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Hawaiian music: The giants of slack key

Jeanne Cooper, Special to SFGate
Friday, February 10, 2012



COMMENTS (21)



Pam Lindell

Berkeley-born slack key artist Patrick Landeza's new album, "Kama'alu," reflects his experience as a Hawaiian musician on the Mainland who cajoled the masters into teaching him when they were on tour years ago. Today he's respected as a teacher and recording artist who is continuing their legacy while creating his own.

Although it may not do for Hawaiian music what "Buena Vista Social Club" did for Cuban rhythms, or what "O Brother Where Art Thou?" did for old-timey Americana, the largely unheralded soundtrack of "The Descendants" — said to be the first Hollywood movie scored exclusively with Hawaiian music — has introduced millions of moviegoers to the giants of slack key guitar and the masters who

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have come after them.

"The Descendants" also showcases the work of a younger generation of *kī ho'alu* recording artists, who like George Clooney's character in the film, have inherited a cultural legacy that they perpetuate in their own ways.

I asked Patrick Landeza, a Berkeley-born slack key guitar expert who's a descendant of Molokai and Oahu families, to share some of his knowledge of his musical forebears and fellow contemporary recording artists on the soundtrack for those who'd like to hear more.

The Late Masters

Gabby Pahinui

Slack key, named for its open tunings and noted for its finger picking, developed in the islands after Mexican cowboys brought guitars with them in the early 19th century. Growing up in the Bay Area in the 1980s, Landeza learned his craft mostly backstage, cajoling touring artists from the islands into giving him lessons

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when his uncles wouldn't. He also imbibed their stories of the slack key artist he calls the "original Hawaiian music icon," Gabby "Pops" Pahinui (1921-1980).

"All things stem from Gabby. From Gabby, that's where everybody just falls into place," says Landeza. "He's the Bob Marley of Hawaiian music, and his sons are like Ziggy and all the others."

The most famous Hawaiian musician in recent years, the late IZ, pays tribute to him at the start of his recording of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," saying, "This one's for Gabby." Fittingly, "The Descendants" soundtrack features Pahinui most often, including among others his signature recording of "Hi'ilawe," "He'eia" (with the Sons of Hawaii), "Wai O Ke Aniani" and at least one song linked to the land that Clooney's character decides to preserve, "Kaua'i Beauty."

While Pahinui's musical line includes virtually every slack key artist playing today — including Landeza — two of his literal descendants have successful careers recording and performing slack key music: **Cyril Pahinui** appears Wednesdays at the Kani Ka Pila Grille at Waikiki's Outrigger Reef on the Beach, while **Martin Pahinui** plays with George Kuo and Aaron Mahi Sundays at the Waikiki Beach Marriott.

Sonny Chillingworth

Although he only has one recording on "The Descendants" soundtrack, Sonny Chillingworth (1932-1994) has had almost as wide an influence on today's slack key guitarists as Gabby Pahinui, and both appeared in different lineups of the Sons of Hawaii, known for its traditional music played with steel guitar.

But Chillingworth also contributed his own distinctive sound to the genre with his double bass style. "He brought in the Latin rhythms to slack key," explains Landeza, who recalls opening for Chillingworth and Cyril Pahinui at Cabrillo College in the mid-'90s.

Landezza first met Chillingworth through George Winston, the Santa Cruz-based jazz pianist who in 1983 founded Dancing Cat Records, the leading producer of slack key recordings. When Winston introduced the young Landeza, he mentioned that the Bay Area artist, who describes himself as Hawaiian, Filipino, Chinese and Irish, had roots on Molokai. Chillingworth "asked what my family's name was," recalls Landeza, "and when I said, 'O'Sullivan,' right way he said, 'I think my grandmother and your grandfather had a little fling.' This is coming from the Johnny Cash of Hawaiian music, and I'm tripping out!"

Ray Kane

If Pahinui is the Marley of slack key, and Chillingworth is the Johnny Cash, Ray Kane (1925-2008) is "like B.B. King," says Landeza. "The Godfather, that's what we'd call him."

Another nickname for Kane (in Hawaiian, Kāne, pronounced "kah-neh"), whose "Auwe" appears on "The Descendants" soundtrack, is "the ambassador of slack key," Landeza notes. "A lot of us (slack key guitarists) came out of him. We're Raymond Kane disciples. He was the face of Dancing Cat, our living legend. He influenced a lot of people."

That discipleship began for Landeza when he was a teenager and Kane was playing Freight & Salvage in Berkeley in the '90s and agreed to give him instruction backstage. "He was just so gracious ... he was on his oxygen machine, and he was ready to teach me right there," Landeza says, although he jokes that Kane never remembered his name: "He always called me Berkeley!"

