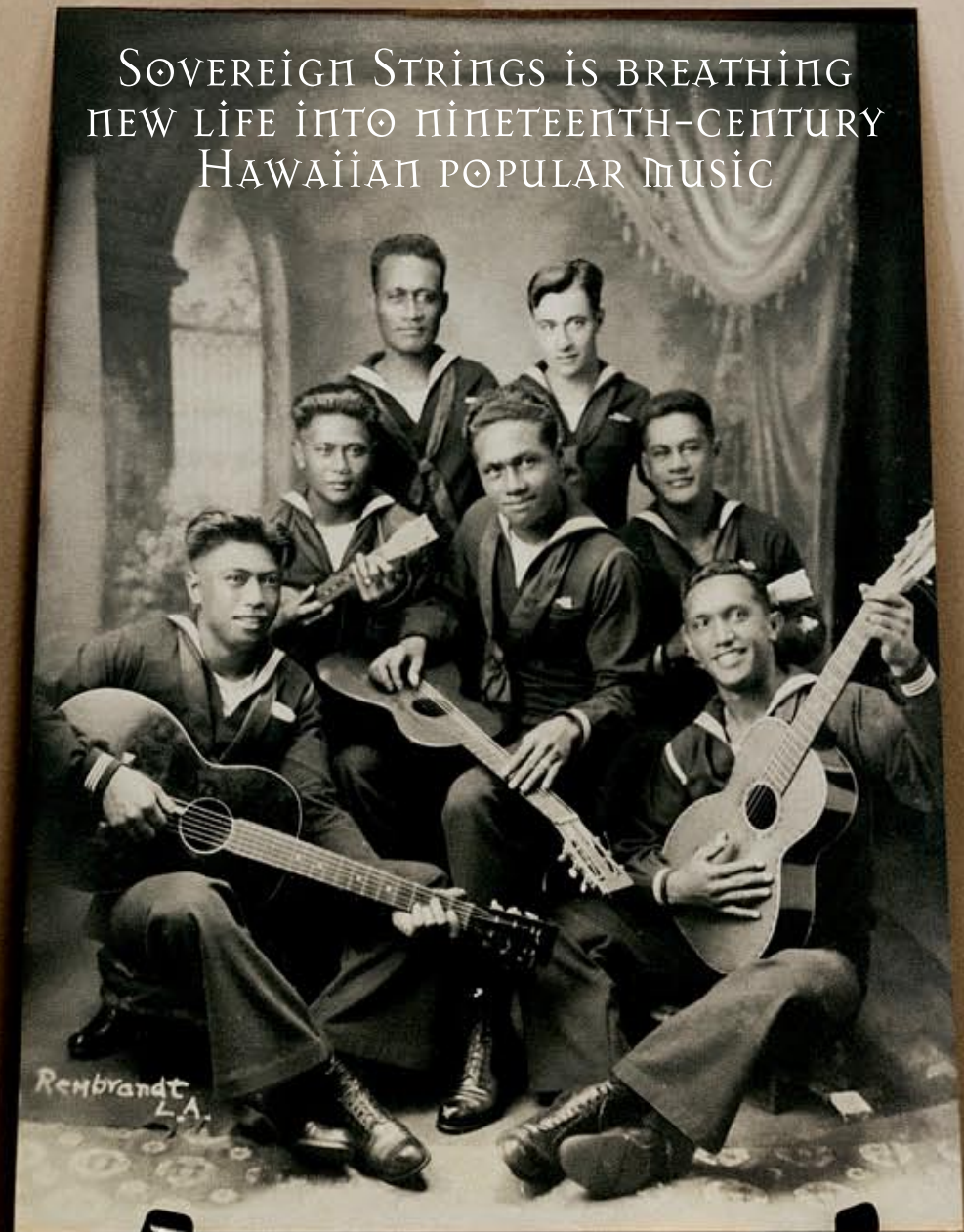


STORY BY NATE CHINEN • PHOTOS BY MEGAN SPELMAN

String Band Revival

SOVEREIGN STRINGS IS BREATHING
NEW LIFE INTO NINETEENTH-CENTURY
HAWAIIAN POPULAR MUSIC



String Band Revival

At a glance it isn't the likeliest setting for a royal assembly: a plastic folding table on a concrete-floor lanai, cheap Christmas lights strung along the eaves. But the musicians gathered around the table one February evening in the Hawaiian homestead neighborhood of Papakōlea are conjuring old sounds of princely pedigree with the rare, transporting enchantment of a seance.

