

Roots Bound



Jeff Peterson
honors the legacy of
Hawaiian slack key

STORY BY CATHARINE LO PHOTOS BY SERGIO GOES

The day guitarist Jeff Peterson had the great fortune to jam with Eric Clapton, the legendary bluesman shared a truth that made a lasting impression. “The thing he said he’s most proud of is that he was able to bring more attention to the people he learned from — Robert Johnson, Buddy Guy, Muddy Waters, Freddie King — that his [own] popularity made

“Each culture has put its own stamp on its music,” Peterson says. “Most important is to always respect the *kupuna* [the elders] and what came before. Hawaiian music came from chant. The influence of Western music caused Hawaiian music to evolve, but it still kept the phrasing, the timing and the feel of ancient music.” Peterson points out that Hawaiian

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music also picked up elements of the pop music of the day — the swing feel found in *Haleiwa Hula*, for example. Despite outside influences, however, the distinctiveness of Island music remains.

Of course, that doesn’t mean that there isn’t room for innovation within the form. One of Jeff’s favorite pastimes is experimenting with new tunings, and for his popular 2005 CD *Slack Key Jazz*, Peterson added a Hawaiian sensibility to the work of some of his heroes: Dave Brubeck, Cole Porter, Duke Ellington. “I tried to stay true to the melody,” he says, “but I put in things that are the heart and soul of slack key.”

In addition to slack key and jazz, Peterson plays classical guitar; he credits his study of the music for developing his six-string artistry, allowing him to move his fingers and play without tension. “Classical music supports everything else,”

he says. “It’s like a little orchestra. Every note can have a meaning. It’s not just playing something loud. Every phrase has an arc that peaks, dissolves and comes to a resolution.”

He continues to explore the compatibility of different genres. “Guitar is used in music all over the world,” he points out, and whether he’s playing at his regular gig at Michel’s in the Colony Surf Hotel in Waikiki or out on tour, his goal is to find those links.

What if Jeff hadn’t become a guitarist? He says his love for the outdoors might have led him to become a rancher like his dad or a ranger at Maui’s Haleakala National Park. But that’s a decision he’s grateful he never had to make. “From a very young age, I had a direction. It’s been a long and interesting journey, and I never know where it’s going to go,” he says appreciatively. “The connection to the roots — that’s what it’s all about.” ✿

Like Clapton with the blues, Peterson plays a distinctly traditional and uniquely cultural music: Hawaiian slack key. The 35-year-old virtuoso’s command of the genre has taken his career to great heights. In addition to playing with Clapton, he’s entertained former President Bill Clinton and he won a Grammy for his contribution to *Slack Key Guitar Vol. 2*, the winning album in the Hawaiian music category in 2005.

Jeff learned slack key from his father, a rancher in Makawao, Maui, who played music with friends beside the campfire. Hawaiian slack key, in fact, was forged in the *paniolo* (cowboy) culture, born when Spanish *vaqueros* introduced Islanders to the guitar in the 1800s.