His *nahenahe* (gentle) style is far from flashy, one that Landeza says he tries to emulate. "If I could associate myself with any slack key artist, it'd be him. I don't play fast, I play



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simple," Landeza says. "When I see guys playing fast, I sometimes have to ask myself, what would Raymond Kane do?"

Living Legends

Dennis Kamakahi

While the late masters may be best known for their interpretations of classic *mele* (songs), the compositions of contemporary artist [Dennis Kamakahi](#), another former Sons of Hawaii member, have earned him many accolades as well as adoration from musicians, hula dancers and fans. "I truly believe he is the greatest songwriter of our time," says Landeza, "and some folks believe that he is the greatest second only to the queen (Lili'uokalani)."

Although his track on "The Descendants" is a cover of "'Ulili E" — a the warbling tune heard in the TV ad for the movie — you can hear Kamakahi's original works on his albums and those of many other Hawaiian music acts, including Landeza, with whom he shares a family connection. Landeza performs Kamakahi's "E Pūpūkani 'Oe," about the "singing" Hawaiian tree snail and the ancestral connections between the forest and Hawaiian music, on his latest album, "Kama'alua," title given to Landeza by Kamakahi that means "to become familiar with."

"He is our living treasure," says Landeza, who recently spent time with Kamakahi on Molokai with slack key peer [Stephen Inglis](#). "He's my biggest musical influence. ... The old timers would always say he had an old soul."

Keola Beamer

Descended from a long line of Hawaiian composers, musicians and hula dancers dating to the 14th century, [Keola Beamer](#) "is in a category to himself," Landeza observes. His two tracks on "The Descendants" — including a duet with George Winston on "Kalena Kai" — boast the almost ethereal, serene quality that has become his hallmark.

"His style is so unique," says Landeza. "It's kind of the Windham Hill style, open-ended, kind of New Age-y. ... His music lends itself well to movies. In general, I think Keola has just a beautiful spirit about him and all things Hawaiian."

Although he tours the Mainland whenever he has a new recording, Beamer — like his late mother "Auntie Nona" and great-grandmother Helen Desha Beamer before him — spends much of his time teaching Hawaiian musical traditions, accompanied by his wife, Moanalani, a noted hula dancer and lei-maker. Their next [Aloha Music Camp](#) is offered July 1-7 at the Keauhou Beach Resort on the Big Island.

Next Generation

Jeff Peterson

He may not look Hawaiian, but [Jeff Peterson](#), one of the brightest stars of the younger generation of slack key musicians, grew up listening to the traditional music of Hawaiian *paniolo* (cowboys) in Maui's Upcountry. Part of a family with long ties to the island and its ranching heritage, he's won accolades as an accompanist for popular vocalists such as Amy Hānaiali'i, and as a solo artist who interprets slack key standards and writes original music.

"Jeff is brilliant," says Landeza. "I spent some time with him at the (Southern California) Slack Key Festival in Redondo Beach a few years ago, and we just kept talking. He's a very, very smart slack key player."

Peterson's composition "Hawaiian Skies," included on "The Descendants" soundtrack, was inspired by the views of West Maui from Kula, according to the liner notes for his award-winning "Maui on My Mind," on which it first appeared. He frequently performs at the Grammy-winning [Masters of Slack Key](#) showcase at the Napili Kai Beach Resort,



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JeanneCooper 9:04 AM on February 10, 2012

Aloha sharksfan2000! There *is* a mention of Ledward Kaapana on page 3 of this story (as one of the Na Hoku nominees from last year). I would have liked to have included more about him, as well as George Kahumoku, John Keawe (briefly mentioned), and others, but given the requested length of the story I decided to focus on the top artists on "The Descendants" soundtrack plus my "guide," Patrick Landeza. There is so much more great music out there than this -- but it is just an introduction, as you say. Mahalo for reading!

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toomanyhipsters 7:49 AM on February 10, 2012

Uh, Ledward Kapaana?

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JeanneCooper 9:45 AM on February 10, 2012

More good news for slack key fans: I just learned that the Masters of Slack Key Tour, including George Kahumoku, Dennis Kamakahi, Richard Ho'opi'i and Stephen Inglis, is coming to the West Coast: *March 8 at UCSB bldg 402 in Santa Barbara; *March 9 at Cal Poly Arts in San Luis Obispo; *March 10 at Harlow's in Sacto (minus Kamakahi); *March 11 at Montalvo Arts Center in Saratoga; *March 12 at Yoshi's SF; *March 14 at Shedd Institute in Eugene, OR.

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