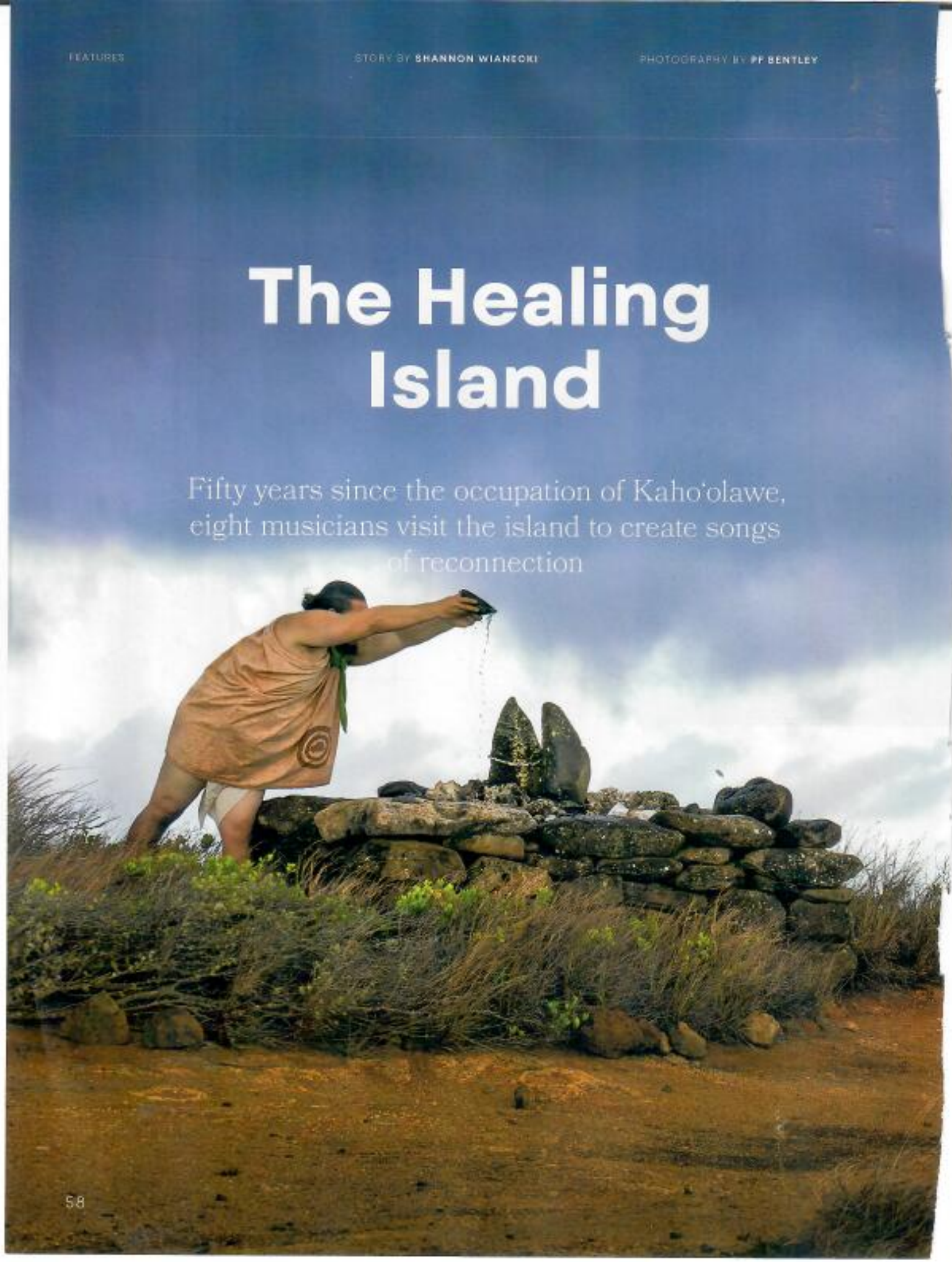
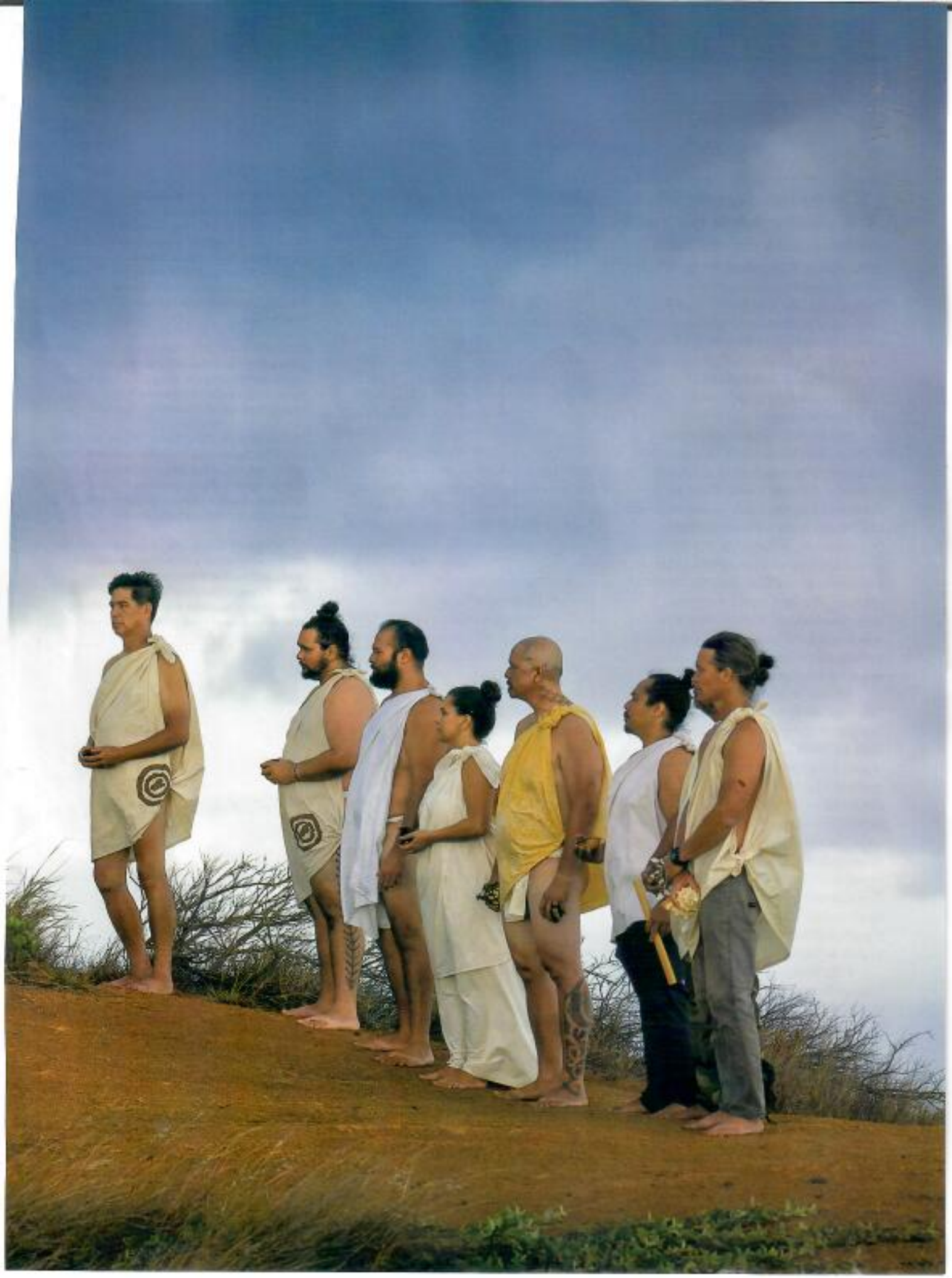
STORY BY **SHANNON WIANECKI** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **PF BENTLEY**

