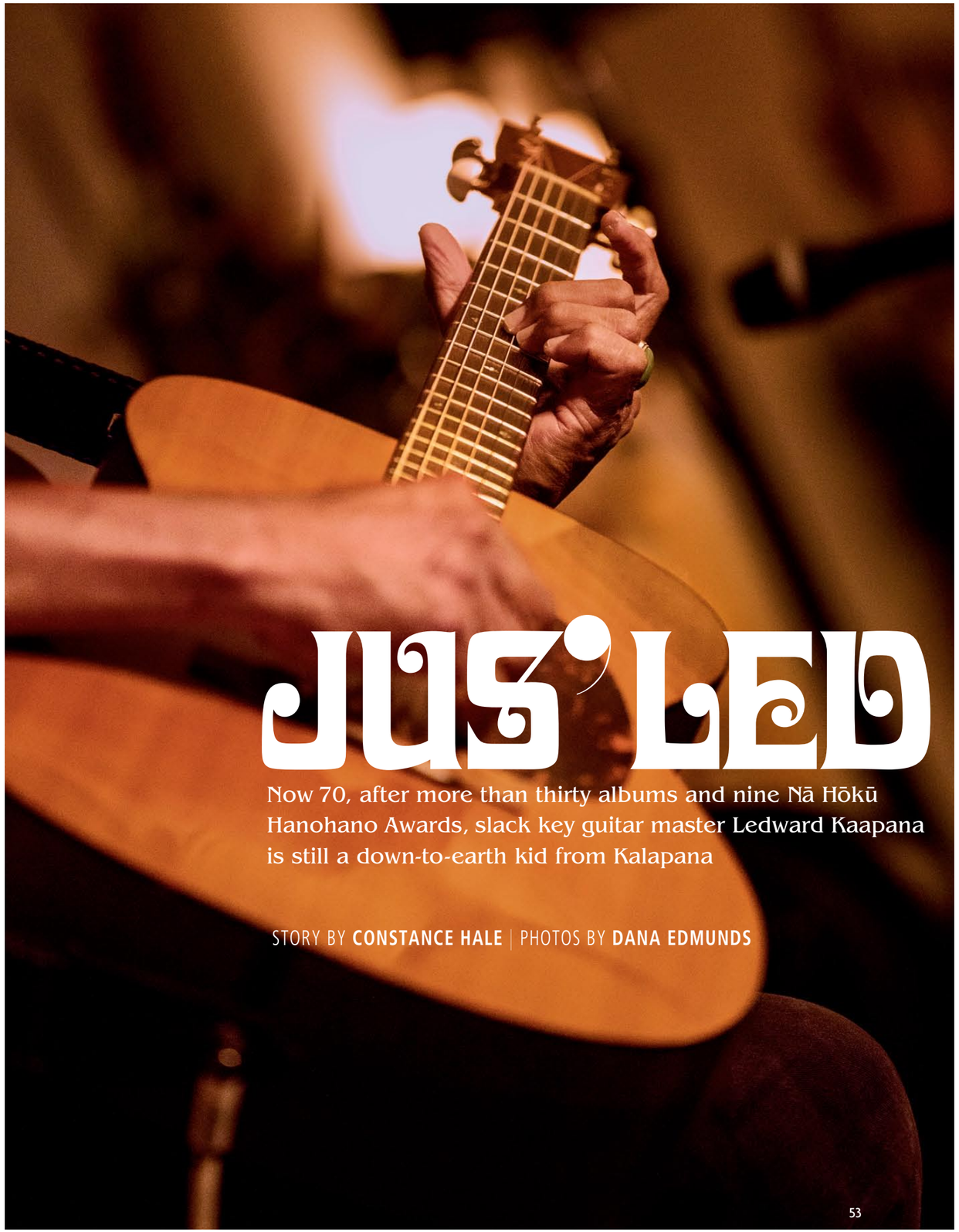


JUS' LED

Now 70, after more than thirty albums and nine Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards, slack key guitar master Ledward Kaapana is still a down-to-earth kid from Kalapana

STORY BY **CONSTANCE HALE** | PHOTOS BY **DANA EDMUNDS**

Ledward Kaapana loves to tell stories. His favorites spill out in his trademark pidgin English, punctuated with giggles, belly laughs and, onstage, the occasional strum. "My mom and dad, uncles and aunties, grandmas—they nevah did read music," he says. "I had one auntie who sang only in C. She was Auntie C. There was also an Auntie A, an Auntie B-flat and an Auntie F. We learned the keys from them." There was a hitch, though: The family scale ran out after G, C, F, B-flat and A. "Anything after that was Second G, Second C, Second F."

