I remember liking them tremendously and digging their commitment to improvisational exploration within their song structures, something I hadn’t really heard much in Hawaiian bands. Little did I know that they had been a popular fixture in Hawaii for well over a decade at that point, with a loyal following and several studio and live albums under their belts. This issue’s story is based around an interview *Ukulele* digital content manager Nick Grizzle did with all four bandmembers in the late spring, mostly about the making of their very cool and stylistically diverse new album, *Songs from the Great Disruption*. Recorded during the pandemic, the album was produced by Los Lobos saxophonist/keyboardist Steve Berlin (who has also helmed records by Leo Kottke, Greensky Bluegrass, Faith No More, and others), and features a number of notable guest players, including Jake Shimbukuro, G Love, George Kahumoku Jr., John Cruz, and Berlin himself.

Elsewhere in this issue, you’ll find songs to play, lessons to challenge you, album reviews, player profiles, Uke Tales, more entertaining historical dives into uke minutiae . . . in short, all the fun stuff you’ve come to expect from us every three months.

Keep on strummin’!

—Blair Jackson, editor
blair@stringletter.com

Ukulele

CONTENT DEVELOPMENT

Editor Blair Jackson

Managing Editor Kevin Owens

Music Editor Adam Perlmutter

Contributing Editors

Audrey Coleman, Jim D’Ville, Steven Espaniola,

Sandor Nagyszalanczy, Greg Olwell,

Adam Perlmutter, Fred Sokolow,

Heidi Swedberg, Daniel Ward

Digital Content Manager Nick Grizzle

Creative Director Joey Lusterman

SALES & MARKETING

Group Sales Manger Amy-lynn Fischer

Sales Manager Ref Sanchez

Marketing Services Manager Tanya Gonzalez

Marketing Coordinator Geneva Thompson

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Single Copy Sales Consultant Tom Ferruggia



Stringletter.com

Publisher Lyzy Lusterman

Editorial Director David A. Lusterman

FINANCE & OPERATIONS

Chief Operations Officer Anita Evans

General Inquiries FrontDesk@Stringletter.com

Customer Service

UkuleleService@Stringletter.com

Advertising Inquiries

Sales@Stringletter.com

Send e-mail to individuals in this format:

FirstName.LastName@Stringletter.com

Front Desk (510) 215-0010

Customer Service (800) 827-6837

General Fax (510) 231-5824

Secure Fax (510) 231-8964

Mail & Shipping

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Richmond, CA 94804

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Got a question or comment for *Ukulele*’s editors?

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at (510) 215-0037, or e-mail him at

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EAT
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TALK STORY



No Bou

From left: Travis Rice, Kaulana Kanekoa, Vince Esquire, "Uncle" Don Lopez

ndaries.

The ukulele-driven Maui band
KANEKOA remains proudly eclectic

BY NICOLAS GRIZZLE

T heir music has been referred to as ukulele-powered Hawaiian jam-rock, reggae music, island music, and they've even been called "Hawaiian Grateful Dead" by none other than Dead drummer Bill Kreutzmann. But now, after 25 years as a band, Kanekoa may finally be able to define their "sound" as a musical group: It's a little bit of everything.

Anyone who has listened to Kanekoa over the years knows how hard they are to categorize. Their nine studio albums (and eight live albums), comprised of a mixture of originals and cover tunes, have roots in blues, rock, reggae, Hawaiian music, and more. Their live shows have attracted a following of fans so fervent they have a nickname, Koa-heads. They've earned praise from mainstream music giants like Bonnie Raitt bassist James "Hutch" Hutchinson and Mick Fleetwood (who called them "amazing" in a 2015 interview for this magazine). But because their music doesn't fit easily into the industry's award and marketing classifications, they haven't quite been able to break out in the way one might expect from a band with such longevity.

"There were so many times when nobody wanted to hear our live music; nobody wanted to hear our originals," says singer and rhythm ukulele player Kaulana Kanekoa. "And that's what really forges you. It carves out what you become. So when there are hundreds of people and you're selling out shows, it feels wonderful, but at the same time you have that [struggle] to draw back on."