# The Healing Island

Fifty years since the occupation of Kaho'olawe, eight musicians visit the island to create songs of reconnection





**White-tailed tropicbirds dive for fish as the *'Ōhua* motors across the still dark sea.** Ahead, Kaho'olawe hunkers on the horizon like a humpback whale. I'm buckled into a lifejacket on the bow, along with eight musicians from across Hawai'i. The Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana (PKO) has invited us to spend the weekend on Kaho'olawe to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of their first landing on the island.

Just seven miles southwest of Maui, Kaho'olawe exists in a parallel universe. The smallest of the main Hawaiian Islands looms large in Hawaiian history, ancient and modern. The island is considered a kinolau, or embodiment, of Kanaloa, the Hawaiian god of healing and the ocean, who manifests as a whale, dolphin, seal or octopus. While it never supported a large population, Kaho'olawe/Kanaloa was known throughout the Pacific as a navigational center and source of superior adze stones.

No one lives here today and none may visit without permission due to the danger of unexploded ordnance. From 1941 to 1990, the US Navy used the island for target practice. Many Maui residents, myself included, remember the window-rattling explosions that turned the sky green. The bomb blasts were scary enough for a kid, but for those with knowledge of what was being struck, they were unbearable. The tale of how the "Target Isle" once again became Kohemālamalama o Kanaloa (Place that Gives Birth to Light), is bittersweet.

Fifty years ago, Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana, known familiarly as "the 'Ohana," defied the US military and reclaimed this battered island. They launched a movement that not only restored Kaho'olawe to local rule but helped ignite a Hawaiian cultural renaissance that continues today. Inheritors of this legacy, the eight musicians aboard the *'Ōhua* have come on a special errand: to remind the younger generation that Kaho'olawe is a living, breathing hub for the lāhui (Hawaiian nation). To give life to its seldom visited sacred sites. To sing of these places and let their names ring.