We're sitting in the carport of his house, in a modest subdivision in Kāneʻohe. Dressed all in black ("makes me look skinny," he says), Led launches into another story, this one about fellow slack key guitar legend Gabby Pahinui and their inability to read music. "When Gabby and I were rehearsing for a live concert at the Waikiki Shell with the Honolulu Symphony, they handed us sheet music. Gabby said to me,

Courtesy Ledward Kaapana

'Led, you know how for read music?' I tell, 'No.' Then he turned the paper upside down. He tell, 'Oh, now I understand: golf sticks!'" Led says, because printed musical notes are shaped like clubs. "I put the paper by my ear and tell, 'Oh, yeah, key of G.'" Then they both cracked up.

Led's down-home demeanor belies his musical stature both in Hawaiʻi and around the world. He has performed at the Smithsonian's Festival of American Folklife and the Library of Congress. He has opened for Bob Dylan and Taj Mahal. He has toured Belgium, Germany, Japan and Tahiti. Carlos Santana knows him. So does Dolly Parton. He has won nine Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards. He has earned four Grammy nominations and has been part of two Grammy-winning slack key compilations.

Led puts his rich baritone and piercing falsetto to stunning use on traditional Hawaiian songs. He's a master of many string instruments but renowned for slack key guitar, the sweet and soulful music that began on Island ranches in the mid-1800s when local paniolo (cowboys) picked up the guitars of Mexican vaqueros and tuned them to suit their voices and tastes. With slack key tunings, the Hawaiian cowboys could replicate traditional rhythms and chanted melodies. Soon slides, slurs, jumps

Ledward Kaapana, or just Led to Hawaiian music fans, is known for his mastery of many instruments—guitar, ʻukulele, autoharp, banjo, mandolin, dulcimer and a ten-string ʻukulele nicknamed the "armadillo." He's also earned a reputation for his sartorial style, often appearing onstage in his trademark black with red leather cowboy boots. Kaapana has been a fixture in the Hawaiian music scene long enough to have influenced a generation of young musicians. "Led is simply the best slack key player alive," says guitarist Patrick Landeza.

and harmonics, or "chimes," were added to echo the Hawaiian style of singing, with its yodels, breaks and falsetto.

Led mastered these techniques at an early age. He developed a repertoire that includes classic Hawaiian tunes, country, pop and originals. And he learned from an uncle to play with his elbow, with the guitar behind his back and even with a paper bag over his hand. He can make the instrument sound like a train, a rock guitar with lots of reverb, or a waterfall. "I start rolling my thumb and my finger on a chord," he explained to *Ukulele Magazine*, "rolling the string so it sounds like waterfalls. You can make it sound like ten or twenty notes all at one time."

"Led is simply the best slack key player alive," says Patrick Landeza, a 46-year-old guitarist and impresario from Berkeley, California. "He's been an influence on all of us. But I will never be able to play like Led — it's unattainable. And yet he has this humility." Island guitar innovator Stephen Inglis agrees that Led is both daunting and inspiring. "Led doesn't sound anything like Jerry Garcia, but the way he approaches the instrument, his use of space and improvisation, makes the two equally amazing. They never play a song or a phrase the same way twice," says Inglis. "He's not a theory musician; he plays from the spirit."

Led grew up in the fishing village of Kalapana, on the eastern tip of Hawai'i Island. The family home, which was destroyed in the 1990 lava flow that also buried most of Kalapana, had a parlor, a kitchen and a porch; the kids often spilled out into the yard at night, sleeping next to fifty-gallon drums. "That way no one goin' run over us when they drive in," he says, laughing. "They see the drum, they say, 'Eh, watch out — da kid sleeping.'

"We didn't have electricity, no television" Led says, "so we entertained ourselves. You could go to any house and everybody was playing music. People played in shifts. You'd fall asleep to the music, wake up — the music was still playing." Led learned to play in the old way, by watching, listening, then imitating. His mother, Mama Tina, played 'ukulele and sang. "My mom could sing for hours and never repeat a song. She showed me the first key on the guitar — C, standard tuning." His father, George, played guitar, 'ukulele, autoharp, piano, steel guitar and saxophone. He taught slack key to Led and his sister Lehua.