Kanekoa began as two ukuleles and a hand drum. It evolved for a while into a more raucous affair—featuring a full drum set and long, rock-inspired jams tailor-made for festival slots—but has also existed as a laid-back duo of just two ukes playing at coffeeshops. The current configuration has the band at its most balanced, with two ukes, a U-bass, and a cajon.

Their latest album, *Songs from the Great Disruption*, released in January 2022, captures the musical gumbo of Kanekoa in a sonically zesty package, with plenty of guest stars spicing up the mix. The album's nine tracks offer a spectrum of genres: pop, cumbia, R&B, classic rock, reggae, Hawaiian music, and more. And yet, despite the variety of styles and approaches, it could be argued that it's actually the most Kanekoa-sounding album to date.

"When we play live, we might run the gamut of genres within a 40-minute set," says Vince Esquire, the shredding lead ukulele player who joined the group as a young teenager. "So to do it on an album was not very different for us."

BEYOND CATEGORIES

The band won a Na Hoku Hanohano award for their 2016 album *Tales of the Fruit Stand Mystic*. The awards are often referred to as the "Hawaiian Grammys," and the category they won for was Best Reggae Album. They're nominated again this year, this time for Best Island Music Album.

"They just don't know how to really categorize it," says bassist "Uncle" Don Lopez, the group's elder statesman, about their sound. When asked how the band would categorize itself, he quickly replies, "We don't know, either!" As if it's an inside joke they'd discussed many times, the band's hearty laughter maxed out the audio in our Zoom interview from the group's Maui studio.

Lopez is a staple of the Hawaiian music scene, holding down the groove for legends like Willie K and others for years. It would be easy to say he'd heard (and probably played) it all before joining Kanekoa around 2015. But he would disagree.

"When I first joined up," he says, "I sat in with them, and I remember listening to what was going on, and saying 'How the hell am I supposed to fit anything into this that isn't just, you know, the usual stuff. Because they're not playing the usual stuff!' And Kaulana said, 'No, Uncle, you just play anything you want.' I'm like, 'OK!' When does a bass player ever get that kind of license?"

"We all grew up listening and watching Don play on the island," Kanekoa says. "Don's always been one of the top players here in Hawaii, for all of our lifetimes. So having him join the *mana* [an Hawaiian term for spiritual energy and strength] was just like—wow! And it just really just brought our music to another level."

"It's been a real adventure for me to be able to create some kind of a groove within all of the chaos and insane stuff that's going on between these three guys," Lopez says. "It's just been wonderful."

The variety of music they play goes beyond what's recorded on their albums. Each show varies night to night, much to the delight of Koa-heads and casual fans alike. "We do a monthly show at a theater on Maui," says Travis Rice, the band's percussionist. "The last time was two weeks ago. The first set was all original music, and for the second set we did Pink Floyd songs."

That set included side A of *Dark Side of the Moon* and other tunes, including the deep cut "Pigs on the Wing" from *Animals*. "On a uke it sounds gorgeous," Rice says. "There's just this weird thing of getting the madness of Pink Floyd lyrics and putting them on top of the sweet-sounding instrument." That show also





SCOTT JOHNSON PHOTO

featured dobro player Justin Morris doing Pink Floyd guitarist David Gilmour's original slide guitar parts.

The band occasionally draws comparisons to the Grateful Dead, and Esquire's playing in particular can sometimes stir up memories of Jerry Garcia. But he doesn't cite the guitarist as a major influence (Rice and Kanekoa are fans, however). For the uke, he says, "I think players from my generation would all say that Jake Shimabukuro was a major motivating factor in our initial interest in learning. But I was more influenced by guitarists for my own personal style—mainly Stevie Ray Vaughan all the way back through his influences like Albert King and B.B. King."

The group is no stranger to top-tier guest artists joining them onstage. They've played with Jake several times, for example. And there's a video online of harmonica great John Popper of Blues Traveler

jamming with them, trading licks with Esquire. It feels like they could go all night and never run out of things to play.