**The *'Ōhua* drops us off at Honokanai'a,** an empty beach on the southwest shore. There are no buildings, not even a dock, so we hoist our bags and step off the sloshing boat ramp into the sand. Our first task is a cleansing ritual. Craig Neff, our guide, passes out a tonic of wai (fresh water), pa'akai (salt), 'alaea (red clay) and 'ōlena ( turmeric). We drink it in silence, then wade into water as clear as turquoise glass. "Make sure you dunk your head," Neff says. "That's what needs the most cleansing! Hemo [release] your cares. Detox, forgive, let go!" We each submerge. A brown shape swims up to Neff. He's startled by the sleek and curious Hawaiian monk seal, one of only 1,600 on Earth. It's a hō'ailona, a good omen.

Well in advance of the anniversary, the 'Ohana began planning commemorative events. Songwriter, producer and recording artist Kimié Miner teamed up with reggae artist Ka'ikena Scanlan to invite local musicians to collaborate on an album. Several will contribute from afar, while others—Miner and Scanlan, plus Isaac Nāhuewai (who performs as Ikaakamai), Kaipulaumakaniolo Keala, Blake "Brutus" LaBenz, Keahi Pi'iohia, Pōki'i Seto and Kiliona Young—are committed to making music on the island. "It's perfect: eight musicians, eight arms of the octopus," says Miner. "The island puts out its own kāhea [call]. Kanaloa calls the ones it wants to its shores."

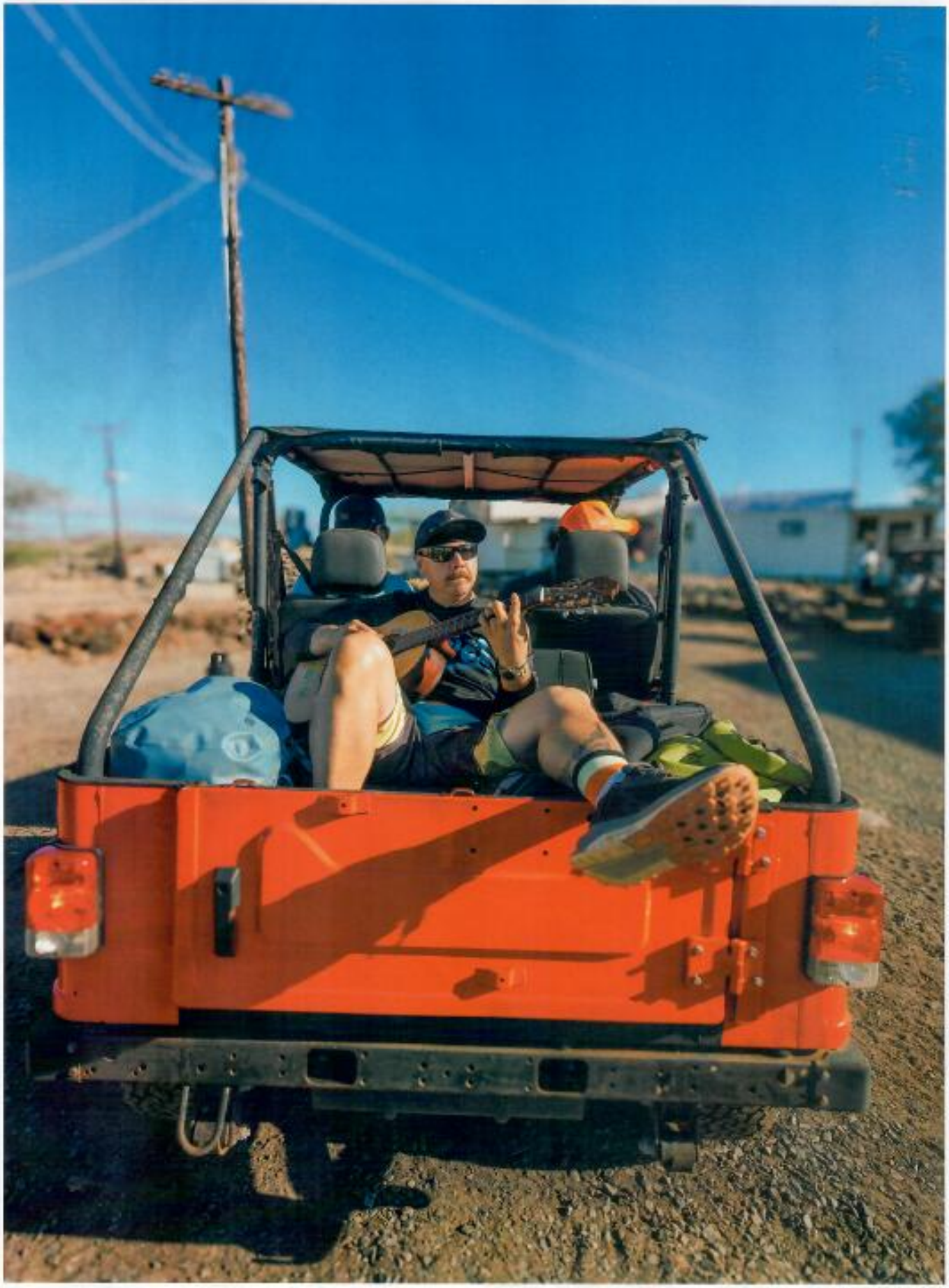
Everyone who visits Kaho'olawe must adhere to safety protocols. The military spent ten years and $400 million cleaning up before it left, but the danger remains. Only around 75 percent of the island's surface was cleared of ordnance, so visitors must stay within marked paths. Beyond that, cell phones don't work here, and facilities are simple barracks with outdoor showers

