

What is Slack Key Guitar?

In slack key ["Ki ho`alu", in Hawaiian], some of the strings are slacked (loosened) from the standard tuning, the thumb playing the bass while the other fingers play the melody and improvisation in a finger-picked style..."Ki ho`alu", which literally means "loosen the key," is the Hawaiian-language name for this unique finger-picked style. The strings (or "keys") are "slacked" to produce many beautiful tunings.

A gift of cattle from England to Hawai`i in the late 1700s, and a subsequent kapu (taboo) on harming them, resulted in an overpopulation of the steers. King Kamehameha III, around 1832, hired Mexican and Spanish vaqueros (cowboys) from North America to teach Hawaiians how to handle the growing herds. In the evenings around the campfire, the vaqueros -- many of whom worked on the Big Island, especially around the Waimea region -- probably played their guitars...

This new instrument would have intrigued the Hawaiian cowboys, or paniolo, who had their own music traditions... When the vaqueros returned to their homelands a few years later, some gave their guitars to the paniolo. The Hawaiians retuned the guitar from the Standard Spanish Tuning (E-A-D-G-B-E), usually by loosening, or slacking the strings...very often to tunings with a Major chord, called "Major Tunings" (such as the popular G Major "Taro Patch" Tuning, D-G-D-G-B-D).



"The beautiful stylings of slack key guitar were a delight to my ears the first time I heard them. I purchased some CDs and studied the tunings, and played along until I learned how to do it myself. And I watched the other slack key players, how they did it. Gradually my own slack key style developed. I believe the music flows from the Spirit of the Hawai`i, through the heart, into the fingers, and out through the voice of the guitar." Kauwila

"Many Hawaiian songs and slack key guitar pieces reflect themes like stories of the past and present and people's lives. But it is the tropical surroundings of Hawai`i, with its oceans, volcanoes and mountains, waterfalls, forests, plants and animals, that provide the deepest source of inspiration for Hawaiian music." Keola Beamer

Popular Slack Key Tunings (from the lowest pitched string to the highest):

Taro Patch	D-G-D-G-B-D (also called "open G")
C Wahine	C-G-D-G-B-D ("Dropped C" or "Leonard's C" Tuning)
C Mauna Loa	C-G-E-G-A-E ("Gabby's C")

Great Slack Key Websites:

http://www.dancingcat.com/skbook1-history.php	(Dancing Cat Records)
http://www.kbeamer.com/sk_history.html	(Keola Beamer's website)

Kauwila's Recordings (available at www.LetYourJoyShine.com)

- CDs: *Alaula, For the Love of Hawai`i, In the Spirit of Hawai`i, Kona Coffee Music, Kona Coffee Music 2, Manu*

Kauwila's Performances: Check his calendar at www.letyourjoyshine.com

Kauwila is perfect for weddings, parties, dinners, restaurants, cafés, and other special occasions. Contact him at kauila@letyourjoyshine.com, or call 808-333-8388.

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