On *Songs from the Great Disruption*, the foursome is augmented by several guest stars: G Love (of Special Sauce fame) on vocals and harmonica, John Cruz on vocals and slack key guitar, George Kahumoku Jr. on slack key guitar, Geri Valdriz on lap steel, and others, including Los Lobos' Steve Berlin on keys and baritone sax; he also produced the album (more on that later).

The song that features Kahumoku Jr. and Valdriz is Kumu Frank Kawaikapuokalani Hewett's "Aloha Ka Leo O Kahi Manu," a beautiful Hawaiian tune with Amy Hanaiali'i on backing vocals and Eric Gilliom on rhythm guitar. The lush arrangement is preceded by a message in Hawaiian from Hewett explaining the song's meaning, and followed by him thanking the musicians for loving his song.

Jake's on it, too, with a beautiful performance as part of a uke duet with Esquire on a cover of Led Zeppelin's "Going to California." The track is a standout not only for the gorgeous playing and tone from the two ukuleles, but for the effortless flow of the arrangement from the entire band, topped off by Kaulana Kanekoa's sultry vocal rendition that almost gives Robert Plant's original recording a run for its money.

RECORDING 'THE GREAT DISRUPTION'

The album was planned before the pandemic, and then everything changed. But that didn't stop the *mana* from flowing from Kanekoa's musical hearts. Ironically, the global travel shutdown may have actually enabled more collaboration on this album with artists in Hawaii and beyond.

"Because of the pandemic, the convergence of events and people was easier to



bring together and cost really nothing, because nobody was doing anything,” Rice says. OK, so they’ve got the time, but how did so many in-demand artists from all over the place end up on this record when nobody could go anywhere? This was largely thanks to technology that allowed for collaboration in real time from the band’s own studio in Wailuku, on Maui.

“A great deal of the cost of creating an album is a band traveling to the studio, writing everything, rehearsing,” Lopez says, “and a lot of times it’s intimidating walking into somebody else’s studio. We’re finding that people are so relaxed. Like Jake—Jake got to be in his happy place and do his thing.”

In that case, the group sent him the track and he recorded on it from his Oahu studio and sent it back “instead of having to fly over here and be in a weird studio with a different sound,” Lopez says. “So it’s

actually kind of creating a calmer environment for some people.”

The playing feels so natural, so in-the-moment, it’s hard to believe Esquire and Shimabukuro weren’t in the same room, let alone not playing at the same time. “That was my goal in the editing process—to get it to sound like we had sat side by side,” says Esquire, who engineered the album with Lopez.

“As Vince received Jake’s tracks,” Lopez adds, “he was able to jam with those tracks. So there is that essence of jam sensation going on in there. It feels like a jam, even though Vince kind of studied the part and created the jam. He got it in his fingers, got it in his ears, and went for it.”

It’s not just trading riffs, either. “There were three or four parts where Jake played a lick or something that I really liked, and I would double it with him,” Esquire says, “There are three or four spots on that track

where we hit the same riff, or I did a harmony to it, to make it sound more authentically like we worked it out.”

It helped that the band has been playing their own arrangement of “Going to California” for about 15 years now, though this is the first time they’ve recorded it in-studio. (It does appear on their *Live at Sweetwater Music Hall* album from 2018.) It was the producer’s idea to include it on the album. Rice says, “Steve Berlin tells bands, ‘Never do covers unless you can make it your own.’ And he said, ‘That one, you guys made it your own. That would be a great song to do with Jake.’”

ENTER STEVE BERLIN

The band met Berlin a few years ago, when they opened for Los Lobos at the Maui Arts and Cultural Center. Los Lobos fans were enthralled with Kanekoa, and the band took notice—Berlin especially.