OPENING SPREAD / **Summoning rain on the arid island of Kaho'olawe: Kaipulaumakaniolo Keala pours an offering of wai (fresh water) onto a rain ko'a (altar) with (left to right) Craig Neff, Blake "Brutus" LaBenz, Ka'ikena Scanlan, Kimié Miner, Pōki'i Seto, Isaac Nāhuewai and Keahi Pi'iohia. Their kihei (capes) bear the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana logo.**

FACING PAGE, TOP / **Bring a dry bag—the journey to Kaho'olawe invariably involves a baptism. Passengers aboard the *'Ōhua* get doused by swells en route to Honokanai'a, where they will disembark in the surf.**

FACING PAGE, BOTTOM / **"A'ohe hana nui ke alu 'ia," goes one Hawaiian proverb. "No task is too big when done together by all." Left to right: LaBenz, Scanlan, Pi'iohia and Seto help build a stone mua (gathering place) above Honokanai'a Beach.**

FOLLOWING PAGE / **To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Native Hawaiians reoccupying Kaho'olawe, the Protect Kaho'olawe 'Ohana invited eight musicians—including Seto, seen here—to spend the weekend composing music on the island.**



and composting toilets. Pack light and secure your belongings in a dry bag—you might have to swim ashore.

The restrictions haven't hampered Miner's style. She wears a bright *pareo*, gold hoops and rock-star sunglasses. "I like to bring my favorite things here to get energized," she says. Scanlan sports a hilariously chic towel cape by Hilo designer Sig Zane, and the others wear T-shirts emblazoned with clever Hawaiian slogans. Their instruments include a pair of guitars, two 'ukulele, two pū (conch shell trumpets), a bamboo flute and a plastic melodica.

**We head to the old military camp,** where a lone coconut tree stands lookout over the worn wooden barracks. Even weeds struggle to grow in this moisture-starved environment.

Native grasslands and dry forest once covered Kaho'olawe, ringed with wetlands and coral reefs. The ecosystem took its first hit in 1793, when Captain George Vancouver gave Maui chief Kahekili a herd of goats. Sheep and cattle followed, and for the next hundred-plus years, failed ranching attempts decimated the island's vegetation. A *New York Times* article published in 1922 decried "the seething mass of goats that swarm like lice upon Kahoolawe's humped back."

While wild goats nibbled the grass to nubs, it was the bombs that ultimately rendered Kaho'olawe uninhabitable. After the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, the US Navy seized the island and shelled it for five decades. Even fishermen were forbidden from coming within two miles of its shore. Hawai'i residents protested, but Navy commanders claimed they could not defend the Pacific without this tactical training ground.

Then, on January 6, 1976, a small flotilla set sail for Kaho'olawe. Around one hundred Native Hawaiians and supporters decided to risk arrest or live fire, hoping to draw national attention to Indigenous causes. The Coast Guard intercepted the fleet, but one boat slipped through. Those who made landfall were later known as "the Kaho'olawe Nine," and two of them dodged arrest to occupy the island for three days. What they saw changed them: huge bomb craters, and the island's iron-rich soil hemorrhaging into the sea.

"It was like the land was calling to me, pleading, crying, asking us to do something," Emmett Aluli told reporters after the experience. He and his fellow activists embraced a new motto: "Aloha 'Āina," or "Love of the Land." They organized as PKO and began a sustained effort to reclaim the island. Through repeated occupations, protests and lawsuits they loosened the military's grip. In 1994, David beat Goliath. The Navy returned Kaho'olawe to the State of Hawai'i. The cleanup took another ten years. Finally, in 2004, the Navy departed Kanaloa.

Today, the Kaho'olawe Island Restoration Committee (KIRC) runs state-sponsored restoration projects out of the old military camp, outfitted with ATVs and protocols for planting in a former faux war zone. The 'Ohana focuses on cultural rehabilitation from an off-grid basecamp across the island at Hakioawa. They've partnered with KIRC on this trip to give the musicians access to as many sites as possible.

