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Finding Meleka

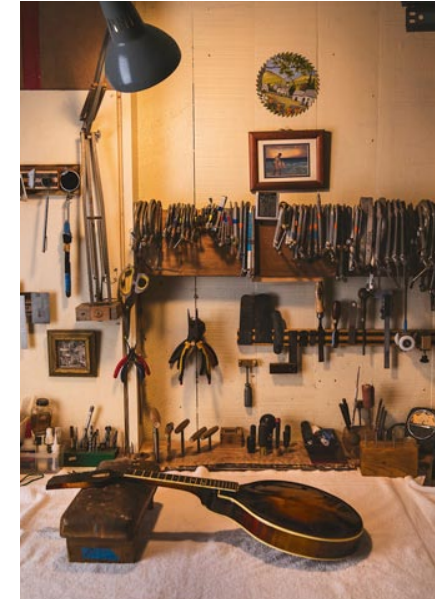
LUTHIER KILIN REECE TRACED THE ORIGIN OF THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS ACOUSTIC GUITAR, AND IT LED HIM STRAIGHT TO A FORGOTTEN HAWAIIAN VIRTUOSO



Finding Mekia

Kilin Reece steps into one corner of his workshop in Kailua—past a tabletop piled with ‘ukulele, metal brackets and scraps of Engelmann spruce—to retrieve an instrument case from a cabinet. “This,” he says as he unfastens the clasps, “is an incredibly historic guitar.” Reece carefully hoists a 1934 Martin 00-42, with abalone trim. He flips it over, and there on the end strip is an inscription: “Property Royal Hawaiian Band, T.H.”—as in, Territory of Hawaii. This is one of four instruments made by the Martin Guitar Company for the Royal Hawaiian Band in 1934 on a commission approved by the City and County of Honolulu.

The old guitar isn’t in playable condition, even though it resides in one of the most fortuitous places on O’ahu for a string instrument in need of restoration or repair. In his shop, KR Strings, Reece has had his hands full working on all kinds of guitars and ukes, sometimes for Hawaiian music legends. He also does custom builds and has even invented his own hybrids—like his variation on an eight-string octave mandolin, about a hundred of which have sold worldwide since he introduced the



line last year in collaboration with the Pono Guitar and Ukulele Company on the North Shore of O’ahu. Much of Reece’s energy, in other words, is devoted either to making new things or making old things new.

But even in its unusable state, this 1934 Martin has had a profound resonance for Reece. Mainly it sparked an obsession—one that could have repercussions for the

known genealogy of the acoustic guitar, not to mention the reputation of Hawaiian music from the early twentieth century. It was because of this instrument that Reece began to consider the long history of Martin guitars in Hawai’i. And that’s what led him to Mekia Kealakai.

Reece has a strong build, a rust-colored beard and the air of a craftsman who’s always worked with his hands. But when the subject turns to Kealakai, he radiates an almost boyish enthusiasm. “He had one of the most amazing life stories,” Reece marvels, referring to a musician remembered not only for his compositions like “Wai’alae” and “Lei ‘Awapuhi” but also as an internationally touring artist and the conductor of the Royal Hawaiian Band.

Through his dogged research sifting through archives in Hawai’i and on the Mainland—notably at C.F. Martin & Co. in Nazareth, Pennsylvania—Reece has uncovered a hidden history. “Mekia Kealakai was the first person to ask Martin to make a jumbo steel-string guitar,” he says. “He was one of only four people at that point that the Martin Guitar Company made a guitar for, and they called it the Kealakai model. Those templates were



Kilin Reece examines a mandolin he custom-built in his Kailua workshop. Reece uses techniques hundreds of years old to not only restore odd and aged instruments—like the coconut-body ‘ukulele on the opening spread (left) and the 1924 Martin koa guitar on the opening spread (right)—but also to invent odd new ones. His creations include the “octolin,” a mandolin/tenor guitar hybrid seen at top on page 67.



Reece's interest in Hawaiian music history led to composer Mekia Kealakai (following page, left), director of the Royal Hawaiian Band starting in 1920. In 1934, Kealakai commissioned C.F. Martin & Co. to create four jumbo guitars, loud enough to be heard when played with the band. Those instruments were the first "dreadnoughts," the most famous and widely imitated acoustic guitars in history.

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In other words, Reece intends to duly credit a Hawaiian musician with an active role in the evolution of the modern acoustic guitar, adding to an Island legacy that already lays a proud claim to inventing the steel guitar, the 'ukulele and ki ho'alu (slack key) style. Reece is compiling his findings into a forthcoming book, and he's working with Bishop Museum to develop an exhibition in 2019. In the meantime he exudes the prophetic zeal of someone in possession of a big secret.

