



Ken Emerson

Slack & Steel

Acoustic & Electric Steel Guitar with Slack-Key

Ken Emerson is one of the world's most highly regarded traditional Hawaiian slack-key and steel guitarists living today. His unique playing style reflects the Hawaiian guitar's grassroots origins of over a century ago & towards present day. For over 30 years Emerson has helped lead the way in resurrecting the traditions of vintage Hawaii music, tapping into classic jazz and blues influences along the way. This was Ken's first album of instrumental music and is a true milestone... includes 5 rare outtakes from the original sessions!

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Ken Emerson
Slack & Steel

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|--|--------|---|--------|
| 1. Moana Chimes (M.K. Moke)..... | 4:15 | 12. Wai Lehua (Ken Emerson) | 3:12* |
| 2. Puakō (Ken Emerson) | 2:52 * | 13. 'Ula Nōweo (Traditional)..... | 2:55 |
| 3. I Kona (Traditional)..... | 3:10 | 14. Radio Blues (Sol Ho'opi'i) | 2:30 |
| 4. Hanalei Medley (Alfred Alohikea) | 3:05 | <u>Reissue Bonus Tracks</u> | |
| 5. Ua Kea (Ken Emerson) | 3:14 * | 15. Hotel Street Blues (Ken Emerson) | 2:41 * |
| 6. Hotel Street Blues (Ken Emerson)..... | 2:43 * | 16. Whinin' Boy Blues (Traditional) | 3:03 |
| 7. Maile Lau Li'i Li'i (Traditional) | 1:58 | 17. Puakō (Ken Emerson)..... | 5:16 * |
| 8. Punahale (Raymond Kane) | 2:40 | 18. Wai'oli Waltz (Ken Emerson)..... | 3:36 * |
| 9. Hula Blues (Johnny Noble)..... | 3:29 | 19. 'Ula Nōweo (Traditional) | 5:04 |
| 10. Wai'oli Waltz (Ken Emerson)..... | 3:11 * | | |
| 11. Hilo March (Joseph Ae'a) | 2:35 | | |

*Ka'io Publishing ASCAP
Previously released by Liko Records LR2002



Ken Emerson and his brother Phil first appeared on the Hawaiian music scene in 1978 when they were selected from nearly 500 other entries to be included in the “Home Grown” album, sponsored by a Honolulu radio station. The contest judges, who were top entertainers and prominent members of the Hawaiian music business, were stumped as they listened to Ken’s steel guitar licks on “Kai Hānapanupa” (composed by Ken and Phil). This contest was for amateurs who had not done a recording before, yet there weren’t too many people who could play like that – just about all were professional musicians and many had already passed away! “Think hard, who’s this... we must know this guy,” they said. Turns out they didn’t... not yet anyway. Through his performances on the “Emerson Brothers” album released the following year and a recording with vocalist Moe Keale, Ken soon became recognized as one of Hawai‘i’s fine steel guitarists.

Born into a musical family, Ken began playing guitar at age 10 and was exposed to a wide assortment of jazz, swing, country, Celtic and Hawaiian music through his father's extensive record collection. He soon became fascinated with steel guitar and began sliding a harmonica on the neck of his guitar to duplicate the sound. Later, he would learn first hand by seeking out and playing with artists such as David Keli'i, "Feet" Rogers, Jerry Byrd, Barney Isaacs, Billy Hew Len, and Sol K. Bright. Those mentors, along with a passion for rare 78 rpm Hawaiian music recordings, have shaped Ken's own style, which combines the earliest forms of traditional steel guitar, 1920s Hawaiian blues, '30s jazz and the swing era of the '40s. He also plays a style he calls "slack/steel" which incorporates traditional slack-key guitar techniques with the unique characteristics of steel guitar.

Ken is an avid collector of vintage musical instruments, recordings and memorabilia. He has given presentations on steel guitar history and technique throughout the state of Hawai'i at libraries, schools, correctional facilities, and even at Kalaupapa National Historical Park (a settlement for Hansens's disease patients dating back to 1866).

Besides playing slack-key and steel guitar, Ken is an accomplished guitarist in other styles as well. He's shared the stage with blues and country recording artists such as Boz Scaggs, Charlie Musselwhite, the Gatlin Brothers and Elvin Bishop, as well as with Hawaiian slack-key masters Raymond Kane and Gabby Pahinui.

During the 1920's, the captivating sound of steel guitar entranced audiences around the world, becoming so popular that there were more steel guitar students playing Hawaiian waltzes and marches on the mainland United States than there were in the islands! When big band and swing hit Hawai'i's shores during the '30s, the steel guitar was there as a premier instrument. Every group from a trio to large orchestras had a steel player.