**Neff begins our tour at a site under construction.** Overlooking Honokanai'a, the half-built rock platform will be a stunning landmark when finished. Neff explains that it's a mua ha'i kūpuna—a gathering place for kūpuna (elders) and stakeholders. Pualani Kanaka'ole Kanahele, one of Hawai'i's most respected cultural experts, created a cultural plan for Kaho'olawe in 2009, which details how to restore historic sites, construct new ones and establish practitioners dedicated to Kanaloa—both the island and the god, as they are considered one and the same. Kanahele recommends that everyone observe three guiding principles while on island: "justified" physical labor, observation and ceremony.

Neff points to a pile of stones. "Now is time for justified labor," he says. "You can add your mana [spiritual power] to the mua." Without hesitation, Pi'iohia heaves a boulder from the pile. We all line up and pass rocks forward. It's


ABOVE / **After bombing Kaho'olawe for forty-nine years, the US Navy left in 2004, having cleared unexploded ordnance from 75 percent of the island's surface. Ten percent of Kaho'olawe was cleared to a depth of four feet; 25 percent was not cleared and remains unsafe.**

grueling, hot work. Neff tells us that Peleke Flores, a master mason from Kaua'i, plans to finish the mua overnight "On the winter solstice—the shortest day, but the longest night. He'll bring forty stone setters and work from sunset to sunrise—just like the menehune!"

I have heard stories of how the menehune—a legendary race of small-statured people—built rock walls and fishponds overnight. I look over to our pile, which has disappeared after only an hour's labor. Maybe it's possible.

Our next stop is a sober one: Sailor's Hat, a man-made pool full of pale blue brackish water. In 1965, the Navy detonated 1,500 tons of TNT to simulate a nuclear bomb. Operation Sailor Hat blasted a fifty-foot-deep crater into the coastline. More devastatingly, it cracked the aquifer, allowing saltwater to seep in and compromise the island's supply of freshwater. "This is the opposite of aloha 'āina," Scanlan says. Along the crater's edge, tufts of lichen grow on rocks melted by the blast. Two species of 'ōpae 'ula, endemic shrimp, now inhabit the pool. Even after abomination, life persists.

Back at camp, we dine on pork and cabbage, rice, quinoa salad and cheesecake. The kitchen once cranked out meals for military personnel; now it keeps KIRC staff and volunteers well fed. Sharing reflections on the day, Pi'iohia expresses his appreciation for how eager everyone was to carry rocks at the mua. Nāhuewai mentions how many times the word "dream" came up. Young observes how 'ula (red) the island is—stripped bare to its bones. "Kua 'ula," red-backed, he says. "That could be a theme," says Miner. "Red also represents sacred leadership, of being called to lead with aloha and connection to 'āina" Riffing off this metaphor, they begin chanting verses.

I ask Neff about his first visit to Kaho'olawe back in the 1980s. "I was still in college, kind of a punk," he says. "You know, you get one Hawaiian flag sticker on the back of your car and think you Hawaiian? After I came here and had the full experience, I cried all the way back to Maui. I just knew that something had changed my life." He chokes up when naming mentors who have passed. "Uncle Emmett, Harry Mitchell, Les Kuloloio, Collette Machado ... in those days the massive pillars of the Hawaiian community were here on island." At Hakioawa, they could simply be Hawaiian without any distraction. They slept outdoors, cooked in an imu (underground oven) and stayed up into the night playing music, dancing hula and feeling the same winds their ancestors felt. This privilege came at cost. Says Neff, "George and Kimo gave their lives so that people could come here."

He's referring to two young men who disappeared in March 1977. George Helm Jr. was a charismatic leader from Moloka'i with a beautiful falsetto voice. He and Kimo Mitchell, a Maui park ranger and experienced waterman, set out on a rescue mission. Two 'Ohana members had been occupying the island for a month; Helm was worried for their safety. Unbeknownst to him, the military had already apprehended them. Helm and Mitchell searched the island in vain, then waited for the boat scheduled to retrieve them. It never came. They attempted to paddle back to Maui on a single surfboard and were never seen again. Their boat was later discovered sunk, its bilge plugs pulled.

Before Helm disappeared, he and Aluli had filed the lawsuit that ultimately compelled the Navy to conduct an environmental impact study and sign a consent decree with PKO. Starting in 1980, the 'Ohana was granted monthly access to conduct religious and cultural practices. Neff remembers having to perform ceremonies while military personnel stood by, chatting over their radios. "Not that I thank the military," he says, "but it helped us to be strong, to focus on what we were doing."

The bombing continued for another ten years. During that time, Harry Mitchell Sr.—Kimo's father—composed "Mele Kaho'olawe," which served as an anthem for the 'Ohana. "Uncle Harry had the vision," says Neff. "Towards the end of the song is 'nāpua lanakila o Kaho'olawe.' The pua, the young, eventually will lanakila—triumph. All of those words have come true."

I head off to bed, while Nāhuewai serenades the band with a melodica solo. They are working out verses to a new anthem: "We can rebuild our home ... hand by hand, stone by stone." They finish the song before going to sleep.