The song sparking this reverie is "Moani ke 'Ala," composed by Prince William Pitt Leleiohoku in the 1870s—possibly during the early reign of his brother, King David Kalākaua. A flute and two violins introduce the jaunty theme, over the oompah strut of upright bass and cello. Strumming a percussive upbeat on 'ukulele is Aaron Mahi, the esteemed former maestro of the Honolulu Symphony and the Royal Hawaiian Band. After an eight-bar intro, he begins singing Leleiohoku's lyrics, which compare his beloved to a fragrant breeze.

For the chorus, Mahi is joined by Ra'iatea Helm and Puka Asing, sitting

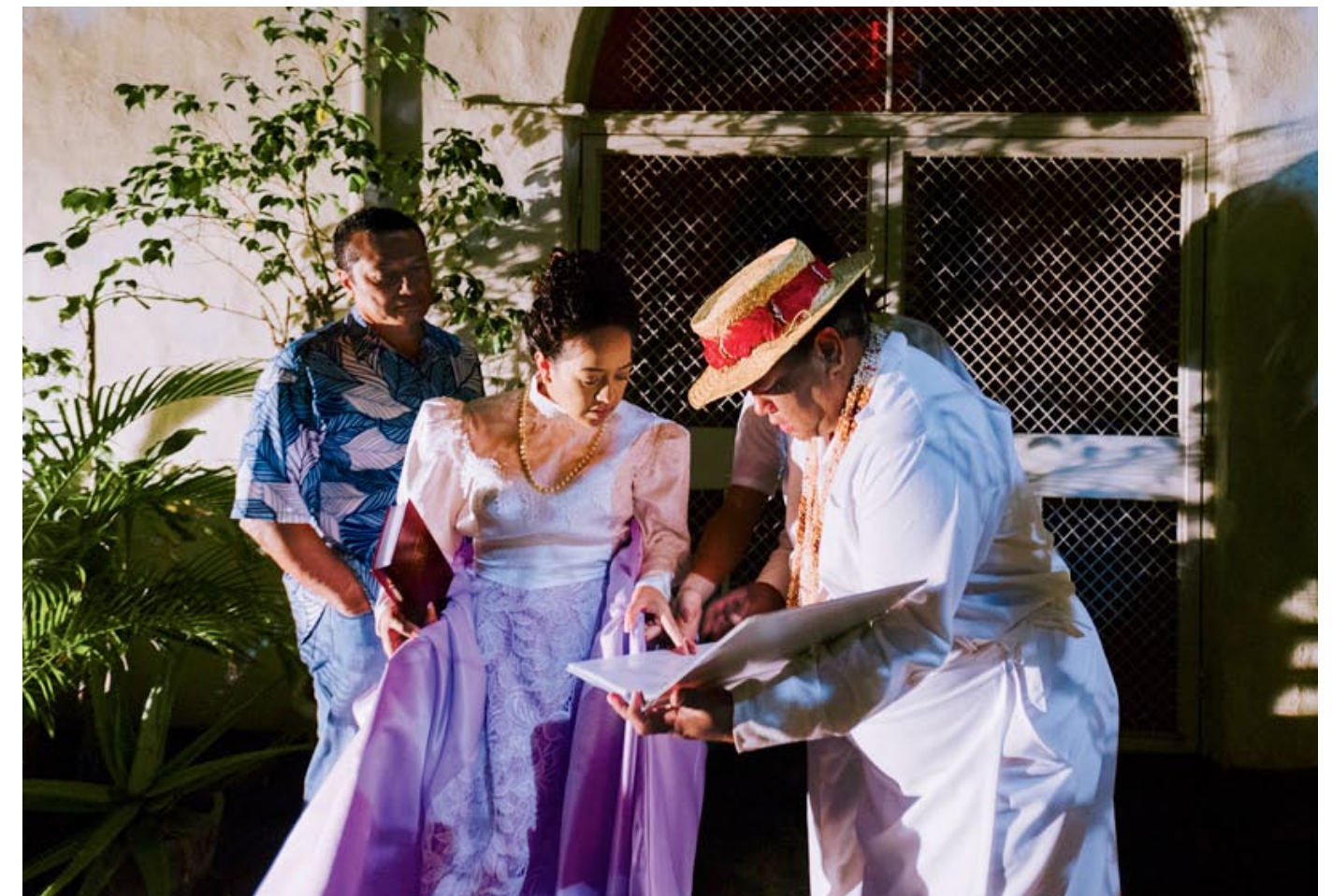


across the table. "Kuhi au a he pono kēia," they sing, in harmony. "Āu e hō'apa'apa mai nei." ("I thought all was well between us/Why do you keep me waiting?") The ensemble, also including an acoustic

guitar and Helm on second 'ukulele, suggests a courtly strain of classical parlor music—but it also sounds proudly and unmistakably Hawaiian. At the finish there are peals of laughter, punctuated by a playful "Yee-haw!"

