

# Globetrotter

## A windward O'ahu instrument-maker traces the footsteps of an early Hawaiian musical explorer, and his impact on all modern music

By Kilin Reece

I have been fortunate to work as a Luthier and musician in windward O'ahu for close to two decades, making a living playing, building and restoring vintage acoustic stringed instruments. The word "Luthier" specifically describes one who works on instruments in the family of "Lutes," considered to be the ancient ancestors to modern stringed instruments like the guitar and 'ukulele. I have always found studying the history and genealogy of stringed instruments to be fascinating, and over the last several years have devoted much time to researching this aspect of my vocation. The anatomy of stringed instruments not only bear the traces of chisel blades and saws, but also the signatures of the cultures from which their designs originate. It has been said that Luthiers build the "shapes that surround the sound," crafting every curve in an instrument's wooden body, from the ribs and waist, to the belly, back, neck and headstock. Ultimately, with the aid of glue, we unite all these contours under the tension, strength and energy of strings to bring life to the voice that an instrument will possess. This voice, with our care and attention, has the potential to transcend the ages, weaving in time a common thread through the lives, songs and dreams of many generations.

In tracing the lineages of the instruments I have met in my small restoration studio here in the shadow of the Ko'olau mountains, and in listening to the many stories their owners have shared, I have arrived at a perspective that Hawai'i is not as an isolated outlier in the evolution of our modern global soundscape,



Mekiā Kealakā'i, circa 1914- Photo: Courtesy

but a long running epicenter of innovation and influence in the western hemisphere, the modern piko of all things stringed.

This year marks the 186th year anniversary of the C.F. Martin Guitar Company, making it the oldest family-run string instrument manufacturer in the United States. My Luthiery work has been largely devoted to the study of instruments made by the Martin family. As a Bluegrass guitarist, I long ago found my six-string soulmate in the bold, full bodied sound of a guitar known as the Martin "Dreadnought". The instrument of choice

for guitarists from Gabby Pahinui to Elvis Presley and from Bob Marley to Bob Dylan, it is easily the most iconic and widely reproduced guitar design in the world.

The Dreadnought Martin guitar began its life in 1915 as a custom-ordered "extra-large jumbo guitar" made for a virtuoso Vaudeville star named Mekiā Albert Kealakāi. It was the largest and loudest guitar the company had ever made, designed to accommodate audiences attending acoustic concerts by Mekiā and his orchestra as they crisscrossed the United States long before the advent of microphones and PA systems.

Born in Honolulu in 1867, Mekiā trained under Henri Berger. He graduated at age 15, joined the Royal Hawaiian Band as Berger's star protege, and within a short time was composing songs with Lili'uokalani and Kalākāua, eventually leading

the Royal Hawaiian Band in a tour across the United States in 1895.

I had the pleasure of joining Chris Martin IV (the Martin descendant currently at the helm of the company) at the Kahala hotel in 2016, and after sharing my research and pouring through scrapbooks and photo albums he agreed that Hawai'i's contributions to his family's legacy were pivotal, and worthy of celebration. Working with the Martin custom shop, we began recreating the "Kealakāi" model guitar, using the molds, templates and blueprints from the archives that brought the

original to life in 1915. This guitar will be displayed side by side with the Dreadnought guitars of Johnny Cash and the Pahinui family in a Bishop Museum exhibition set to open April 2020.

In the 1960s, the Library of Congress re-issued recordings made by ethnomusicologists in the 1920s. These recordings formed my first introduction to what is called American "Roots" or "Folk" music. As a teenager in Berkeley, California, I checked out 10-inch vinyl records from our local Public Library, which had a complete collection of the Library of Congress Folkways record label. Legends like The Carter Family, Leadbelly, Son House, Lightnin' Hopkins, Doc Watson and Elizabeth Cotton took turns on my turntable bringing to life songs of hard luck rural America.

On subsequent research trips to the Martin Archives in Nazareth, Pennsylvania, I began swinging down to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., hoping to find clues about Mekiā's travels across the continent at the turn of the last century. On one such visit, I had a chance conversation with a librarian who mentioned some very old recordings in their collection, made by a Hawaiian string band around 1904 for a small record company. He offered to make me a Compact Disc of transfers made from the records. Later that evening I loaded the CD into my rental car's dashboard player, and as the warble of music making its way through 115 years of time and space came surging through the speakers, I nearly crashed into the car in front of me. What was I was hearing?

