

Sunday, May 2, 2004



## Hawaii's Back yard

Cheryl Chee Tsutsumi

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### **Kauai husband and wife team spreads aloha through slack-key music**

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Aloha Plenty is not only the name of Doug and Sandy McMaster's music business, it's the motto by which they live their lives. They believe acts of kindness inspire more of the same, resulting in a ripple effect of healing, happiness and well-being in individuals, communities and, ultimately, the world.

Slack key is the conduit through which they share their aloha, at twice-weekly concerts in the rural community of Hanalei on Kauai.

The McMasters are virtuosos of this innovative style of guitar playing, which was devised by Big Island paniolo (Hawaiian cowboys) in the mid-1830s. Mexican vaqueros brought the guitar to the Big Island in 1832, when they were retained by King Kamehameha III to teach the Hawaiians how to rope, ride horses and manage burgeoning herds of wild cattle.

Avid music lovers



#### **Hawaiian Slack Key Guitar Concerts**

**Place:** Hale Halawai Ohana O Hanalei, 5-5299C Kuhio Highway, Hanalei, Kauai. This community

themselves, the paniolo quickly adopted the instrument. As they relaxed with their guitars pau hana (after work), they discovered that by loosening the strings -- in essence, retuning the instrument-- they could create a whole new sound. Their thumb kept rhythm on the lower-pitched strings while their other fingers played the melody and harmony on the higher-pitched strings. "Ki hoalu," the Hawaiian word for slack key, literally means "loosen the key."

"The Hawaiians who created this unique and beautiful musical art form were true geniuses," Sandy says. "The altered tunings -- the slackened keys -- were creative solutions to instruments damaged by humidity changes and lack of training in the standard tuning. The rhythm part played with the thumb resulted from a scarcity of instruments and the desire to create a full sound."

center is located in Hanalei town, past the post office. Look for the "Concert" banner on the mauka (mountain) side of the road, across from Malolo Road. Turn toward the mountains on the small gravel road. About 20 yards farther, there will be another sign pointing to a gravel parking area.

**Time:** 4 p.m. Fridays, and 3 p.m. Sundays

**Admission:** \$10 per person; \$8 for ages 6 through 18 and seniors aged 50 and older; free for 5 and younger. There is a drawing for a free gift, which varies each time; it could be the McMasters' five CDs, lei, slack-key lessons, artwork or a poster of Hawaii.

**Slack-key clinics:** The McMasters occasionally offer slack-key clinics that focus on technical and performance skills. They have ranged in length from two hours to a week at varying fees. Call for details.

**Call:** 808-826-1469; concert seating is limited so reservations are recommended.

**E-mail:** [aplenty@hawaiiantel.net](mailto:aplenty@hawaiiantel.net)

**Web site:**  
[www.hawaiianslackkeyguitar.com](http://www.hawaiianslackkeyguitar.com)

According to Sandy, the learning curve for slack key is steep; frustration is a common reaction among novices. "Getting your fingers and thumb on the same hand to do two different things (thumb playing the rhythm and fingers playing the melody simultaneously) is not easy," she says. "When you change to a new tuning, the chords, the harmonies and the bass notes change, and it's like learning a new instrument. This is much more difficult than learning new songs and techniques all in the same tuning."

Doug has been playing slack key since he was 6. In the late 1970s, when he met Sandy in college, he bought her a guitar and introduced her to ki hoalu. They've been making beautiful music together ever since.

Says Sandy, "Doug tells me that I have a special talent for slack key

in that it comes very easily for me: the tunings, the variations, the alternating bass rhythm parts. Where many people struggle, it just seems natural to me. I also play ukulele in slack key; actually, I never learned to play it in the standard tuning."

THE MCMASTERS have been inspired by slack key greats such as Raymond Kane, Sonny Chillingworth, Keola Beamer, Ledward Kaapana and Leonard Kwan, as well as many other lesser known but equally gifted Island musicians. "We listen and learn from all for they light our way and keep us on our path," Sandy says. "Over the years, we've learned that along with being given such a gift comes a kuleana (responsibility) to hoomau (continue the tradition)."

There was a time when slack key was in danger of being lost. In the old days, it was played only in the presence of family and longtime, trusted friends. Notes Sandy, "If you came upon someone playing slack key and they didn't know you, they would stop playing and even de-tune the instrument so that their music and tunings would remain exclusive to the family."

In fact, tunings were closely guarded secrets passed from an elder master to a chosen child. "So much was lost when a master passed on without having found an apprentice to carry the tradition forward," says Sandy.

In 1999, to help perpetuate the art, the McMasters launched Friday and Sunday afternoon slack-key concerts at Hale Halawai Ohana o Hanalei (House for the Gathering of the Families of Hanalei). Set against a gorgeous backdrop of taro fields, the Hanalei mountains, a bird refuge, waterfalls and rainbows, this community center -- with its informal, family-style atmosphere -- provides the perfect setting for the soothing sounds of slack key.

A portion of the proceeds from the 90-minute concerts supports Hale Halawai Ohana o Hanalei, which perpetuates the Hawaiian culture through art, hula, music, dance and health-related classes and clinics. It also serves as a venue for community meetings.

Prolific composers and recording artists, the McMasters are the primary performers at the shows, although noted artists such as Nona Beamer and Lehua Kaapana Nash have been featured in guest slots. Concert themes are rotated; on the day you attend it may be "Legends of Slack Key" (stories and songs of slack key's celebrated masters); "Songs and Stories of Kauai"; "History of Slack Key"; "Hawaii's Cowboy Music"; "Slack Key Tour of the Islands"; "Menehune" (race of small people who worked only at night); "Mo'o" (legendary lizards and dragons); "Slack-Key Love Stories"; "Sea Turtles and Other Endangered Species"; or "Ahupua'a" (land division extending from the mountains to the sea).

Sandy and Doug intersperse narration with songs throughout the presentations.

"Doug is the keeper of the music and I'm the keeper of the stories," Sandy says. "It's my job to make sure what we are sharing is accurate and thorough."

IN ANCIENT TIMES, the Hawaiians chronicled major events through songs and chants that were passed orally through the generations. In Sandy's view, slack key also is a way of recording history. "In the slack-key tradition," she explains, "in addition to carrying on the music created by the kupuna (elders) and ancestors, people also are given new music in the old style that tell stories of our times. As long as the stories are told, the songs are shared and new traditional-style music is created, slack key will live on."

Audiences invariably are swept up in the warm, loving spirit of aloha the McMasters create through slack key. Read the comments in their guest book and you'll see many hearts have been touched:

"Beautiful sound, very spiritual and calming. Therapeutic music for the soul."

"Passionate, masterful work of true professionals and gracious, loving people."

"Sharing sunsets and listening to your music brought me as close to heaven as I can get and still be here."

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See the [Columnists](#) section for some past articles.

Cheryl Chee Tsutsumi is a Honolulu-based free-lance writer and Society of American Travel Writers award winner.