**At four a.m. the next morning,** the crushed cobalt sky is studded with stars so numerous and bright it's plain why the ancients looked upward for direction. A brilliant halo circles the moon—another hō'ailona to start our day. We pile into the ATVs and head upland, bumping and lurching on the dirt road past "DANGER: UNEXPLODED ORDNANCE" signs. A pueo—the

RIGHT / **Sitting within the circle of the Kuhikoʻe star compass, Neff shares moʻolelo (stories) of the canoes that sailed here via Kealaikahiki, the legendary "path to Kahiki," a.k.a. Tahiti.**

Hawaiian short-eared owl—silently wings above our caravan.

Sunbeams begin to wrap around Haleakalā on Maui, revealing the close relationship between the two islands. One lies in the other's shadow. At 1,483 feet, Kaho'olawe's summit isn't high enough to catch clouds, so it relies on its towering neighbor, Haleakalā, to collect and share moisture. Back when both islands had thriving native forests, Hawaiians sang of the nāulu cloud that moved between them. Two centuries of ranching and bombing broke this natural cycle. Conservation biologists and Native Hawaiians believe it can be restored—though their approaches sometimes differ.

Historically, Hawaiians honored Lono, the god of agriculture, fertility and peace, during a four-month winter season. Makahiki was a time to rest, give thanks for nourishing rains and petition Lono for abundance. The beginning and end of the season were marked by processions around each Hawaiian Island, during which people offered gifts of wai, 'awa (kava) and 'ulu (breadfruit) to the priests of Lono. After Christianity became established in the 1800s, people stopped petitioning Lono. In 1982, the 'Ohana conducted the first Makahiki procession in modern times, on Kaho'olawe. According to founding member Davianna McGregor, the 'Ohana's greatest accomplishment wasn't reclaiming the island, it was reviving Hawaiian spiritual practices.

Our caravan stops at Ka Ipu a Kāne. The small stone tower is one of three rain ko'a (altars) constructed in modern times. Each corresponds to a similar ko'a on Maui or Lāna'i. In times past, Hawaiian priests would activate ko'a to send rain where it was needed, from one island to another.

Neff and the musicians change into ceremonial clothing: white muslin kīhei (capes) and malo (loincloths). They approach the altar barefoot, wind whipping through their loosened hair. Together they chant "E ala e," a prayer to welcome the rising sun. Each person has brought an offering of wai from their home. Keala, who has trained as a priest of Lono, accepts the offerings in turn. As he pours the water onto the altar, it becomes a rippling silver cord, connecting each person's community to this place. Squalls on the horizon draw closer. And then it begins to rain: fat drops plash onto the dry hardpan.

Miner sings the first verse of their new song. Pi'iohia fetches the 'ukulele, and all eight voices swell in harmony. Neff watches in admiration, then joins in to sing "Mele Kaho'olawe." "For the kūpuna of Hakioawa," Neff shouts. "They watching!"

**We head to Lelehune for breakfast,** where the KIRC crew is waiting. In the shelter of a little shed they've set up a hot buffet. "Welcome to the Four Seasons," Paul Higashino jokes. The wiry and irreverent 71-year-old is Kaho'olawe's closest approximation of a permanent resident. He first came to the island in 1978 to conduct botanical surveys for the Navy. After volunteering with the 'Ohana in the 1980s, he took a job managing the island's ecological restoration. He's been with KIRC since its inception.

Studies from initial restoration efforts showed that Kaho'olawe lost nearly 1.9 million tons of soil to erosion each year. The island was literally blowing away in the wind. Higashino, a self-proclaimed "moisture farmer," has spent his career trying to coax life out of the hardpan. He's tried just about everything with the limited available resources, shoring up plantings with hay bales, cardboard and even dinner plates.

He's seen gains. On the sunbaked summit, hardy 'a'ali'i bushes have taken root. A rare hinahina flower grows within their protection. A wiliwili tree stands in the lee of the shed. Its massive, gnarled trunk crouches close to the ground, but its limbs hold up fiery orange blossoms. This elder has weathered many storms.

Keala says that he saw a family of 'apapane, crimson Hawaiian honeycreepers, here last May. At age 27, he's the youngest among our group, but speaks with gentle authority. He first came to Kaho'olawe as a child and grew up immersed in Native traditions that were suppressed during his parents' and grandparents' time. "That's not lost on me," he admits. "It's hard to feel worthy,

ABOVE / **Left to right: Pi'iohia, Nāhuewai, Kiliona Young and Scanlan add their voices to those of the Hawaiian activists who risked their lives to occupy Kaho'olawe fifty years ago.**