Steel guitar was in the forefront of Hawaiian music when the magic of radio brought Hawai'i into homes across the nation via the popular "Hawai'i Calls" program. The name "Hawai'i Calls" was more than appropriate – after all, during winter's snow and ice, who could resist the call of the islands when the pleasant voice on the radio announced, "Good morning from Waikiki, it's 78 degrees outside and the water temperature is a warm 75 degrees Fahrenheit." The prominent sound of steel guitar in the music that followed certainly must have been associated in the minds of many listeners with that faraway tropical paradise called Hawai'i.

During the 1970's, a cultural renaissance of sorts occurred in the islands. At its core was the resurgence of three elements that were forged together inseparably in the tradition and values of old Hawai'i – music, dance and language. The younger generation began to appreciate that they were heirs to a culture all their own, not one that was dictated by outside influences or conceived as a promotion to attract tourists. The music of folk musicians like Eddie Kamae's "Sons of Hawai'i" and "The Gabby Pahinui Hawaiian Band" grew in popularity, while the tourist-oriented music of Waikiki began to decline. Although there were artists such as David "Feet" Rogers and Gabby Pahinui, who incorporated the steel guitar sound into roots Hawaiian music, the instrument was looked upon by many younger musicians as symbolic of the commercialism of Waikiki and its popularity began to wane.

As steel guitar makes a comeback, it's important to realize that the instrument was much more than the signature sound in the marketing of Hawai'i as a visitor destination, or a prerequisite for any band wanting a job in Waikiki. The art of steel guitar is a true Hawaiian innovation which has left a rich legacy in the ongoing development of music in our islands.

Hawai'i is commonly accepted as the birthplace of the steel guitar, and its invention is attributed to Joseph Kekūkū at about 1893. By this time, Hawaiians had already made the once-foreign instrument, the guitar, their own by adding slack-key tunings and techniques. Kekūkū and others, still not bound by rules that said the guitar had to be played a certain way, experimented with metal combs and pocket knives to produce a glide and twang that was pleasing to their ears (not to mention fun). While attending Kamehameha School for Boys, Kekūkū fashioned a rounded steel bar in shop class which he used to fret the strings and produce the first steel guitar.

The "steel" in the name refers to this metal bar. Documentation on early recordings and sheet music often referred to the instrument simply as "Hawaiian guitar." The original design consisted of a regular guitar using the metal bar and an adapter that raised the strings off the neck so the metal bar could glide over the strings easily.

Kekūkū's invention swept the United States in the early 1900's. Over the years, several modifications were made to his design such as metal resonators fastened to the wooden body to enhance sound (dobro), metal bodies which produced an even brighter sound (National steel guitar), and electric amplification which enabled it to be heard over many other instruments in a large band (Rickenbacher "frying pan"). One such innovation, the pedal steel guitar, has formed quite a niche in American country music but isn't widely used by Hawaiian musicians. Of the truly great Hawaiian steel guitar masters, Sol Ho'opi'i, is perhaps the most remarkable, for he incorporated innovative jazz/blues styles and techniques into his Hawaiian repertoire to redefine the limits of steel guitar for generations to come.

This CD features Ken Emerson, an artist who possesses a deep appreciation for the historical significance of steel guitar music along with flair and versatility as a player. Many songs are "slack/steel" selections that showcase the steel guitar as a folk instrument. Others are slack-key and acoustic steel duets which represent another side of Hawaiian steel guitar not commonly heard in most recordings. There is also a sprinkling of steel guitar classics including 1920's and '30s blues numbers. These vintage renditions were included because they typify the sound of Hawaiian steel guitar in its heyday (also because Ken does them so well!). We hope you will enjoy Slack & Steel as it portrays the colorful history and personality of this unique Hawaiian innovation which has left an indelible mark on contemporary Hawaiian music.

The Slack & Steel Songs

Moana Chimes (M.K. Moke) - A popular tune played by slack-key and steel guitarists alike. Both styles are featured in this duet of a metal body 1928 National acoustic steel guitar and slack-key guitar both in open G "Taro Patch" tuning.

Puakō (Ken Emerson) - Written for a beautiful spot on the Kohala coastline of the Big Island of Hawai'i. The slack-key is played on a 1955 Martin D-18 guitar in G tuning accompanied by a wood body steel guitar in G 6th tuning.

I Kona (Traditional) - A favorite amongst falsetto singers. This melody lends itself well to steel guitar since the steel and Hawaiian falsetto singing have a lot of tonal qualities in common. Features the more contemporary sound of an electric steel guitar complemented by slack-key.