But it was his uncle Fred Punahoa, a slack key legend in his own right, who

The Uncle in Black: Kaapana traces the artistic lineage of his music to the Spanish and Mexican vaqueros who brought the guitar to Hawai'i in 1832 and to the Hawaiian cowboys, or paniolo, who first learned to play it. Some of the earliest radio music he heard was country, and Kaapana's collaborated with Alison Krauss, Jerry Douglas, Dolly Parton and Chet Atkins, among others.

Courtesy Ledward Kaapana

"Mike is always there when I need him," says Kaapana of his friend and frequent sideman, Mike Kaawa, seen above right. "We just know how to answer each other. He's such a good rhythm guitar player, I don't need a bass." Their 2008 album *Force of Nature* earned the duo a Nā Hōkū Hanohano Award for Favorite Entertainer.

inspired the showmanship. "My Uncle Fred said every night he would have a dream: an old man in white clothes with a red sash who would sit under a coconut tree and play," Led says, winding up. "After seven nights he told his dad, and the dream never came back. Uncle Fred wen' tell, 'That old man taught me to play with his nose, his arm, his feet. If I never wen' tell my dad, I would be playing with my eyelashes."

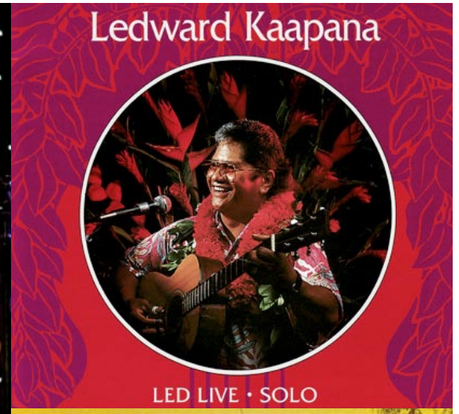
The Kaapana family didn't have a TV, but they did have transistor radios. But because they were so far from the city, the radios didn't work. "All you can hear is static, PSHSHSHSHSH. No sound, nobody talking. Then one day my older brother said, 'Eh, let's string a Coke bottle on a copper wire, take it all the way up the coconut tree, bring it down to the house and poke it in the back of the radio. You know what? We caught KAHU radio in Honolulu. That's how I learned how to play country music." It wasn't just country; Led soon learned all kinds of music, including rock, jazz and oldies. "The Platters, the Beach Boys, the Ventures," he says. "I would listen to Chet Atkins. I had one uncle, my mom's brother, who used to imitate Louis Armstrong." Led says that when other kids were playing kickball, he and his twin brother, Ned, were playing guitar. "When we was nine, I was already playing 'Maunaloa Slack Key.' Sixth grade, we did Battle of the Bands. Came in second."

In 1962 a relative of the famed falsetto singer Genoa Keawe came to Kalapana and asked George Kaapana if he could take Led and Ned with him to Kona. The three started playing at a club called The Islands. "We were underage, and my mom and dad had to sit in because of child labor laws. Then we played at the Kona Inn, then the Tradewinds and then the Magic Sands Hotel. We made good money." In eleventh grade Led quit school.

The twins went to Los Angeles when they were about 20 and hooked up with a cousin named Kalei Kaluna. "The Three K's," Led remembers. After six months Led came home to Kalapana, soon followed by Ned. They worked for an uncle's construction company. With their cousin Dennis Pavao, who lived "down the way" and shared the family repertoire, they would frequent Queen's Bath — a freshwater pool in a lava tube, now gone — "to play music."

Led, Ned and Dennis moved to Kalihi, on O'ahu, in 1969 and worked construction with another uncle in Waikīkī. "My cousin bowled in Pearl City, at the Leeward Lounge, and he asked us to come play. We nevah had name. Just three guys from Kalapana."

The three guys also started drinking in the live music scene in Waikīkī. "We would go hear Sunday Mānoa at Chuck's Cellar, Genoa Keawe at the Hale Aloha, Sterling Mossman at the Barefoot Bar. We just loved music. They would call us up, 'the boys from the Big Island.' We would do Hawaiian, country-western, jazz songs, and Ned would play 'ukulele solo."



Their break came when Danny Kaleikini, the entertainer known as "the Ambassador of Aloha," asked them to play with him at the Kahala Hilton. In 1972 the three cousins started at Chuck's Cellar when Sunday Mānoa left for the Ilikai. Their sister Lei came up with a name: Hui Ohana. The cousins recorded their first album, *Young Hawaii Plays Old Hawaii*, in 1973, and they went on to record thirteen more. "We did music full time from 1972 to 1976," Led says. "For me there was nothing better than Hui Ohana. Dennis was the soprano, Ned was the alto, I was the tenor. I was so happy, on top of the world."

