

# Slack key guitar is music to the ears

By [John Steinhorst The Garden Island](#) | Wednesday, November 22, 2017, 12:05 a.m.



## John Steinhorst / The Garden Island

Some of the musicians performing at the Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Festival are (from left) Stephen Inglis, Ian O'Sullivan, Walt Keale, Brother Noland Conjugacion and Blayne Asing, at the Kauai Marriott Resort & Beach Club Sunday.

LIHUE — Ohana and mele came together Sunday to share the sounds of unique Hawaiian music. The 25th anniversary of the Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Festival on Kauai rocked the Kauai Marriott Resort & Beach Club with renowned artists from on-island as well as special guests from Molokai, Maui, Big Island and Oahu, who shared their heart and soul through ki ho'alu, the Hawaiian term for "slack key guitar."

"It's great to be in Kauai," said one of the performers, LT Smooth, born and raised in New Zealand before moving to the Big Island. "The festival is just a life-changing moment for me. I think we need more change in the world. It's just a whole different vibe. I've toured all over the world with different music. Slack key is its own element, its own niche in music."

The musical style, created by reducing tension on the guitar's strings, is a cultural expression with special tunings unique to each Hawaiian island, ahupuaa (land division) and family. The guitarists' expert finger-picking techniques and smooth strumming's attracted hundreds of stoked spectators to the event.

“The first thing that comes to mind is getting together with the brothers and sisters to jam, play music, ‘cause we don’t often see each other too much,” said Kauai musician Malani Bilyeu. “It’s such a special occasion to share our music and everything else. People come that really haven’t heard Hawaiian music anywhere while they’re here. It’s a good opportunity to experience the Hawaiian sound.”

Other Kauai artists Paul Togioka, Cindy Combs and Pancho Graham were among more than a dozen performers at the festival.

“Being part of the slack key tour as an ukulele player is really odd from other people’s perspective, but for me it was my first way into the whole music scene through this festival,” said performer Walt Keale. “I feel really blessed just to be invited. My family’s from Kauai, Niihau originally, so it’s always good to come back to Kauai and sing for our families. This is my favorite festival. It’s relaxed and a great way to end the whole season.” Legendary musicians traveled from throughout the Hawaiian islands to be part of this silver anniversary.

“Slack key has a beautiful long tradition here in Hawaii, and I fell in love with it after moving away from home,” said Stephen Inglis, a performer who was born and raised in Honolulu. “Like a lot of people, I didn’t appreciate what I had until I left. I’ve just been really blessed and lucky to play with the best.”

“Kauai is always a wonderfully warm crowd, so the vibe is great,” Inglis added. “We have so much fun on stage together. We get to have these handfuls of family reunions every year. We are like family, so we just have a blast sharing this music with everybody and doing it together.”

Organizer Milton Lau and his staff of volunteers presented this special Hawaiian ki ho’alu event. It featured giveaways of CDs, T-shirts and a brand new Taylor guitar that was won by Princeville’s Dianne Blomquist.

“I’m thrilled that we’re back here where we started in 1992, the year after Hurricane Iniki,” Lau said. “At that time, we were also here to uplift the spirits for the people in Kauai. And 25 years later, we’re back here again. It’s a true blessing for us to do this. We feel that it’s our calling to support the music and give back to the community.”

The Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Festival started off with one concert on Oahu in 1982. Now there are 21 festivals across the country, and the events are still growing. Lau says people continue to ask them to come to places like San Antonio, Texas, and Duluth, Iowa, after seeing one of the festivals in Hawaii and wanting to experience it in their hometowns.

“It has a special spirit about the music itself, unlike any other forms,” Lau said. “It touches people’s inner soul and brings comfort and even somewhat relief. It touches a true chord that vibrates through their whole body.”

Proceeds benefit the nonprofit Ki-ho’alu Foundation to perpetuate and preserve the art form for future generations.