The music was immediately familiar: acoustic guitars punching out rhythm while fiddles and flutes played in and around the vocal lines, accented by the chop and strum of 'ukulele and banjo, rooted in the pulse of pizzicato cello. How was it possible that a Hawaiian string band had recorded music that sounded nearly identical to my beloved Bluegrass music, decades before any of America's most celebrated folk recordings?

I later learned that Lui Thompson, the band's leader, got his start with Mekiā Kealakāi and his orchestra at the 1901 Buffalo World's Fair. By 1901, Hawaiian string ensembles like Lui's had been touring the United States for 30 years, playing vaudeville theaters and traveling tent shows from Sacramento to New York. In 2018, I was able to work with the Library of Congress to re-master and release in CD format the complete recordings of Lui's band, alternately calling

## HAWAIIAN MUSICIANS ON THE MAINLAND



Newspaper clipping of the Kawaihau Glee Club before they toured the United States - Photo: Courtesy



Mr. Kealaka'i, circa 1916- Photo: Courtesy

themselves "The Royal Hawaiian Troubadours" and "Honolulu Students."

These are arguably the world's earliest complete recordings of a traveling string band. It features songs played in the style popular during the lifetimes of composers featured in the tracks including Kalākaua, Lili'uokalani, Likelike, Leleiohoku, Mekia Kealakai, David Nape, Helen Parker, Sam Li'a Kalāinaina and Thomas Sylvester Kalama. There is much to be learned by studying this early Hawaiian string ensemble style of music. Vibrant and sophisticated, it combines the wind, reed, string and percussion instruments that became the foundation for genres such as Jazz, Blues, Bluegrass, Country, Western Swing, and Rock & Roll.

Through conversations with clients and friends over the years, the potential to re-

imagine the musical styles of the Hawaiian Kingdom's string band traditions gained momentum. We began rehearsing and re-imagining a time in Honolulu when fiddles, banjos, cellos, flutes, mandolins, 'ukulele and steel guitars wove a seamless fabric of music unique to the Hawaiian Kingdom.

Earlier this year we launched a concert series called "A Night of Sovereign Strings". In April we collaborated for a second round of concerts at the historic St. Andrews Cathedral. Led by former Royal Hawaiian Band and Honolulu Symphony Maestro Aaron Mahi, traditional Hawaiian vocalists and instrumentalists united with members of the Hawai'i Opera Theater and Hawai'i Symphony Orchestra to celebrate a shared musical lineage.

Last month I made one final research trip, intent on tracing Mekia's footsteps from the east to west coasts. I began in Nazareth where I picked up the completed recreation of the Kealakai model guitar and spent a couple days filming Chris Martin IV at the Martin Museum for a documentary I am making.

The stars aligned, and I was joined by virtuoso guitarist Kamuela Kimokeo and his 9 year old son, Ka'ihī. The Kimokeos happened to be on a family vacation to the East Coast. Chris Martin unlocked the museum vault and brought out the most legendary masterpieces in his family's collection for Kamuela and Ka'ihī to play. They wowed a spellbound crowd of Martin employees with masterful duets, Ka'ihī ripping solos on a Dreadnought Jr. model set up to be played on the lap Hawaiian style, a method invented by Mekia and his childhood friend, Joseph Kekuku. This innovation ultimately led to the birth of the first electric guitar.

I left Nazareth and headed north to Elmira, New York, where, in 1916, Mekia had played the Majestic Theater for a run of 3 nights billed as the "Kealakai Royal Hawaiian Sextette." I was intent on stopping at historical societies, archives, libraries and museums, searching the American rust belt to find a Vaudeville theater still standing where Mekia and his band might have played. I hoped to stand in that space, to strum a few chords of the new Kealakai Hawaiian Dread and hear its voice fill the space as Mekia had. But the theaters are all gone, turned into fast food joints, strip malls or multiplex movie theaters.

The commitment of the ali'i to invest the power of the musical arts in the Kingdom was a vision carried forward by Mekia, who, after traveling the world as renowned celebrity, returned to Hawai'i in 1920 to lead the Royal Hawaiian Band, sparking the careers of the likes of Lena Machado. He also returned to teach at his alma mater, The Boys Reform School.

Evidence of Mekia's generation and their travels at the dawn of the 20th century are everywhere, in the contours of our most treasured and iconic instruments, in countless instructional music books, and in music curriculum exported worldwide. It's amazing to see how Mekia's generation shared a profound concept of music that was made available to one and all. ■

*Kilin Reece is a luthier and the founder of The Kealakai Center for Pacific Strings, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization named in honor of the legacy of Mekia Kealakai and his devotion to music and music education.*