"The lens through which people have looked at Hawaiian musical culture and history is so skewed by so many biases and misperceptions," he says. "I really feel like the Polynesians, and the Hawaiians in particular, haven't gotten the credit they deserve for being virtuosos, technical innovators with respect to both instrument design and the music."

Reece has a colorful backstory himself, and it goes a long way toward explaining the slant of his scholarship. For more than a decade he was a member of the Saloon Pilots, a popular Island blue-

grass outfit, playing guitar and mandolin and often singing. (He left the group just recently because the demands of his work had made it tough to maintain a full commitment to performing.) He also appears on a new album by bluegrass artist Peter Rowan: *My Aloha!*, a batch of old Hawaiian and hapa haole songs in sweetly lilting arrangements.

String instruments have been a constant in Reece's life, going back generations in his family. He grew up in California, graduating from Berkeley High School. Then he spent a couple of years in New York City before heading to Cabrillo College in Santa Cruz, where he studied jazz guitar. "I started playing mandolin the last couple years in Santa Cruz," Reece says, "learning fiddle tunes: traditional bluegrass, Celtic and Americana music from the contra dances." During that same stretch of his twenties, Reece worked at the Santa Cruz Guitar Company, apprenticing with the master luthier Richard Hoover. He followed a girlfriend to Oklahoma, and spent the next several years playing traditional bluegrass and Western swing, often driving many miles for a gig.

Reece moved to Hawai'i fifteen years ago and began working at the Ko'olau Guitar & 'Ukulele Company, spraying lacquer and fixing instruments. "So I found myself smack-dab in the middle of the most thriving repair shop for Hawaiian musicians on the island of O'ahu," he recalls. "I met Ledward Kaapana, the Brothers Cazimero—everybody was going there to get their stuff fixed. Not only famous musicians, but also aunts and uncles who were taro farmers or pig farmers, and they'd bring in their 'ukuleles. It was really just jumping in and learning to swim in the Hawaiian music world."

With his personable blend of curiosity, humility and respect—not to mention the quality of his handiwork—Reece earned the trust of local players. Kaapana, who knows Reece as more than a go-to repairman, points to his laid-back enthusiasm. "I always see Kilin at concerts, and hanging around with the local boys. He acts like he's a local boy from here, too, just like us. He's so easy to get along with." Of course, it mattered that Reece plays music—bluegrass, specifically. "The similarity between Hawaiian musicians and bluegrass musicians, on a real basic level, is they both play acoustic instruments," he reflects. "That's the heart and soul of that style—getting a good tone out of an acoustic instrument and then singing with it. When people



Bishop Museum



Courtesy Hawaii State Archives

would hear that I play bluegrass, it was always ‘Let’s jam’ or ‘Let’s talk story.’”

Reece bought the repair business from the Ko’olau Guitar & ‘Ukulele Company almost a decade ago, refashioning it into the operation now known as KR Strings. As an independent, he has the freedom to favor painstaking artisanal methods and materials, turning restoration into something not only functional but also very much an art, with a strong foothold in tradition.

“I just spent some time in Cremona, Italy, where there’s a Stradivarius school for violin making,” Reece says. “I really feel like we should have a similar luthiery school here, where kids can learn to incorporate physics, sound, art and design. The Native Hawaiians, they were making beautiful canoes, bowls, weapons, surfboards, calabashes. The climate here is harsh on string instruments, with all the humidity and salt air. And those guys were using all-natural, locally sourced oil varnishes, from kukui nuts. If you can make wooden objects that last in Hawai‘i, you’re doing something right.”

Reece’s distinctive octave mandolin came out of the same impulse. In his workshop he demonstrates with one of his prototypes, which produces a deep, twangy sound. The instrument has eight strings, like a standard mandolin, but its body is comparable to a baritone ‘ukulele, and its sound projection is woody and strong.

Traditional Celtic musicians, who see it as a cousin to the bouzouki, have been among the instrument’s early adopters: “The guys in Ireland, I can’t sell them enough of these things,” Reece says. Most local musicians who have played one see it as a cross between a guitar and an ‘ukulele. “It feels so different,” says Kaapana, who plays his in an open G tuning. “I don’t know if it’s an ‘ukulele or a guitar—it feels in between. It’s got its own sound.”

Reece likes that indeterminate quality, which gives musicians a certain freedom. “It’s fun because it’s new and it’s different, so there are no rules,” he says. At the same time, he’s quick to connect his invention to his research into turn-of-the-century string-band music in the Islands. “It was an opportunity to draw that line connecting the mandolin and Hawaiian history,” he says. “Which to me is part of the bigger story of Hawai‘i having been a thriving, cosmopolitan, sovereign nation for many, many years prior to annexation.”