Mahi, Helm and the others have reconvened here, at the Asing family home, a few weeks after "A Night of Sovereign Strings: Celebrating the Musical Legacy of Mekiā Albert Kealakai," an ambitious musical program at the Honolulu Museum of Art's Doris Duke Theatre. The concert, which was rapturously received during two sold-out performances in January, sought to re-create the sound and spirit of late-nineteenth-century Hawaiian music, which drew from European classical models without losing its root connections to hula, mele (songs) and 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language).

The restless mind behind this project is Kilin Reece, a luthier and guitarist who has spent the last several years researching the little-known history of early Hawaiian string bands like those led by Kealakai,



Sovereign String Band members Ra'iatea Helm (above middle) and Puka Asing (right) discuss final song selection before their inaugural performance at the Doris Duke Theatre last January. The group is rediscovering the rich catalog of early Hawaiian string band music, which had a more profound influence on American popular music than is generally acknowledged. At top, Asing and former Royal Hawaiian Band maestro Aaron Mahi receive a standing ovation after the performance.

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a virtuoso guitarist, flutist, trombonist and conductor. Reece's fascination with this exemplary figure (chronicled in "Finding Mekia," a feature in the August/September 2017 issue of *Hana Hou!*) prompted him to explore more deeply the music and culture of the period around the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy and the Islands' annexation to the United States. Reece's scholarship led him to a new circle of collaborators, including Helm, a Grammy-nominated Hawaiian singer; Ian O'Sullivan, a conservatory-trained guitarist who teaches at Kamehameha Schools; and Duane Padilla, a classical violinist also known for his flair in the gypsy jazz outfit Hot Club of Hulaville. "We always knew there was a connection between the violin and Hawaiian music," Padilla says. "But none of us was willing to do the legwork that Kilin's done to find it."

Padilla is sitting beside a few members of the Honolulu Symphony: violinist Fumiko Wellington, flutist Lance Suzuki and cellist Anna Callner. They too are enthusiastically involved with Sovereign Strings, along with a handful of others who couldn't make it tonight, like kī hō'alu (slack key) guitar great Jeff Peterson, lap steel guitarist Jeff Au Hoy and traditional Hawaiian trio Keauhou.

Helm has won eight Nā Hōkū Hanohano awards, but in this company of elders, she exudes an apprentice-like humility. "Being here with these folks—Puka, Kilin, Uncle Aaron and all the wonderful musicians—I'm learning so much," she says. "And I've always wondered, where did this Hawaiian music come from? You can't learn that in school, you know?" O'Sullivan, who has done firsthand archival research into the music of Queen Lili'uokalani, agrees: "Ethnomusicology for Hawaiian music is basically like the Wild West for ethnomusicology. So this guy"—he gestures toward Reece—"really is breaking new ground."

Reece explains that the arrangement of "Moani ke 'Ala" they've been playing is based on a transcription of a recording from 1904. He came across it among a batch of uncataloged material in the American Folklife Center archives at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC; he reckons they're the earliest complete sessions of a traveling string band in existence. (With the blessing of the Library of Congress, Reece has issued these findings on CD.)

Also in this cache of old recordings, which feature a group led by a former Kealakai associate, Lui Thompson, is the



The Sovereign String Band includes some of Hawai'i's most talented musicians, including Anna Callner, Adam Asing, Jeff Peterson, Ian O'Sullivan and Jeff Au Hoy (seen above, left to right). Above middle, luthier, guitarist and Sovereign String Band founder Kilin Reece beside classic guitars and 'ukulele, including a 1934 Martin guitar commissioned by the Royal Hawaiian Band. Above top, Helm performs in period costume designed by local dressmaker Iris Viacrusis.



beloved mele pana (place song) “Hi‘ilawe.” Recorded many times over the years, notably by Hawaiian music icon Gabby Pahinui, the song takes on a light saunter in this string-band arrangement, with lead vocals beautifully handled by Asing. “The Hawaiians took whatever we learned and we made it ours,” says Asing, one of four gifted musical siblings (including Adam, the bassist in the ensemble). “We always had the natural flow. It comes into play with everything that we put our hands on. Going down to our farming, to the intricacy in our leis, to our weaving. Down to our cooking!” He laughs heartily. “So lemme know when you guys ready to eat!” He’s prepared a home-cooked Hawaiian feast: kālúa pig with cabbage, chicken long rice, lomi salmon, poi.

