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« [DeAndre Brackensick: Bay Area's Hawaiian 'American Idol'](#) | [Main](#) | [Maui moves: Hawaiian to expand nonstop service from Bay Area, Aqua adds hotel](#) »

Celebrated slack-key songwriter Dennis Kamakahi finds new audience with “Descendants”

March 12 update: Tickets (\$24) are still available for the 8 p.m. show tonight at Yoshi's San Francisco.

Of all the living slack key artists featured on the soundtrack to “The Descendants,” singer-songwriter **Dennis Kamakahi** may have received the most exposure – at least subliminally. It’s his version of the classic “‘Ulili E,” performed with son David, that plays in most of the TV ads for the movie, now playing on most Hawaiian and United Airlines flights to the islands.

“I’m flattered,” said Kamakahi, whose hauntingly beautiful original “Pua Hone” – one of many signature songs by the prolific composer – can also be heard in the movie, though not on the best-selling soundtrack. The former member of the Sons of Hawai’i appears Sunday night at the Villa Montalvo Carriage House in Saratoga and Monday night at Yoshi’s San Francisco as part of a slack-key tour with [George Kahumoku Jr.](#), Stephen Inglis and Richard Ho‘opi‘i.

Being left off the soundtrack was no slight to “Pua Hone,” a “small segment” of which is heard



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when Clooney’s character and daughters return to the hospital after their trip to Kaua’i, as Kamakahi explained: “They wanted to keep it as easy as possible to get the publishing rights (for the CD).”

It’s not surprising that he could pinpoint when his song (performed in the [video](#) below) appears in the film, either. A member of the Screen Actors Guild, the Hawai’i-based musician said in a recent phone interview that he watched the movie “10 times” when he first received his copy for the awards season. Although as far as the Academy Awards were concerned “The Descendants” took home only the Oscar for best adapted screenplay, it wins high praise from Kamakahi for its authenticity on many levels.

“I thought the character George Clooney played, he could have been one of my neighbors, he was so convincing,” he said, shortly before flying out on his ongoing West Coast tour, which also heads to Eugene, Ore., on Wednesday. Kamakahi also recalled how he and fellow slack-key superstar Ledward Kaapana treated the production team to a *kani kapila*:

“When the musical directors came to Hawai’i, and they asked to see real Hawaiian music, they called me up and said, “Can you come down and jam with Ledward Kaapana in Hawai’i Kai?” I said, ‘OK, so we went there and Led didn’t even know I was in the audience. I always like to surprise him, all of sudden he looks at me and he says, ‘You know there’s only guy who wears a cowboy hat.’ We just played fun, backyard style. His music stops at 8 o’clock and we just went on till 11 o’clock.

“We gave them the feeling of how the music can move you and make you feel at home. They had an early flight out, but the director stayed and they had a great great time. You won’t get anything more authentic than that,” Kamakahi noted.

The evening was like a shorter version of the famous weekend-long sessions hosted by the late Gabby Pahinui in Waimānalo – who also appears on the soundtrack. “He was a very strict musician, strict in the sense that when you played with him, it was very important that if he picked the solo for you, and you thought you couldn’t, you would be asked to leave,” Kamakahi recalled. “He wasn’t after perfection, he was after the camaraderie. That was the joy of it.”

It’s that kind of camaraderie the current tour, which occasionally includes Bobby Ingano on steel guitar, will feature. “We’ve known each other for so long. The group with George, myself, Bobby, it’s a reunion tour from the Grammy-winning albums that we did. It’s like sitting in a backyard in Waimānalo all over again.”

Kahumoku and Ho’opi’i open the show with individual sets, followed by an intermission, and then Kamakahi performs with Inglis, a former student with whom he released an album in October

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CATEGORIES

- [Activities](#) (57)
- [Airlines](#) (31)
- [Art](#) (1)
- [Beaches and parks](#) (32)
- [Budget travel](#) (32)
- [Cruises](#) (4)
- [Culture and History](#) (111)
- [Deals and discounts](#) (23)
- [Dining](#) (23)
- [Entertainment](#) (212)
- [Environment](#) (46)
- [Festivals](#) (44)
- [Food and Drink](#) (34)
- [Gay & Lesbian](#) (3)
- [Golf](#) (1)
- [Hawai’i \(Big Island\)](#) (48)
- [Hiking](#) (12)
- [Kaua’i](#) (35)
- [Lana’i](#) (8)
- [Literature](#) (11)
- [Local Hawaiiana](#) (225)
- [Lodging](#) (68)
- [Marine Life](#) (14)

about [Kalaupapa](#) – the former “leper colony” of Moloka‘i.

“It was originally going to be his album and I was just going to contribute a couple of songs, but we both had this friend, Bernard Punikai‘a, who was also a good composer and musician and an activist for people with Hansen’s disease. He had told me he had songs written in Kalaupapa. After he passed away (in 2009), the songs were given to his family,” recalled Kamakahi, who has roots on Moloka‘i. “I’m like ‘Oh my God, let’s see what you got.’”

“The common element is Kalaupapa. We found other composers from Kalaupapa, one hymn that has not been outside since 1877, and we got the music and lyrics together and recorded it, a song about Father Damien. Every time I sing it, I just get teary-eyed. Man, this song was composed back in 1877 and never outside of Kalaupapa, and even though it’s that old, it’s pretty new to my fellow entertainers.”

And thanks to “The Descendants,” many of the old classics of slack key have found an equally appreciative new audience. See you at Yoshi’s!

- [Maui](#) (37)
- [Military](#) (5)
- [Moloka‘i](#) (10)
- [Movies](#) (14)
- [Museums](#) (9)
- [New Briefs](#) (1)
- [News Briefs](#) (57)
- [O‘ahu](#) (69)
- [Perspectives](#) (18)
- [Photo Galleries](#) (6)
- [Plants and Gardens](#) (11)
- [Polynesia](#) (7)
- [Preservation](#) (12)
- [Safety](#) (5)
- [Shopping](#) (10)
- [Spas](#) (3)
- [Style and Fashion](#) (8)
- [Sunday Quiz](#) (144)
- [Surfing](#) (12)
- [Television & radio](#) (14)
- [Travel resources](#) (7)
- [Travel tips](#) (71)
- [Tsunami](#) (13)
- [Uncategorized](#) (20)
- [Update](#) (3)
- [Volcanic activity](#) (7)
- [Volunteering](#) (3)
- [Waterfalls](#) (3)
- [Weddings](#) (2)
- [Wildlife](#) (12)

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Linda Ballou 10:57 AM on March 19, 2012

Just ordered the Soundtrack..plan to use it to set the mood for a power point presentation I have created that takes people to sacred sites in Old Hawaii...even tho slack key wasn't around then it is real Hawaii now!

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