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Musical Journey

Slack-key guitar master George Kahumoku Jr. maintains an intimate connection with the land, performing and sharing his knowledge with others

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John Berger, photo credits Jamm Aquino



George Kahumoku Jr. nuzzles Bella, a goat that he and his wife, Nancy, hand-raised on their farm in the Kahakuloa district of West Maui. Sheep, goats and chickens are among the livestock on the property, which features an almost endless bounty of food and plant crops.

KAHAKULOA, Maui » George Kahumoku Jr. guides "Hauoli Girl," his white four-wheel-drive Toyota Tacoma pickup, around the tight turns of the increasingly narrow road that leads to his farm in the remote Kahakuloa district of West Maui. "No more guardrail," he says when he notices his passenger looking out over the sheer drop to whatever lay below. "Lucky they wen' pave 'em. It used to be gravel before." The journey ends at the modest one-story farmhouse Kahumoku shares with his wife, Nancy; her 93-year-old mother; his hanai son, Geoffrey Sweeney; and Li'i Li'i, a friendly Australian shepherd-border collie mix. Sweeney handles the musician's blog, mailing lists and online sales of Kahumoku's Hawaiian coffee and herbal teas, CDs and DVDs. The immediate ohana includes son Keoki Kahumoku, a slack-key recording artist and teacher in his own right.

On one side of the house is a neatly trimmed lawn and a gorgeous view of the ocean. In other directions, plants appear to grow at random: papaya, cherry tomatoes, green onions, ti, pineapples, lychee, coconut, breadfruit, "45 varieties of sweet potato, 10 varieties of bananas, nine varieties of tapioca, 40 varieties of citrus" and a seemingly endless selection of herbs, edible flowers and plants used for traditional Hawaiian medicinal purposes. A tour of the 2.5-acre grounds becomes an informal ethnobotany lecture. "I multicrop, so in one area I'll have, like, 20 different things growing. You confuse the bugs, you confuse the diseases. If you mono-crop you get problems," Kahumoku says.

Inside the home, in the entry, a slender bookcase displays photos, framed album covers and other memorabilia of Kahumoku's career as one of Hawaii's pre-eminent slack-key guitarists. Adorned with dried lei are three Grammy Awards for slack-key compilations for which Kahumoku served as a producer and performer. (He should have a fourth, as his name was inadvertently omitted from the producing credits of a fourth winning compilation album.)

Kahumoku, 61, could bring home another trophy at the 54th annual Grammy Awards today for "Wao Akua (The Forest of the Gods)," the only Hawaiian music album in the new regional roots music album category, which absorbed the Hawaiian category last year. Released in May, the album captures the beauty of traditional slack key and builds on Kahumoku's years of experience playing "background music" for tourists on Hawaii island and Maui.

"Whenever I play an instrumental 'background music' gig, I often drift into a zone of reflection that flows into a spiritual realm where I hope the listener can follow," he wrote in the liner notes. "These solo instrumentals are the embodiment of my life's journey through Hawaiian slack-key guitar music. ... Just as there are different layers in the forest: the ground cover, ferns and bushes, understory, and a canopy; these songs, too, are representative of the various layers of my musical life." Kahumoku shares his vision of the spiritual aspects of Hawaiian music and teaches the techniques of singing or playing an instrument in his work as director of the Institute of Hawaiian Music, which opened last year at the University of Hawaii-Maui College. He also produces and performs weekly concerts at the Napili Kai Beach Resort, trading his time as a deejay on a Maui radio station, FM 107.5, for advertising for the series, and performs monthly at the Maui Arts & Cultural Center

Born and raised on Hawaii, Kahumoku was still a student at Kamehameha Schools when he began his career as a professional musician in 1962. Kui Lee heard him playing slack key between washing cars for Lippy Espinda at the corner of Kapiolani Boulevard and Kalakaua Avenue and invited Kahumoku to sit in and play a song with him and Sam Kapu Jr. at the Forbidden City nightclub next door. After graduating from Kamehameha in 1969, Kahumoku earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the California College of Arts and Crafts in Berkeley in 1973. He remains an avid sculptor.

Returning to the islands after college, Kahumoku played as a background musician — what he calls "a side dish" — for 20 years at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel, then leased a farm he owned on Hawaii Island and moved to Maui when the hotel closed for renovations. He continued to play for hotel audiences, but recording for George Winston's Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Masters series transformed him and other slack-key guitarists from background music to concert headliners. "Before, if you played slack key you were usually the backup for somebody else. ... All of a sudden we were concert guitarists from the back porch, (and) we were playing places where you could hear a pin drop. I think that's what made us really famous."