Before everyone grabs a plate, Reece has one more point to make about the mission of Sovereign Strings. “These songs are maps,” he says earnestly. “In them the wind becomes profound. The rocks, the places—the wisdom of these places—is tangible. It all comes to life when they sing these songs.” Mahi nods in agreement. “So there’s much more going on than just a concert to re-explore instrumentation,” Reece continues. “This is reawakening. This is opening windows to a past that’s very difficult and illuminating the triumphs and the brilliance of the people who created this music.”

Kalākaua, Lili‘uokalani, Leleiohoku and their youngest sister, Princess Miriam Likelike, were all prolific composers, known today by a group encomium: Nā Lani ‘Ehā, or the Heavenly Four. Their commitment to musical excellence, apparent in the glee clubs they established, was also well embodied by the Royal Hawaiian Band—especially under the baton of Prussian concertmaster Henri Berger, who began his tenure in 1872. Berger brought high distinction to his post; together, he and Kalākaua wrote the enduring anthem “Hawai‘i Pono‘ī.” But one of his lasting achievements took root in the lowly setting of a boys’ reform school. Among the young truants he mentored there was Mekia Kealakai.

“This whole generation of reform-school boys, music was their life,” explains Reece. “By 1885, ten years later, they’re playing every single day in the Royal Hawaiian Band. Henri Berger was teaching them everything, including theory and harmony. And these kids were all Native Hawaiian speakers, still hearing all the old



One inspiration for Sovereign Strings is former Royal Hawaiian Band master Mekia Albert Kealakai (pictured above), whose musical contributions traveled well beyond Hawai‘i; he commissioned the first Dreadnought-style acoustic guitar, built by the C.F. Martin Company, which went on to become one of the most popular guitar designs of all time. (The Fender Stratocaster electric guitar, also pictured, was designed by Maui-born guitarist Freddie Tavares). Above top, O’Sullivan, violinist Duane Padilla and Peterson backstage.



Largely unremembered today, Hawaiian string band music was immensely popular in its time. These classically trained musicians toured the United States, introducing audiences to music rooted in hula, mele (songs) and ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language). Above top, Ernest Ka'ai's Royal Hawaiian Troubadors, c. 1912. Middle: The Honolulu Students led by Lui Thompson (third from left) at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, NY. Bottom: John Philip Sousa (in black, seated) with Kealakai's orchestra, also in Buffalo, 1901.

All images courtesy Kealakai Center for Pacific Strings

legends of Hawaiian theology. Hearing hula music. And they're taking the music they play at the palace in the morning—Verdi, Strauss, Bach—and then, to make a living, Berger's sending them out at night to parties, where they have to pare down that big orchestral sound to violin, flute, banjo, mandolin, guitar and 'ukulele."

Mahi, whose own tenure as associate conductor of the Royal Hawaiian Band ran from 1989 to 2007, has a unique perspective on the dignity these musicians brought to the task and the ways they reconciled their cultural birthright with a Western classical orthodoxy. "No matter where music is elicited from, it is the expression of the human spirit," Mahi says. "We say in Hawaiian, it's our na'au." He chuckles, using a Hawaiian word that can mean "gut" or "heart." "These Hawaiian men came from the most difficult of situations, from reformatory school—and when you can't go any lower, only way to go is up, right? No matter what they touched, it was their na'au speaking."

This remained true during the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawai'i by a cabal of sugar barons and businessmen in 1893. Anyone familiar with Hawaiian history knows the basic outline: how Lili'uokalani endured house arrest at 'Iolani Palace as a provisional government seized power. Less widely known is that the provisional government issued an ultimatum to the musicians in the Royal Hawaiian Band: Sign a loyalty oath renouncing the queen or forfeit the right to play in public. "So, what do they do?" Reece asks. "They jump on a boat and take a railroad tour across the continental United States playing not only their brass band music, but also this string band style."

Their reception must have exceeded all expectations: Reece has amassed a small collection of archival newspaper clippings hailing their success. One outdoor performance in San Francisco in 1895 drew a reported crowd of fifteen thousand, who demanded encore after encore. Two years later a Los Angeles paper issued a typically enthusiastic impression: "The ensemble music was full of richness of color and dash. The native airs were charmingly given and with the beautiful accompaniment of stringed instruments were received with immense applause."

