

Keola's Thoughts On "Makuakāne"

I wrote this as an exercise in self-reflection in September, 2006, and sent a copy of it to Kenneth for his thoughts. He made some suggested and requested that I make it available on his website. Enjoy.

I recall very vividly the day when this project began, at least from my perspective. I visited Kenneth at his studio during a trip to Honolulu in the spring of 2005, and afterwards was invited to lunch by Kenneth and his wife Tasha. We talked about many things over lunch – music, technology, Hawaiian language, and family. At the end of the meal, Kenneth said to me, "Something tells me that we need to be working together; I don't know what it is, but let's keep talking." We threw around some ideas, but nothing really jumped out at that time.

When I returned to Hilo, I found about six *mele* that I had written over the previous seven or eight years, and it took me about a week to work up the courage to send them to Kenneth. While I had written music for them, I simply sent the lyrics and hoped that Kenneth would come up with something much better, unencumbered by my melody and chord changes. I really didn't think that much would come of it, perhaps he would use one or two of them in projects he produced for other artists. A few days later he went into the studio, and over the next day and a half he sent me five completed demos, with guitar, 'ukulele, bass, his lead vocal, and background vocals – all recorded by him alone. I was astounded, and the results were spectacular. I was immediately inspired, and wrote another song that evening, and sent him a draft the following morning. Within two hours another completed demo arrived by email.

These songs, in a much higher state of refinement, appear on this CD. 'Ama'ama, **Days Gone Bye**, **Ku'u Lei Lokelani**, **He Nani Moloka'i** and **Wa'awa'aikina'aupō** were among the original six (the final song of the original six was written to be performed in a chant style and remains unrecorded), and the seventh was **E Ku'upau**. In the months that followed we collaborated on many more. Many of the *mele* were inspired by music Kenneth sent to me; **Hōkūlaka'i** was one such *mele*. I had the seed of an idea for this song in my mind for many months following the arrival of Hōkūalaka'i, the 'Aha Pūnana Leo's double-hulled canoe, to Hilo. It was only when listening to a Kenneth's music that I closed my eyes, and visualized the entire song. From that point it was a matter of setting it to words. So was **Holo Paikikala** written. Kenneth's music took me on that bicycle ride in my mind, and I simply needed to put it down on paper (or more accurately, in my word processor). What an incredible ride it was.

Other songs were written in the ensuing months without music, and Kenneth masterfully crafted the music to fit them. At one point early in our collaboration, I recalled a story I had read in 2004 about the death of the last *po'ouli* bird on Maui. It was a male that scientists had captured, and it died while they searched in vain for a mate for it. I imagined it, prior to capture, circling around Kūhiwa and Hanawī, its native habitat in East Maui, searching for a mate that did not exist, not knowing that it was the last of its kind. I never felt so lonely in my life as I did at that moment. The music that Kenneth wrote to **Manu Po'ouli** and his subsequent recordings captured that emotion vividly.

I researched the music of John Kameaaloha Almeida for my Master's thesis, and while listening to over a hundred of his recordings and several hours of interviews with him conducted in Hawaiian, I made a silent promise to myself – I would honor this man with a *mele inoa* (name song). It was an empty promise for a few years, until I took the time to think about and truly appreciate his unrivaled contributions to Hawaiian music and his love of the Hawaiian language. **Pua O Pauoa** was completed a few minutes thereafter. I emailed the lyrics to Kenneth, took a short walk to clear my head, and when I returned to my office I had a voice mail from him, with his singing the first few lines of the song in a way that Almeida may have done himself. While I will never be able to repay Almeida in person for all that he has meant to me, this *mele* is a small down-payment. Kenneth's recording captures the energy of his original demo beautifully. I see a lot of Almeida in Kenneth as well - their instrumental and vocal versatility, their prodigious songwriting skills, and the way both have helped so many musicians of their respective generations.

What I learned from Kenneth through this process was that songwriting is the art of observation and documentation. Our songs surround us, waiting to be set to words. They hide in what we see, what we hear, what we experience, and feel, both physically and emotionally. Most of the songs that were written during the past year and a half really existed years ago, they simply weren't documented until I recognized them for what they were. Now, rather than waiting for a song to come along and hit me over the head like a sledgehammer, demanding to be written, I see several each day, sometimes a dozen, and can select the most interesting to put down in words. Some still hit pretty hard, and demand that I drop whatever I am doing so that they are accurately captured. But sometimes, like a woman, the song is coy. It flirts with you and then hides, only fully revealing itself when you are willing and able to give it your full attention. Once you have truly and completely immersed yourself in that experience, it is your command of the language which allows you to share that experience, those feelings, with others. May I never be satisfied with my skill with the language, but constantly strive to be able to more accurately express myself in a way which honors those who left it for us to carry on.

A very important step which occurred in various places through this process was *paka* – giving the songs to experienced *haku mele* and language experts, who could see possible unintended meanings in the words and help strengthen the thought and Hawaiian poetic devices which occur in *mele*. Sometimes the choice of words is a conscious act, seeking these devices. The most satisfying, however, occur when a composition comes spontaneously, and it is only upon subsequent observation that these elements, such as linked assonance, linked or opposite meanings, people and place names and other Hawaiian poetic devices become apparent. Larry Kimura was the person that I most frequently approached for this assistance, and it was truly a joyous day the first time I took a song to him, and he returned it with no suggestions, but simply with a smile and a reassuring “*Maika'i kēia*” (This is good).

From his work in the groups Mango, Pandanus Club, Kā'eo, and in producing other award-winning artists, Kenneth is well-versed in collaboration. For me, it was a new experience, at least when it came to song writing. He would take a song that I wrote and come back with suggestions and requests for many of the lyrics - to add or delete a

word here, change a word there, things that would make the song stronger, more concise, more memorable. I would offer suggestions with phrasing and pronunciation, to help the flow of the language. Sometimes they worked, sometimes they didn't, but the process repeated for each song until we were both satisfied with the results. Rarely, however, were we both simply satisfied. Extatic may be a better word.

Before we could stop to count, we had about 25 *mele* composed, and in some cases a dozen or more different versions of the same song. However, there was constant revision and what felt like a never-ending search for the perfect arrangement and perfect performance, like chasing the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Somewhere during this process it became abundantly clear to both of us that this was going to be Kenneth's debut album as a solo artist, and his realization drove the songs and recordings even higher. Working through late-2005 and early-2006, Kenneth recorded and re-recording the songs, some of them a dozen or more times, and with each revision they got stronger. Rarely a day passed when I didn't receive a new version of one of the songs, if not four or five.

During the summer of 2006, Kenneth worked feverishly to complete the final recordings, mixes, made the final (and very difficult) decisions regarding which songs would appear on the CD. A computer hard drive disaster which occurred in August of 2006 might have caused a lesser artist or less determined individual to completely abandon such an ambitious project, or at the very least result in a significant delay. Kenneth, however, rose to the occasion, and recreated all of the lost work. As a result the music rose to an even higher level than that of the lost recordings. And as in the earlier recordings, he played every instrument and singing every vocal part himself. It wasn't until just a few days before the final mix that the only other musician added any music, when Greg Sardinha played three tracks of steel guitar to sweeten three songs.

The result of this year and a half of work is what you hear on **Makuakāne**. I could not be prouder of the work that Kenneth and I have accomplished together. I sincerely hope that you enjoy listening to it as much as we did in bringing it to you, and that you've also enjoyed learning more about the adventures we encountered in creating it.

Keola Donaghy
'Ōla'a, Puna, Hawai'i mokupuni
Kepakemapa, MH 2006