

Yesterday and today together

Eddie Kamae and his Sons of Hawaii did not singlehandedly ignite the perceived renaissance in Hawaiian music of the past few years, but the group has certainly been at its core.

Oddly enough, the driving force of this group, which has now survived basically intact for 20 years, was himself very slow in developing an interest in the music of his own people. Kamae first began tinkering with an ukulele at 14 when, in the early '40s, his older brother found one on a bus. By 1948 his agility with the ukulele was so strong that he virtually reinvented the instrument through his innovative technique. Working as one half of the Ukulele Rascals (with Shoi Ikemi) at the Lau Yee Chai restaurant in Waikiki that



The Sons of Hawaii (from left): Joe Marshall, Dennis Kamakahi, Eddie Kamae and David "Feet" Rogers.

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year, Kamae was credited with lifting the ukulele from its shadowy status as a rhythmic instrument to one with a full melodic voice in the front line.

In exploring the full dimension of the ukulele, Kamae ignored Hawaiian music in favor of strong Latin tunes such as "Malaguena" and "Bolero" and popular songs, infusing the sound with jazz and mariachi influences. A year later his emphasis switched to hapa-haole, on tour with Ray Kinney's orchestra across the U.S. Mainland.

Through most of the early '50s, Kamae stayed out of music altogether.

"Those were hard times," he now says. Rather cryptically, he adds: "I'd suggest to any young up-and-coming group that there are three things that won't work, and booze is one of them. It's booze and drugs and someone else's wife it's not good. It'll never work. The problems are always around. In music, you'd say, 'It's a past that had to happen.'"

It wasn't until 1957 that Kamae re-emerged and, working with Haunani Kahalewai, got his first taste of Hawaiian music. "My father had always wanted me to play Hawaiian, but I felt it was too simple," he now says. "I always refused, telling him I'd only do what I wanted to do. So I never did get it played for him; today I wish I had. Now I appreciate the complex phrasing, sound and rhythm of Hawaiian music."

Shortly after, Kamae was driving from his Maunawili home into Waikiki and stopped off to see some friends in Waimanalo. There he met an ailing Gabby Pahinui, and so began a 20-year institution in Hawaiian music. "Gabby was really skinny and he couldn't eat. They were feeding him liquids through a straw. He asked me if I played music, but Hawaiian still wasn't really my thing. We got together anyway, and that's how the Sons of Hawaii started, right there. It also started my divorce, right there. When I got my divorce I had to call the minister up and tell him it was my fault. It happened, that's all. And we played music from day to night. Everybody got together—by accident."

The other two charter Sons, steel guitarist David "Feet" Rogers and acoustic bassist Joe Marshall, have steadfastly remained with Kamae as the nucleus of the group through all its years. Gabby, ever the gadabout,

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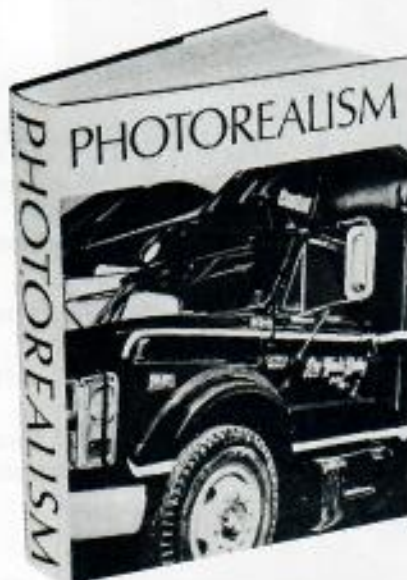
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stayed for the first two albums on the Hula label, dropped out, rejoined again for a while in 1966, cut several slack key albums on his own or with other collaborators, then reunited to record with the Sons once again in 1971 for the Panini label.

Through the early '70s the nucleus held fast while new members and guest artists came and went as if through a revolving door. Palani Vaughan was a featured singer for a while in 1971. Moe Keale had joined in 1970 and remained for six years and three albums. "But at the end of the period," Keale recalled last year, "I was getting 'buggy' and wanted to try something new." He went on to form Anuenue. With the addition of composer and 12-string guitarist Dennis Kamakahi in 1974 the Sons of Hawaii worked as a quintet until Keale's amicable departure, and the quartet has maintained stability since then.

Kamae has been no slouch as a songwriter. His "Morning Dew," a collaboration with Larry Kimura, is a contemporary standard which has now been interpreted by some 30 other artists. "Kela Mea Whiffa" and "Ke Ala Ka Jeep" are two other Kamae favorites, and he has composed numerous songs since with his second wife, Myrna, as lyricist.

