

**John W. Troutman (2016) *Kīkā Kīla: how the Hawaiian steel guitar changed the sound of modern music*, Chapel Hill NC\University of North Carolina Press. IX + 372 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4696-2792-2. US\$35.00.**

The Hawaiian steel guitar has provided the signature sound of Hawai'i for well over a century and has affected musical traditions all over the world: so much, in fact, that many only talk about it as 'steel guitar' and are completely unaware of its island roots and colorful history. There are even those who believe that it originated in Country & Western music or was introduced to Hawai'i for tourist entertainment. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The story has been told before of how in the 1880s a Hawaiian, Joseph Kekuku, changed a Spanish guitar into a *kīkā kīla* ('guitar' + 'steel') by raising the strings from the fretboard and using a piece of steel for producing the tones with their characteristic glissando and vibrato; and how, less than a century later, the instrument became popular overseas only to become almost forgotten in its islands of birth. The guitar's history provides a recurring theme in two editions of the encyclopedia *Hawaiian music and musicians* (George S. Kanahale ed. 1979; George S. Kanahale & John Berger eds. 2012) and, most notably, in *The Hawaiian steel guitar and its great Hawaiian musicians* (Lorene Ruymar ed. 1996). These previous works compile information from several sources rather than tell a coherent and detailed story.

John W. Troutman, a historian at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and a steel guitarist himself, has spent eight years documenting and analyzing the history of the instrument. He presents many, often surprising, facts in chapters that are both chronological and thematic, as each era also has its own theme: early Hawaiian guitar culture, the first steel guitar and the last days of the monarchy, the early steel guitar craze, the global reach of the instrument, further technological development, the steel guitar's effect on diverse genres of music, its banishment during the 'Hawaiian renaissance', and its standing in contemporary Hawai'i.

The book begins with the introduction of the Spanish guitar to Hawai'i in the nineteenth century. Local ways of tuning and playing it, particularly in the so called 'slack key' style, fitted perfectly with Hawaiian singing and the hula dance, which, to a considerable extent, was revived and modernized by royalty at the same time.

The next part of the story is about how Kekuku, while studying at the Kamehameha Schools, invented the steel guitar. Troutman discusses the conflicting narratives about the instrument's origins. He argues (like, for example, Ruymar in her book) that although others in the islands might have previously used some object to produce the 'steel sound' on a guitar, Kekuku was the first to make the adaptations necessary for it to be playable in a new pleasing way. Until then, guitars were only used for accompanying singing in Hawai'i and the United States, and it was with Kekuku's invention that it first became regarded as a solo instrument there. After moving to the mainland, where he performed and taught successfully, he was hailed as the world's best solo guitarist and paved the road for solo performances on all kinds of guitars.

During the first half of the twentieth century, a remarkable number of musicians from Hawai'i moved to the continental United States, which had annexed their islands in 1898. It is interesting to note the guitar's importance for keeping a whole Polynesian diaspora together. Hawaiian steel guitar took the country by storm, and during the First World War recordings featuring the instrument were outselling every other type of music in the United States. As a result, not only steel guitarists but also other musicians, dancers, vocalists, composers, and music teachers were provided with work opportunities. From 1935 to 1975 more than two thousand weekly episodes of the radio program 'Hawai'i Calls' reached millions of listeners. At the show's peak, it was relayed around the world via 750 radio stations, and always with the sound of steel guitars combined with lyrics about 'exotic' islands.

Hawaiian steel guitar music may very well have been the first genre of what is now labelled as ‘world music’, as exemplified by a surviving film from 1918 that shows a Native American, a Muskogee woman, dressed in beaded buckskin stage regalia, playing a Hawaiian steel guitar for wounded American doughboys in a hospital in England. Adapted to local traditions, the instrument has also become very important in Bollywood movies in India, and is used in African juju music. The Hawaiian steel guitar inspired the bottleneck blues in the Southern US, and the crying steel guitar is indispensable for the Nashville Country & Western sound. The story Troutman tells about how the Samoan-Hawaiian Tau Moe family went on a tour around the world that lasted more than 50 years (!), introduced the steel guitar in an astonishing number of countries, and helped at least 150 Jews to get out of Germany, could alone be the subject of a whole book.

It could be argued that modifications of the Hawaiian steel guitar, including amplification, pedals, and multiple necks, made it very different from Kekuku’s original acoustic instrument. However, not only did the basic playing technique remain, but Hawaiian musicians were in the foreground to promote the latest innovations. For instance, a Hawaiian, Freddie Tavares, had a leading role in designing Fender’s first pedal steel guitar as well as its famous ‘Stratocaster’, and in many countries electric steel guitars were actually the first electric guitars of any kind.

Troutman is meticulous in his use and documentation of written sources and interviews. I have only found a few minor errors, such as when he states that “Dick McIntire left his brothers in Los Angeles to seek new opportunities in New York City,” when it was Lani McIntire who did that. I would also have appreciated more interviews with contemporary musicians, especially those in their teens or twenties, to learn about what inspired them and to which extent they believe in keeping ‘traditional’ playing alive or adapting to new styles such as ‘Jawaiian’ (Hawaiian reggae). However, that could be a topic of further research, and this is a thoroughly fascinating, exquisitely written, and well-illustrated work that is a credit to both author and publisher.

In short, Troutman shows that popular types of music around the world and, I would add, ideas about tropical islands, would not be what they are today if it was not for musicians from the northernmost corner of the ‘Sea of Islands’. Even if his book is not about islands *per se*, it is still an important contribution to island scholarship.

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