Hanalei Medley (Alfred Alohikea) - A medley of three songs by this famous turn-of-the-century composer honors the Hanalei district of Kaua'i: Hanohano Hanalei, Hanalei Bay and Ka Ua Loku.

Ua Kea (Ken Emerson) - Written for "Heavenly Hāna" on the island of Maui where the rain is called "Ua Kea" in Hawaiian poetry. Played "bottle neck" slide guitar style (as opposed to lap steel style) on a wood body, 1956 Guild f40 in D "Wahine" tuning.

Hotel Street Blues (Ken Emerson) - Written for Ken's grandfather, Ray Emerson, who told stories of riding streetcars in downtown Honolulu in 1915. The song's tempo reflects a leisurely ride on a horse-drawn streetcar with the steel doing an appropriate horse whinny.

Maile Lau Li'i Li'i (Traditional) - An acoustic steel and slack-key rendition of this old familiar tune. The song's title refers to a prized variety of the fragrant Maile vine with small slender leaves.

Punahele (Raymond Kane) - A backyard style "slack/steel" jam where slack-key guitar techniques such as hammers and chimes are duplicated on the electric steel.

Hula Blues (Johnny Noble) - This classic, written in 1920, lends itself well towards blues and jazz licks. Played in the "kolohe" or "novelty" style of that era on a National Tri-cone Resonator.

Wai'oli Waltz (Ken Emerson) - The steel guitar was an integral part in countless Hawaiian waltzes. This one, written for the Hanalei area, is played "slack/steel" style where a slack-key thumb-picking pattern is used on the bass strings of the steel guitar.

Hilo March (Joseph Ae'a) - Dating back to 1881, this up tempo tune is in practically every Hawaiian steel guitarist's repertoire. This version features two steel guitars in a style reminiscent of the Kalama Quartette (circa 1920).

Wai Lehua (Ken Emerson) - Inspired by the Kīlauea Volcano area after visiting Halema'uma'u and Kīlauea Iki craters on a misty morning. This duet captures the delicate interaction between slack-key guitar and acoustic steel.

'Ula Nōweo (Traditional) - A song created from an old Kaua'i chant. Here, as with the falsetto singing style of "I Kona," the melodic qualities of traditional Hawaiian chant lend themselves well to the sounds of the steel guitar. A wood body guitar is played "slack/steel" style in G minor tuning.

Radio Blues (Sol Ho'opi'i) - A 1920s period piece from the repertoire of Sol Ka'ai'ai Ho'opi'i, perhaps the greatest steel guitar player of all time.

Bonus Tracks

Hotel Street Blues (Ken Emerson) - An alternate steel take.

Whinin' Boy Blues (Traditional) - 20s New Orleans-style steel blues!

Puakō (Ken Emerson) - A slack-key-guitar-only version of this Ken Emerson original.

Wai'oli Waltz (Ken Emerson) - Alternate version.

'Ula Nōweo (Traditional) - A very nice B version.

Mahalo e Ke Akua no kēia 'āina aloha, ka 'ohana a me nā hoaloha a pau. Many thanks to J. Keoni Fujitani, Grace Hata, Jack and Alice Emerson, John Anderton, Honu, "Sweet" Leilani Owens, Anna Ho'opi'i, Lynn Martin, Moe Keale, and Eddie Kamae. I dedicate this recording to the memory of Ross Cameron Kelamoku Emerson.

–"KE"

Ken Emerson

Acoustic and electric steel guitar, slack-key guitar, 'ukulele and rhythm guitar.

Pancho Graham

Acoustic bass on "Hanalei Medley," "Hotel Street Blues" and "Punahele."

Rick Hanapi

Rhythm guitar on "Punahele."

Reissue Produced by Ken Emerson

Reissue Executive Production by Michael Cord

Restored & Remastered by Mark Lyon, Audio-Restorations.com

Bonus Track Editing & Engineering by Lorin Rowan

Reissue Graphic Design by Amy Pace

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Executive Producer: John Keoni Fujitani

Associate Producer: Ken Emerson & James Winkler

Recording and Engineering:

James Winkler, Cloudless Sky Studios • Kilauea, Kaua'i

Ken Chikasuye, Rain Recording • Mt. View, Hawai'i

Mark McGinnis-Squid Inc. • "Banana Camp," Kōloa, Kaua'i

Mix and mastering:

Rick Asher Keefer – Sea West Studios • Pāhoa, Hawai'i

Art, photo coloring, graphic design & packaging:

Nelson Makua Design • Hilo, Hawai'i

Ken Emerson photo: Ted Lauder

Liner notes: Keoni Fujitani



 Cord International 
PO BOX 152 VENTURA CA 93002
VISIT US AT WWW.CORDINTERNATIONAL.COM

We'd love to hear from you!



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