

EDDIE KAMAE / 1927-2017

Hawaiian music virtuoso also used film to preserve culture

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Eddie Kamae — ukulele virtuoso, recording artist, record producer, filmmaker, one of the most influential Hawaiian musicians of the second half of the 20th century — died Saturday. He was 89.

A statement by the Hawaiian Legacy Foundation, an organization created by Kamae and his wife and business partner, Myrna Kamae, to preserve and promote Hawaiian culture, said Kamae “passed peacefully this morning with his wife Myrna by his side, a smile on his face and ‘E Ku’u Morning Dew’ playing in the background.”

“E Ku’u Morning Dew,” co-written by Kamae and Larry Lindsey Kimura, was Kamae’s most popular composition and the song most often associated with him.

Born and reared in Honolulu, Kamae made history in 1960 when he formed the Sons of Hawai’i with bassist Joe Marshall, slack-key guitarist Gabby Pahinui and steel guitarist David “Feet” Rogers. The group’s interest in traditional “grass roots” Hawaiian folk music preceded the “Hawaiian Renaissance” by almost a decade. The Sons’ choice of uniforms — blue denim overalls and red-and-white palaka (checkered) shirts — also represented the working class milieu where their music was found. Moe Keale became the fifth member of the Sons in the early 1970s.

IN 1973, following Pahinui’s departure, Kamae invited Dennis Kamakahi, younger by a generation, to join them. Kamakahi became his research partner in seeking out and documenting music that was on the verge of being lost forever

as earlier generations died off.

Kamae’s search put him in contact with elderly Hawaiians who were the last living links to the music, language and cultural viewpoints of 19th-century Hawaiians. Kamae understood the importance of preserving their information, set aside his career as a musician, and became a filmmaker. In the years that followed, he produced a series of 10 documentary films on the musical and cultural traditions of Hawaii.

Ironically, Kamae had started playing the ukulele only after his older brother found one on a city bus and brought it home. In his early years as a professional musician, Kamae played almost any type of music except Hawaiian — classical melodies, pop hits, Latin and jazz — saying that he liked Hawaiian music but found no challenge in playing it.



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Eddie Kamae played a Sunday gig at Honey's at Ko'olau Golf Club, where he was joined by other foremost Hawaiian musicians.

Instead, he studied music technique and developed a way of playing the ukulele where he would pluck all four strings simultaneously. Kamae's virtuosity inspired many younger musicians to visualize the ukulele as more than a rhythm instrument. Those musicians, and the musicians they inspired in

turn, continue to energize ukulele players today.

IN 1957, KAMAE began playing Hawaiian music. By 1960, when he founded the Sons of Hawai'i, he had committed himself exclusively to Hawaiian music and from then on displayed his virtuosity through the

music of the Sons.

In 2004, Kamae collaborated with James D. Houston on an illustrated biography, "Hawaiian Son." In 2008, he released "Yesterday & Today," a retrospective on the Sons of Hawai'i and the group's music that included new recordings of Kamae playing with the musicians



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Myrna and Eddie Kamae celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary Aug. 3 at the Honolulu Elks Club in Waikiki.

who replaced the founding members of the group. Kamae's work with the younger Sons was the group's final recording sessions.

Kamae received two Na Hoku Hanohano Awards for his work as a record producer — the second was for producing "Yesterday & Today." He received the Hawai'i Academy of Recording Arts' lifetime achievement award for his career achievements as an

individual in 1992, and he received a second lifetime achievement award in 2009 for his work as a member of the Sons of Hawai'i. He was inducted into the Hawaiian Music Hall of Fame and Museum in 2007. In addition to his wife, Kamae is survived by his brother Alfred Kamae, his daughters Jo Kamae Byrne and Kathy Medeiros, and nieces and nephews. Memorial plans are pending.