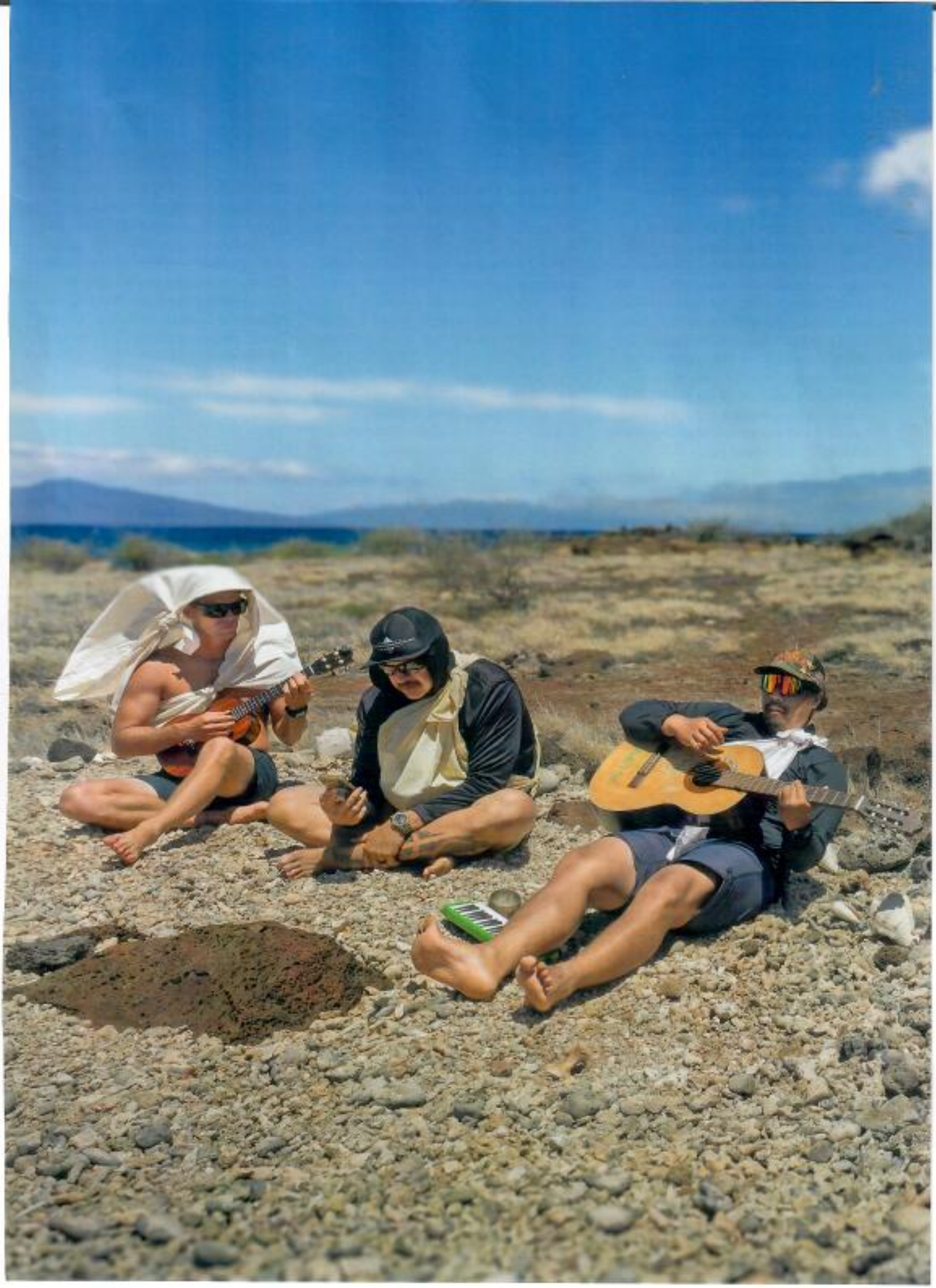
FACING PAGE / **Inspired by the mana (spiritual power) of Kaho'olawe's cultural sites, Pi'iohia, Seto and Nāhuewai (seen left to right) record a new track onsite.**

but I have to be. I owe my life to PKO. Everything I'm interested in, my job at the university—it's all because of the magic that happened in the 1970s."

He describes the exhaustion and euphoria he felt while carrying the ki'i (image) of Lono during the Makahiki procession—a twenty-one-mile trek from Hakioawa to the opposite shore. The annual procession stops at our next site: Moaula'iki, the knobby peak shaped like a dorsal fin on Kaho'olawe's spine. "This summit was a natural target for the Navy," says Keala. "It couldn't be desecrated by bombs—even though they tried. The mana of our kūpuna shielded this place."

Neff tells us it's best to ascend the narrow ridge barefoot. I step carefully past jagged rocks carpeted in reddish-orange lichen. At the top I gasp at the unexpectedly vast view. Most of the archipelago—Maui, Lāna'i, Moloka'i, Hawai'i Island and even O'ahu—can be seen from here on clear days. The islands overlap like folios, the channels between them defined, as if drawn on an atlas.

