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ISLAND SOUNDS

Paula Fuga's album leaves 'Idol' in dust

By Wayne Harada
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Paula Fuga may not have been made for TV but she has a voice and potential to outdo all previous "American Idol" contestants to date. Her debut, "Lilikoi," is ripe for success.

And Steve Inglis, a singer-composer with the gentle spirit of a troubadour, demonstrates his ease with originals and a couple of adopted Hawaiian songs in his second CD outing.

"LILIKOI" BY PAULA FUGA; PAKIPIKA PRODUCTIONS

- Genre: Maoli music with a contemporary spin.
- Distinguishing notes: The first time I saw and heard Paula Fuga, she was in the corridors of the Sheraton Wai-kiki hotel. It was October 2003, and she was an "American Idol" wannabe auditioning for the TV show's third season, which would expose to the world the likes of Jonah Moananu, Jasmine Trias and Camile Velasco. Fuga, from Waimanalo, sang bold, hypnotic music, strumming 'ukulele, gathering polite, appreciative applause from others waiting for The Verdict, that post-sing-for-the-judges yea or nay. She didn't make the cut. Now Fuga, making her name on her own, is on the threshold of another big vote: Will the public embrace or dismiss her debut CD?

Frankly, Fuga's disc, out on her own label, is the best yet to emerge from the Hawai'i "Idol" contingent — no covers, no copycat imitations. The CD is loaded with Fuga-composed tunes that display sweetness and soulfulness, innocence and maturity. Clearly, Fuga is firmly part of the dawning of a "new" Island sound devoid of Jawaiian riffs and loaded with insight and originality. Most promising track? Possibly "Thought of You," heard in two forms, the first with an enigmatic uke and chamber string backing, the second "Roots Rendering" version with an earthy reading infused with a mild blend of jazz and folk. Several other cuts demonstrate the breadth of Fuga's vision: "Lilikoi," like the fruit, is sweet and tangy; on "Nose Flute Dub," as implied, she embraces the traditional instrument; "Sweet Reverie" has flashback blues elements with unexpected string quartet seasoning.

- The outlook: Fuga performs with passion — the "Lilikoi" tag is spot-on.
- Our take: With support from Jack Johnson (he included Fuga in his Kokua Festival), "Lilikoi" could be the most defining, delectable debut since Keali'i Reichel's "Kawaiipunahele."

"The Sun Will Rise" by Paula Fuga. Audio sample available in mp3 format.

"DRIFTWOOD" BY STEVE INGLIS; LOCOMOTIVE MUSIC

- Genre: Acoustic folk-rock vocals, with slack-key.
- Distinguishing notes: Steve Inglis has the spirit of a folkie, who imposes his guitar and gentle voice onto originals and borrowed Island faves. Result: a contemporary reflection of life then and now, of people and places. "Palolo in the Moonlight" is typical of his style — soothing, nostalgic and romantic, reacting to the beauty that is Hawai'i. The song could be his breakout cut. "Makiki Rain," is similarly introspective. He delivers the Lili'uokalani classic "Ahe Lau Makani" with exquisite eloquence. Inglis is comfy and agile with Hawaiian lyrics, too, on tracks like "Sanoe" and "Ipo Lei Manu." And he makes a smart move, getting help from guitarist Makana, who performs on ki ho'alu, and Pierre Grill, who not only plays bass but provided the studio for the session.
- The outlook: Inglis' second CD establishes him as a serious contender; his material and stylish performances rank with the best.
- Our take: Inglis joins the prolific, caring new breed of singers-composers.

"Old Things" by Stephen Inglis. Audio sample available in mp3 format.

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