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Dennis Kamakahi, 61, Hawaiian Guitarist and Composer, Dies

By NATE CHINEN MAY 1, 2014

Dennis Kamakahi, a prolific Hawaiian songwriter, an influential slack-key guitarist and a central figure in the 1970s cultural movement known as the Hawaiian renaissance, died on Monday in Honolulu. He was 61.

The cause was lung cancer, his wife, Robin, said.

With his music, Mr. Kamakahi (pronounced KAH-mah-KAH-hee) formed a bridge between ancient and modern cultures. He paid frequent tribute to previous generations of Hawaiian songwriters, and his own songs have strong echoes of the cadence and narrative of traditional hula chants, along with pop harmony and inflection.

Of the roughly 500 songs that he composed, many have become beloved Hawaiian standards, including “Wahine ‘Ilikea,” “Pua Hone,” “Koke‘e” and “E Hihiwai.” Mr. Kamakahi was a virtuoso of the ki ho‘alu guitar tradition, with its distinctive fingerpicking and open-tuning patterns. Now popularly known as slack-key, the style emerged in the 19th century, developed by native Hawaiians on guitars left by visiting Mexican vaqueros. Mr. Kamakahi was one of its popular ambassadors, often touring the world with just his guitar and his songs, delivered in a warm, avuncular baritone that occasionally shifted into a buttery falsetto.

Each of his three Grammy Awards, in the since-discontinued Hawaiian music category, was for his part in a slack-key compilation album. With his son David, a singer and ukulele player, he also appeared on the soundtrack of the Alexander Payne film “The Descendants,” which starred George Clooney.

In 2009 Mr. Kamakahi won a lifetime achievement honor from the Hawai‘i Academy of Recording Arts. Last year the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History added one of his guitars to its collection, along with an array of albums, photographs and sheet music.

Dennis David Kahekilimamaoikalanikeha Kamakahi was born on March 31, 1953, in Honolulu. (His Hawaiian middle name means “the distant thunder in the highest heavens.”) His paternal grandfather played guitar in the slack-key style, and so did his father, Kenneth Franklyn Kamakahi, a first-chair trombonist in the Royal Hawaiian Band. Mr. Kamakahi’s first instrument was the ukulele, which he picked up at age 3. He switched to guitar at 10 and played trombone in middle school.

As a freshman at Kamehameha Schools, he formed a group called Na Paniolo with two classmates: Aaron Mahi, who later became a conductor of the Honolulu Symphony, and Kalena Silva, now an ethnomusicologist and professor of Hawaiian language. This was near the beginning of the Hawaiian renaissance, a grass-roots reclamation of native culture and language, which were seen as gravely endangered.

At 19 Mr. Kamakahi was invited by the ukulele player Eddie Kamae to join the Sons of Hawai‘i, the musical group most indelibly associated with the Hawaiian renaissance, filling the spot vacated by the slack-key master Gabby Pahinui, who left to pursue a solo career. Thrust into the spotlight, Mr. Kamakahi thrived not only as a guitarist and singer but also as a budding songwriter.

Dedicating himself to writing primarily in the Hawaiian language, he apprenticed with one of its chief scholars, Mary Kawena Pukui. “What she explained to me was, write about your time,” he said in 2009. “There’s a lot of songwriters, they don’t write about what’s happening today.”

Mr. Kamakahi composed some songs of historical scope, but he mainly wrote from his own experience, in lyrics rich with metaphor. Though unmistakably Hawaiian in character, his songs were often infused with elements of the blues or various kinds of folk music. He often said that when he wrote the melody for “Pua Hone” (“Honey Flower”), a love song for his wife, he imagined the keening trill of bagpipes.

In addition to his wife and his son David, he is survived by his mother, the former Clara Aweau Ing; another son, James; a daughter, Marlene Kamakahi; a brother, Jeffrey; and two grandchildren.

Mr. Kamakahi was also an ordained Episcopal minister, and though he

didn't formally serve a congregation, he often wore clerical vestments. His main commitment was always to the legacy of the Hawaiian renaissance, taking pains to differentiate its cultural mission from some of the political activism that arose in its wake, including the state sovereignty movement.

“When people talk about sovereignty,” he said in 2009, “our music is our sovereignty. Because nobody tells us how to play our music. We know how to play our music because we learned from our kupuna, our teachers. Our music has always been here, our dance has always been here. But it just had to awaken.”

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