Miner sits on a natural stone seat: the famed navigator's chair. Generations of sailors came here to study the winds, currents and stars. When the Micronesian master navigator Mau Piailug visited in 2004, he recognized this site from



dreams and conversations with ancestors. He reminded his fellow navigators that Kaho'olawe is the piko, or center, of the Hawaiian archipelago, and declared that all Hawai'i voyages should begin and end here.

We continue on to Pōkāneloa, a huge stone perched over a gulch with small holes chiseled into its face. Kanahele studied the shadows that fell on this stone during various equinoxes and times of day and determined that Pōkāneloa is a sophisticated sundial. When the sun reaches a certain point above the horizon, it begins to bend due to the curvature of the Earth. The Hawaiian term for this phenomenon is ke'eke'e, and the stone's markings make it visible to the naked eye.

Neff explains this esoteric process as best as he can—but stops when LaBenz points upward. Directly above Neff's head, a colorful halo encircles the sun. Neff laughs. "Beam me up! I ready!" He uncaps his flask of 'awa, pours milky liquid into each carved hole and ushers us back onto the road.

Our final site of the day is more material than metaphysical. "Pu'u Mōiwi was the island's economic engine," says Keala. We climb up through scrubby kiawe (mesquite) trees to the adze quarry, where red flakes of basalt lie strewn on the sand—as if the carvers who chipped them left only moments ago. For millennia, the adze was the most important tool in the Pacific, used to shape canoes, household goods and weapons. The basalt at Pu'u Mōiwi is high in iron oxide, producing its reddish hue. The adzes made here were light red, sleek as obsidian and very hard. Coveted as trade gifts, they have been found as far as the Tuamotus and, Keala says, Peru.

"I've never visited so many sacred spots in one day," Neff says after we return to camp. The musicians are inspired and busy composing a second song. "There is a dream ... Moaula'iki ... 'apapane singing so sweetly. ... The seven seas surround me. ...We are living their dream, it's our reality."

**On our final day,** we travel along the southwest coast to Kealaikahiki: the path to Tahiti. Two rock pillars point the way out to sea. When Piailug said all voyages should begin and end on Kaho'olawe, he meant here, on this particular point. Four channels converge here into a single sea road flowing south, straight to Kahiki (Tahiti), the Hawaiians' ancestral homeland. In 2011, the Tahitian crew aboard *Fa'afaite* followed Piailug's instruction and sailed their double-hulled canoe here from Tahiti. "They came and collected their ancestors," says Neff. "They said they felt a weight lifted from centuries."

Yet another rainbow appears above Neff's head, even though the sky shows no sign of rain. Magical things happen so frequently here, it's enough to make you believe in the old gods.

We continue along the coast to the star compass at Kuhike'e. Bleached conch shells mark the cardinal directions on a large platform of white coral and black lava rocks. We sit within the circle and drink cups of honey-sweetened 'awa. The midday heat intensifies as the sun seems to pause in its arc. The musicians take no notice, enraptured by the mana of this place. Sharing another round of 'awa, they compose a love song. "I want to taste your waters," Scanlan sings. Miner answers: "E lei nāulu i ku'u poli." The lei of nāulu rain fills my heart. The others laugh and build on the innuendo comparing parched Kaho'olawe and the rapturous rain cloud to lovers. Well on their way to completing an album, they'll record these songs back home.

We eat lunch at Kaukakapapa Beach. LaBenz strums the 'ukulele while we float like seals in a tidepool. Across the road, a recent wildfire scorched what was Hawai'i's largest grove of ma'o (Hawaiian cotton) trees. Higashino packed a bag of ma'o seeds along with our lunch; Miner and I scatter handfuls as we return to camp. It's hard to imagine that they will take root and thrive in this blackened ground. And yet, who would have imagined that the US military would surrender a strategic training ground? Or that Lono would be resurrected?

That night, Neff surprises us with the "Lucky Number Game." We each draw a number and as he calls the numbers out, he tosses the lucky recipient a T-shirt or sticker that he screen-printed at Hawaiian Force, his shop in Hilo. Then he shares his personal recipe for change. "The Five Ps are pule [prayer], protest, politics, persistence and punch 'em," he says. "You always gotta start with prayer. And sometimes, you just gotta punch 'em. Do something big and unexpected, like when they first occupied this island."

Before we board the *'Ōhua* the next morning, we chant a prayer asking Kanaloa to release us. "'O 'awe-kue o kai uli ... pointing tentacle of the deep sea ... release me from my obligation as your guest." But the truth is, once you have felt the warmth of Kaho'olawe, you don't want to be released. **hh**

FACING PAGE / **Singing new life into ancient rites on Kaho'olawe: Seto, Young and Nāhuewai (seen left to right) welcome the rising sun with the pū and bamboo flute.**

# Contents

V29 N°1
FEBRUARY - MARCH 2026


## ISLAND INTELLIGENCE



## DEPARTMENTS & FEATURES