

# the Out of Depths

Makana fuses tradition and innovation to create "slack rock"



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No matter where the audience is — a bar, a concert hall, an outdoor festival — when Makana strums the opening chords of a melody, he captures everyone's attention: His music is so big and powerful, it's hard to believe it's all coming out of one guitar. But it is. The twenty-nine-year-old musician is an intuitive wizard at the tunings that define Hawaiian slack key, or *kī hō'alu*. Ever since he

the fact that he's a Gemini — but it may be the music. Just about every song he plays is in a different tuning, and his repertoire spans numerous genres: world music, ambient, folk, rock, jazz, blues and slack key. In any given show, he'll transition easily from his Delta-style original, "Necksnap Blues," to a Latin adaptation of Sting's "Fragile" to the sonorous Hawaiian classic, "Pu'uanahulu." What's most important, he believes, is composing music that moves the listener.

"I love turning a feeling into a booming sound," Makana says. "Then, when it hits a person, the sound turns back into a feeling." He offers an example from his most recent album: "Take a song like 'Flood II.' It's about watching your lover leave on a plane ... for good. The beginning of the song is numb and subdued. And then the plane begins to take off, and a beautiful slack key melody lifts the song into a new groove. As the plane gets smaller, so does the music. It becomes so intimate, the whole band leaves and there's just a single guitar. The plane disappears from sight. Suddenly, heavy rock drums come thundering in, and the band explodes, and that's the sound of your heart breaking and the flood of emotions pouring through. 'Flood II' does not end up where it started. You are not the same. You'll never be the same. The songs reflect the movement that we experience as change in our lives."



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became a protégé of late slack key legend Sonny Chillingworth at thirteen, Makana has been perpetuating the art form and reworking it for the contemporary ear. "When the guitar was brought here by the Spanish, Hawaiians adapted it to their voices and to their perceptions of the amazing natural environment around them," Makana says. "Hence these beautiful open tunings that really affect you in a physical sense."

Makana's guitar seems to be an extension of his body — his fingers run across the strings as naturally as they would run through his long, curly hair. He has a young face and an old soul. He's at once introspective and extroverted. He practices *qi gong* and talks nonstop on his cell phone. He loves the stillness of Hawai'i and the chaos of Manhattan. A walking contradiction? He attributes his split personality to

This theme runs throughout Makana's 2006 release *Different Game*, which crosses slack key with pop rock to create what he calls "slack rock." He labels the album "a soundtrack for letting go."

"We've been taught that love is attachment, but this is not the case. Love is a guiding force that brings us into harmony with what is," he says. "Surrendering to the inevitability of change is about learning to let go in *real time*, as life occurs. You can't just decide to let go without going through a process. The songs that hurt when you listen to them, they do something to you; they help. Sometimes a song is the only thing that can ignite release. Slack key guitar has a magical quality that opens people's hearts. I've taken that and put it inside other kinds of music." ✿