Reece, whose archival work has duly established Kealakai's role in the development of the world's first Dreadnought acoustic guitar, feels strongly that the influence of these traveling musicians—

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impeccably trained classical players with a foothold in Native Hawaiian culture — changed the very shape of American roots music. Most scholarship in the field centers on immigrant and African-American communities, restricted to regional locales or a few choice urban hubs. “As they’re touring in 1895 across the United States, these guys were far more musically sophisticated than most of the population they were coming into contact with,” Reece argues. “They’re meeting working-class populations at a time before community colleges had been set up. And as they traveled, the Hawaiians taught everybody, everywhere they went.”

Reece’s own experience as a bluegrass guitarist sharpens his passion on this point. “I think the world plays like Hawaiians,” he says, eliciting a whoop from Asing. “From the research I’ve done, you look at this string band style that spread around the world: There’s before and there’s after.” He points to the 1901 Buffalo World’s Fair, where Kealakai led a group that included Lui Thompson. Hundreds of thousands of people heard them over a period of months and saw hula traditions exemplified by Mele Nawa’ahēihei, who would soon become Mrs. Kealakai. According to Reece, the Hawaiians were stationed next to the Mexican pavilion — a stray detail that informs his reading of “Wai’alae,” one of Kealakai’s best-known compositions, written around this time. In the Sovereign Strings version of “Wai’alae,” based on a 1911 recording by Ernest Ka’ai, you can hear a distinct melding of Mexican and Hawaiian influences. Set in gamboling waltz time, the song has a fanfare scored for flute and two violins. It’s a song of revelry that Mahi sings with roguish gusto, strumming his uke on every beat — two parts mariachi, one part paniolo (cowboy).

Another Kealakai song in the group’s repertoire, “Nu’uanu Waipuna a Kealoha,” has no reference recording, so the musicians had to form their own arrangement. “I always teared up a little every time we would start that piece,” says Mahi, explaining that the lyrics are about a husband and wife whose union has been torn asunder by leprosy. Sitting around the folding table, the group begins the song in sparsest fashion: Suzuki’s flute, Mahi’s ‘ukulele, Reece’s fingerpicked guitar. Then Helm begins to sing in a soft-featured Hawaiian falsetto. It’s an exquisite and sensitive treatment of the melody, and the sort of moment that many an Island local would describe as “chicken-skin.”

After the last note fades, Helm has a question for Mahi: “Is this song meant to be sung by a female or a male voice?” Mahi purses his lips. “Well, the perspective is a male one,” he muses. “But as far as I’m concerned, that was good enough for me!” The gang erupts in laughter and cheers.

The larger implications of Sovereign Strings — as an expression of pride and a reclamation of purpose — are clear to all who have encountered the project. Part of what makes this music powerful today is the bittersweet realization of a Hawaiian heritage whose broader cultural fluencies have been buried, either by the passage of time or the machinations of politics.

The end of independent Hawaiian rule was easier for the world to justify when the kingdom could be characterized as a provincial backwater. In fact, nineteenth-century Hawai‘i was a cosmopolitan center with a highly sophisticated aristocratic class, as this music indicates. Part of that is the mastery of a Eurocentric classical tradition by figures like Kealakai.

Mahi is among those who feel the time for this message has come — and not just among its base, whose long history of advocacy includes people like Ra’iātea’s father, the musician and activist George Helm. “All these things I wanted to do when I was bandmaster, I couldn’t do,” Mahi says. “And now I can do it.”

A couple of months after the gathering in Papakōlea, another Sovereign Strings concert takes place, this one at St. Andrew’s Cathedral. It’s a benefit for Reece’s new project: the Kealakai Center for Pacific Strings, a nonprofit that seeks to educate the public about the legacy of this nineteenth-century music. One video on social media depicts the musicians in crisp white dress as Helm sings “Nu’uanu Waipuna a Kealoha,” her voice echoing sweetly in the vaulted sanctuary. Reece, speaking by phone the morning after the concert, notes that the players had also performed at a private function: “We played for the governor and the patrons of St. Andrew’s Priory.”

There’s some poetry in the notion that Sovereign Strings is resonating now with such a crowd, more than 125 years after the overthrow. It calls to mind something Reece said on Asing’s front lawn, with the city and Honolulu Harbor stretching out below. “Part of this whole thing is to tell this story *from* here, looking out,” he affirmed. “Not to let the story be told *about* Hawai‘i, but to credit these musicians as the originators.” **HH**