Mekia Kealakai is a crucial part of that legacy. Born into poverty, the son of a sergeant major in the Royal Guard (hence the name “Mekia,” which means “major”), he received rigorous musical training in reform school, where he’d been sent for truancy at age 12. His teacher—Henry Berger, then the conductor of the Royal Hawaiian Band—trained him in the Euro-

pean concert tradition. Mekia entered the band in his teens as a trombonist and flutist.

During a Mainland tour in 1895, Kealakai caught the ear of the composer and bandleader John Philip Sousa, who wanted to hire him. But Kealakai turned him down and remained in Hawaiian string bands for the next ten years, playing up and down the West Coast from Portland to San Francisco before touring America and Europe and with his own act, Major Kealakai's Royal Hawaiian Sextette. He met his future wife, the noted hula dancer Mele Nawaaihehe, at the 1901 World's Fair in Buffalo, New York.

There's a formal photograph from that exhibition, a copy of which Reece carries around in a thick research binder. He has it with him when we meet for lunch in the spring, several months and thousands of miles from my first visit to his workshop in Kailua. He's been bouncing around the East Coast, visiting C.F. Martin & Co. along with assorted persons of interest, including a world-renowned vintage guitar restorer and a descendant of pioneering 'ukulele craftsman Manuel Nunes.

We're in my adopted hometown of Beacon, sixty miles upriver from New York City, in the Hudson Valley. Reece is eager to share some of his most recent findings, including the discovery that Kealakai spent five or six years living in Portland, Oregon. "He was on the Mainland from about 1906 to 1919, when he left to play in England," Reece says. "Everybody starts the story of Hawaiian musical influence in America in 1915, with the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco, where they built a whole second city. But Mekia was living on the West Coast a good eight years before that, laying the groundwork for that huge wave of Hawaiian music and culture to sweep the country."

C.F. Martin & Co. made its Kealakai model in 1916, one year after the exposition. The standard size for a guitar was smaller then, more suited to the parlor than the stage. Kealakai, seeking a stronger projection when he played Hawaiian lap steel, asked for a bigger-bodied instrument. The resulting design was repurposed in an order for Oliver Ditson and Company, which has long been understood, inaccurately, as the originators of the dreadnought guitar. An article last year in *Martin: The Journal of Acoustic Guitars* set the record straight, but only among a readership of brand-loyal connoisseurs. Reece intends to build a larger case for Kealakai's influence.

He has seen Kealakai's name mentioned warmly in correspondence between C.F. Martin III and the Bergstrom Music Company—the Honolulu music emporium that requested those four Martin guitars for the Royal Hawaiian Band in 1934.

Kealakai was freshly retired at that point, having returned home to Hawai'i in 1920 to assume the helm of the band. "He really put the emphasis on Hawaiian-language songs in the Royal Hawaiian Band and on the Hawaiian string-band tradition," Reece says. "The Royal Hawaiian String Band Ensemble went through the 1920s and '30s, and kept that tradition alive."

The careful tending of such traditions happens to be something associated with Beacon, where folk icon Pete Seeger lived for more than sixty years. After lunch Reece and I stop into Main Street Music, an instrument shop run by David Bernz, who won two Grammys for producing some of Seeger's final albums. The front of the store is crowded with banjos and violins, a few of which Reece pulls off the wall to test out. Otherwise it's vintage guitars hanging on every wall and lined up in rows on the floor. Reece is right at home.

With a little prodding, he tells Bernz about his octave mandolin, and they fall into amicable shoptalk mode about Terz sizing, tone woods and pin bridges. There's an old Martin hanging on the wall—a 1927 0-45, owned by Bernz's father. Reece gets out his binder and opens it up to a photograph of the 1934 model, and they compare the construction.

Reece, sensing an interested party, goes on to give a summary of the oft-overlooked legacy of string-band music in Hawai'i. He makes clear that he literally has the receipts: "I've been doing work in the Martin archives, and this is the original purchase order. And here is the ledger book from Martin for the same four guitars, with a note: 'All instruments are to be engraved Property Royal Hawaiian Band, Territory of Hawaii.'"

Bernz, who knew nothing of this a few minutes ago, is impressed. "This is a great project," he says. "Maybe you'll be famous for this someday."

Reece doesn't miss a beat. "Well, *this* is the guy who needs to be famous for this," he says, turning a page and pointing an index finger. "This is Mekia Kealakai, in 1901, at the Buffalo World's Fair ..."

It's a familiar song by now, but no less true in the telling. Reece seems like he could keep going like this for a while—but also like he's only just getting started. HH