AS A FARMER, Kahumoku was "green" before "green" became fashionable. "I come from a family of survivalists. We know how to hunt, fish, gather food. Everything on my farm I raise for us to eat. Whatever's extra we share or we sell," he says. Brush cuttings supplement the diet of the sheep and goats that share a pasture on the far side of one of his garden plots. Manure from his livestock reduces his use of fertilizer. Table scraps are fed to the ducks he keeps in pens to keep pests out of his fields. Chickens in moveable pens provide

eggs and "clean the ground" as their droppings fertilize it. Li'i Li'i helps Kahumoku herd the sheep and goats and once helped him catch a 400-pound wild boar that invaded the property. The area where Kahumoku lives doesn't allow pigs or cattle; he keeps them on leased land in other parts of the island. "Basically our cattle is free-range on the pasture; we know where they came from. It's a whole different thing if you know where your meat came from. . . . You take charge of what you eat." Like the farmers of old, he'll trade a goat or a pig for something the farm doesn't produce; some of his music students trade time working on the farm for lessons from the slack-key master. The fresh fruits and vegetables that exceed his personal needs are sold through a farmers' co-op.



Kahumoku keeps busy on his 2.5-acre farm in West Maui by tending his fruit and vegetable garden and livestock.



Kahumoku packs up bananas and papayas to deliver to a farmers' co-op.

Kahumoku is involved in all aspects of farm work. He takes the lead in planting or replanting potted sprouts and cuttings, collects eggs for breakfast and breaks off some greenery for the animals. He is working hard on this clear, early morning, finally taking a break to help the students sort and pack bananas and papaya for delivery to the co-op. After a midmorning breakfast, Kahumoku leaves to pick up a dozen loads of mulch near Lahaina. He confers with Nancy about their plans for the day — she'll be joining him at the Napili hotel for the slack-key show that night. He exchanges his yellow aloha shirt for one with a colorful surfboard print. On the drive back through West Maui, Kahumoku points out native plants and introduced species, explains the traditional uses of the Hawaiian plants and tells the stories of local landmarks and historic places commemorated in old-time songs.

Kahumoku's lot in a Hawaiian Homestead area near Lahaina is an extension of the farm. While the other "homesteaders" are growing neatly trimmed lawns, almost everything grown on Kahumoku's property is edible: eggplant, luau leaf, tomatoes, papaya, lemongrass, green onions, sweet potatoes and other food crops. His biggest concern, he says, is persuading one of his grandchildren to live in the house and tend the plants on a daily basis. He mentions matter-of-factly that he waited 40 years to get the lot. "I signed up when I was 18 years old. When I was 58 my name finally came up. "Three years later, Kahumoku says, the output of his homestead crops pays the mortgage and covers the other costs of homeownership as well.

Kahumoku's immersion in Hawaiian culture began when he was a keiki living with his great-grandparents and their extended ohana in South Kona. The family was almost completely self-sufficient. "When we'd go shopping we'd only buy three things: salt, sugar and material to sew clothes. That was our whole shopping list." Kahumoku enjoyed doing his "fair share" of the work, but childhood asthma limited his ability to farm and fish. Instead, he spent a lot of time with his great-grandmother. One of his tasks was reading the Bible to her in Hawaiian. "That's how I basically learned the language," he says. Kahumoku's experiences in those early years shaped his perspectives on many things. For one, he's not afraid of hard work. "My fingers can go fast (when I play guitar), but the reason for that is I learned how

to pick coffee and break branches and all those different things. It builds up your strength in your fingers and your hands."

Every Wednesday night, except when he's touring, Kahumoku hosts the Masters of Hawaiian Music Slack Key Show at the Napili Kai Beach Resort. First presented at the Westin Maui, the concerts have spawned four Grammy Award-winning albums that showcase not only ki ho'alu (slack key), but also ukulele, steel guitar and Hawaiian singers, including falsetto performers. He began recording the shows when Winston asked him to "archive everything." Grammy-winning producer Daniel Ho, who'd met Kahumoku in California, took the project to the next big step by going through the archival recordings and selecting cuts for commercial release.



That night, Kahumoku plays at the Napili Kai Beach Resort as he hosts his Masters of Hawaiian Music Slack Key Show, which also features ukulele, steel guitar and Hawaiian vocal performances.

On this night, Kahumoku's guests are the Rev. Dennis Kamakahi and Stephen Inglis, who are visiting Maui to promote their album of songs about Kalaupapa. Kahumoku presides as the emcee and as an opening act — Kamakahi and Inglis are the headliners. The farmer and mulch-digger of the morning now wears a neatly pressed yellow aloha shirt tucked in at the waist of his black slacks. He plays a short set so the headliners will have more time. Nancy joins him onstage to dance hula.

Kamakahi says later that Kahumoku is "a great opening act whenever we travel on concert tours together. He knows exactly how to prepare the audience for a Hawaiian show by making them relax and ready for the next act. "He is one of the most energetic entertainers I've ever met. He lives each moment to the fullest. Out of all the friends I've ever had in the entertainment business, George is in my inner circle of close friends that I hold his ideas and opinions in the highest regard. Musician, farmer (and) teacher, he is a true treasure of Hawaii."