Berlin has worked with Willie Nelson, Mavis Staples, REM, Sheryl Crow, The Replacements, The Chicks, John Lee Hooker, and many more in the studio as a session musician and arranger. In addition to Los Lobos (which he joined in 1984 as an official member after producing their EP the year prior), he's produced albums by Leo Kottke, Greensky Bluegrass, Jackie Greene, Faith No More, Crash Test Dummies, Buckwheat Zydeco, the Tragically Hip, and many more.

Berlin most recently won a Grammy in the Best Americana Album category this year with Los Lobos for *Native Sons*, which he produced and performed on. That pushed his total to four Grammy awards, with nine nominations, for performing and producing with Los Lobos, Buckwheat Zydeco, Ozomatli, John Lee Hooker, and Los Super Seven.

"Steve Berlin is a—we kind of found out we'd lucked into it," Rice says. "We thought he was the sax player, bandleader for Los Lobos . . . and then we found out he had this whole other side to him."

Originally, the plan was to record with Berlin producing in-studio for a couple weeks. It ended up taking a few months, start to finish, working remotely, in the middle of 2020. But Berlin was still fully committed to the project, the band says. "Combined with Zoom video, which he'd be on at the same time, Steve was able to produce the album basically just through a live stream of our recording software from Pro Tools," Esquire says. "I think this is going to start a new way of doing things, a new process for people on how to be creative, because the Covid thing is not going away."

Adds Rice, "We did the whole album online, casual. It's a different way of doing it. This way, we spread it out over months, and we had a chance to sit with it a lot more. It was much more flexible."

As excited as the band was to work with him, Berlin was equally excited to work with them. "Kanekoa is one of those special bands where years and years of hard work give them the license to create seemingly effortless beauty, but behind the scenes there's lots of sweat equity," he said in one interview. "Their peaceful and gorgeous songs are uniquely suited for these unsettling times, and I thoroughly enjoyed every minute of working with them."

"A great deal of what he did was to help with arrangement of some of the tunes," Lopez says. "He came up with some ideas for arrangements that we then fleshed out. He was the one who came up with the idea to do a cumbia on the John Cruz tune ['Don't Let Go']."

"He would definitely press us all, in rearranging and arranging some of these songs that we had been

playing in a live format for years already," says Kanekoa. "Now and again, he would push me to write more lyrics right there on the spot or within the next couple of days."

Rice feels this album is more polished than their previous studio efforts, in a good way. "I think what Steve brought was that real professional level; the idea being, let's be very detail-oriented, every single track. Why are you putting that sound in there? Why are you bringing that note? It was like everything was just tightened up. So then as a whole, it sounds magical."

Lopez adds, "With Steve, we came in and would re-record songs several times to fix things or try different ideas and feels, things like that. With the other albums, they were just laid down and whatever there was is what was dealt with."

With a band whose identity is tied to musical spontaneity, that might sound counterintuitive. But Berlin had the wisdom of experience to get them on board. "If you record, you're not going to capture the magic of live [performance]," Rice says. "And for years, we would try. With Steve, he sort of solidified the idea that, no, they're two different things. You can develop a song for the next ten years, and it can be different than what's on the album. And that's cool."

COMING FULL CIRCLE

The focus on blazing rock uke solos, sonic-speed strum jams, and mind-melting effects pedals of their previous albums has been shifted on this new album to creating space for the guests to shine and bring something new to the mix. The jam-band energy is still there, but it's matured. The music is constructed to be a picture of this moment in the lifespan of the song; a solid foundation upon which to build for their unpredictable and exciting live shows.

"We just kind of grew up in this band," says Esquire, who has been with the group for most of his life. "Through this process, and now that we're older, we kind of just have this more mature, polished outlook on how we should play."

Kanekoa adds, "Now we're just a more polished version of our sound, which is really cool, because we're a lot more comfortable playing our sound than we might have been 15 years ago."

The band has, in a way, come full circle back to its roots, says Esquire. "I would relate it to martial arts, which I used to do. They say when you get your black belt is when you start over again. Basically, you're starting your journey again. So I feel like this band is now coming to the point where it's gotten that black belt. And now it's starting again." u