But Kamakahi has proven to be a real treasure, regarded by many of his peers as the finest composer working in Hawaii today. Robert Cazimero is one such enthusiast, who in this column a couple of months back said that he and brother Roland await each new Sons album to see which Kamakahi songs they should do next. So far, they've recorded his "Pua Hone" and perform "Wahine Ilikea" and "E Hihiwai" frequently on stage.

Kamakahi, now 27, dominates the new Sons of Hawaii album, *Grassroots Music*, with nine of the 10 songs, the odd one out being another Kamae-Kimura effort. The new release has a decidedly country and Western twang, swinging more toward Austin, Texas, rather than Nashville with a blend of old Bob Wills style Western-swing and the new progressive cowboy sound of Willie Nelson and Waylon Jennings. "With most of the music on this new album," Kamakahi says, "we tried to reach some median point at which we feel the kind of music we play can be appreciated by the majority of the potential audience. It's a new depar-

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ture in a different field, yet we still feel that the old rhythms we use are closely identified with the backlands country music here in Hawaii."

The album completed, the Sons are now to be found back in the Blue Dolphin Room at the Waikiki Outrigger, playing weekends until at least next March. From there, anything's possible. They'd love to take their Hawaiian country sound to the Mainland. Kamae's friend Jerry Byrd put some feelers out for the group to the producers of the "Grand Ole Opry" during his last Nashville recording session, and something might click. "Apparently they said they'd welcome us," says Kamae, "but there's only one hitch—we'd have to pay our way up there."

There's an old dictum of the entertainment world that "in show business, if there's no business, there's no show," and while Kamae's first priority is music, his attention to business details is more astute than most of his breed.

"When we first started years ago, the idea of forming a partnership was to use part of the money we'd earn for some kind of investment," he says. "It didn't go that way—some wanted to take the money home and some wanted to have a good time. So it didn't work out. Now the way we have it, with a corporation, it's easy to do all the things you want to do. You want to invest in something, you want to borrow for things you need. You don't have to worry about an agent putting up so much money for all the things you need like strings, instruments and amplifiers. Right now we're a corporation, we all sit down and make the decisions, and we go. And it's easy all the way around."

For the past seven years, the group has recorded for its own Hawaii Sons label, financing the studio sessions and manufacturing costs, then turning the completed product over to a distributor for a far more advantageous return. Kamae also handles all the bookings and other business negotiations for the group. Does this indicate a basic distrust of the way others in the business operate?

"No," Kamae says. "But it does give you the freedom to do as you wish. Somebody can come along and tell you 'OK, we'll handle you, manage you, we're gonna do this and that for you.' But then tomorrow might be another thing. So you have to be consistent with what you really

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want to accomplish, and then go do it for yourself."

While Kamae was one of the first artists to set up his own independent record label, he doesn't recommend it for everyone, especially for new artists. "When we first started, it was with Hula Records and as far as I'm concerned they did some great things. They're still doing some good things because they're very concerned about recording the artists."


"But some of the musicians coming up now, tonight they have a dream and tomorrow it's gone. If somebody doesn't help them along the way, they'll be in real trouble. If they have to put their own money into recording for the first time, the best thing you could tell them is that it's not that rosy at all. You have to go step by step. Hawaiians have a tendency that they want to record; they figure that by doing a recording they'll climb up so fast. But sometimes, if they're not really ready for it, they'll do a record and fall down."

The Sons' own album sales have been reasonable, if not spectacular. "At the time we first started, I'd say if we go five [thousand copies per album] it's pretty good," Kamae allows. "You go three, you're on safe road. If you move slowly every year [with steadily selling albums from back catalog], I love that. I'd rather have one that moves every year instead of having one come up and then fading when the next album's released."

"Our last album has stayed pretty close to 5,000, and that's healthy for us. This new one should be better, I believe, because of the market and the way people think today. I think the time's right for this one."

At 53, Kamae's still not ready for the retirement home. Working with younger people like Kamakahi, he says, keeps him rejuvenated—although Kamakahi says he had trouble keeping pace with the others, playing three and four sets a night, when he first joined the group.

"When the time comes, I'll know," Kamae says, "when it's time to just put it down. I tell my wife I'll be going fishing, that's the most relaxing thing I know. I'll go sit on the veranda, with plenty of time to go fishing."

"But I think today, the things we're doing, with Dennis' work and input and the young idea, it's really exciting. You put yesterday and today together and it works." 

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