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# Mekia's Martin

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Like many turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Hawaiian musicians, celebrated bandleader Mekia Kealakai—whose career spanned the overthrow of the Hawaiian kingdom and America's annexation of the Islands—preferred guitars manufactured by CF Martin & Company.



**Guitar maker and historian Kilin Reece plays a Martin Custom Major Kealakai (seen also on pages 15-16). CF Martin & Company created this reissue of an instrument it built for Hawaiian musician Mekia Kealakai in 1916—the ancestor to the most popular acoustic guitar style in the world.**

**B**ut in the days before amplification, Kealakai's parlor-size guitar wasn't loud enough for the big vaudeville concert halls at a time when the popularity of Hawaiian music was exploding worldwide. So he convinced Martin to make him a special guitar that was larger and had steel strings—

something the company was just beginning to try. As the iconic guitar manufacturer's sixth-generation scion Chris F. Martin IV puts it, Kealakai's guitar "was designed to give the people in the back row their money's worth."

As history would have it, the instrument delivered to Kealakai in 1916

became the prototype for the most widely played acoustic guitar design of all time: Martin's "Dreadnought" model, prized for its sturdiness and volume. Kealakai's role in the origin of the Dreadnought, however, remained generally unknown until it was brought to light in recent years by luthier and historian Kilin Reece, founder of the nonprofit Kealakai Center for Pacific Strings.

This spring, Martin released a reissue called the Custom Major Kealakai. Calling the original instrument "the 'missing link' in our company's transition from making smaller, Spanish-style guitars to the larger instruments of today," Chris Martin says that after researching the guitar's history with Reece, the company put out the reissue "to honor this amazing Hawaiian story behind the guitar that essentially birthed the Dreadnought."

Key features have been painstakingly re-created in the new version, which retails for just under eight grand (with a portion going toward music education programs for Hawai'i's kids). Most noticeably, there's the unique flower-shaped bridge that Kealakai designed himself. And the guitar's sides, back and neck are made from a hundred-year-old trove of mahogany—making it the same age as the original.

Kim Ae, a great-granddaughter of Kealakai who is collaborating with Reece on a film project, says that hearing one of the replica guitars played for the first time "gave me chicken skin, to think that we come from the line of this musician who had such a big impact. It's a story that's not only dear to us, but to all Native Hawaiian people, with all the history that's wrapped up in it."

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