In 1976, Led married Sharon Helm, a Kalihi girl he'd known since she was 12. Around the same time, Hui Ohana broke

up but Led kept at the music. "In 1978 I was with my mom in Kalihi, looking through her songbook. I saw a song that started with the words "Aia i Kona kai o pua." I started practicing the tune. My mom heard it, and she said, "'Where did you learn this song?' She started to cry. She had lost the tune. I used to play it when I would run around with Uncle Fred and then my cousin Kalei." That song gave a name to his new group: Ikona. They released six albums, including Hōkū Award winner *Jus' Press*. ("The expression 'jus' press' came from my Uncle Fred. I used to ask, 'Uncle, what key you playing in?' He said, 'Boy, jus' press.' So I start pressing, and he said, 'Boy.' I said, 'Yes?' He said, 'Press the right key.'")

Led's first solo album, *Lima Wela* ("Hot Hands") was released in 1983; it won the Hōkū Award for Instrumental Album. He later recorded albums with acoustic lap-steel player Bob Brozman as well as with Alison Krauss, Jerry Douglas and other bluegrass legends. In all, he has released thirty-five albums, including an all-autoharp CD and an all-ʻukulele one, which took the 2016 Hōkū for ʻUkulele Album.

An important group of those recordings was created in the 1990s with Dancing Cat Records. Founded by pianist George Winston to document and preserve slack key guitar, Dancing Cat booked tours across North America and Europe, taking Hawaiian artists to coffeehouses, music halls and venues as prestigious as Wolf Trap in Vienna, Virginia. A growing legion of acoustic guitar fans called themselves "Led Heads." Led became the guitar player that guitar players loved to talk about. Nashville guitar great Chet Atkins paid him the ultimate country music compliment by giving the Hawaiian a signature Gibson guitar named for Atkins. In 2011 Led was named an NEA National Heritage Fellow (the highest honor in folk and traditional arts in the United States).

In the meantime something happened to Led's playing, a shift in the way he practiced and performed. It had started years earlier. "Me and Sharon were living in Kalihi. I was playing guitar alone, at home. All this stuff in me was coming out." He moves his hand from the table to his chest. "I was finding all new little things I could do. I started *creating* the music. I surprise myself thinking, 'Whoa! What's that? Something new here!' It never stops. Every time I play one song, it's different, because something is different in me. I just make it more sweet or whatever."

When he performs, Led is purposeful, looking for opportunities to innovate and seeking the listeners Dancing Cat introduced him to: rapt crowds of Mainland music lovers, or concert audiences at places like the Honolulu Museum of Art. "When it's so quiet and I know they're listening, I get more creative," he says. "I'm making the guitar talk to the people."

Which isn't to say Led doesn't love a raucous crowd. Each Saturday night, he plays Honey's at the Koʻolau Golf Club, and it was there he celebrated his seventieth birthday on August 25, with four of his five sisters and a crowd of more than a hundred. "It's a big deal, his birthday," says Sharon. "He's the only one who made it to 70." (Led's five brothers have all died, either of heart attack or heart disease, and all of his sisters have diabetes.)

Led was dressed in black jeans and a black shirt, with a black suede cowboy hat, red leather boots and a gold earring in his left ear. He wore lei of red and gold as well as maile.

"How 'bout a hand for my sisters," he said. "Lei on my left, Lehua on my right and Rhoda and Trudy down there." He passed the lead from sister to sister, bantering in between. "Music was the center of our life," he said. "We only had one guitar, one ʻukulele. One person would put it down, another would grab it. We wen' fight over the ʻukulele, broke da thing. That's OK, we get broom! Still can learn!"

Led called up his favorite sideman, Mike Kaawa, who plays twelve-string. The two shared a Nā Hōkū Award for Entertainers of the Year in 2009 for their collaboration *Force of Nature*. They played the traditional "No Ke Ano Ahiahi," a racing version of "Ghost Riders in the Sky" and a three-song tribute to the late Dennis Kamakahi, ending with "Kōkeʻe."

After the birthday show, I asked Mike what makes Led distinct from other slack key guitarists in Hawaiʻi. "He just has a bigger box," Mike said. "He is the last of the old-timers. He comes from a place where there was just a celebration of life—fishing, music. All that country, it's included in the package. Right now this is the only family that can play together, that still has critical mass. They're bringing back what they remember from Kalapana—sitting near the coconut stump.

"And," Mike added, "he's true to his sound. He will never change his dialect. It doesn't matter if he's 70, 80, 90—he'll be the same." HH