



A modern re-creation of the original "Kealakai extra large model" Martin built for Major Kealakai built by luthier Tracy Cox behind one of the original 1934 Martin 00-42 guitars purchased by the Royal Hawaiian Band. The recreation fo the Kealakai model was commissioned by Martin historian and archivist Greig Hutton. The guitar was essentially a 12-fret 0000 with a dreadnought-style depth and an aftermarket bridge built by Alexander Lono Munson. Photographs by Richard Heirakuji



A ROYAL QUARTET

*Charting the Martin guitars
that left the mainland*

BY KILIN REECE



On the morning of July 27, 1934, more than 60,000 people crowded on the sun-drenched docks and piers around Honolulu Harbor, eager to catch a glimpse of the first sitting president of the United States ever to visit the islands of Hawaii. The Royal Hawaiian Band—40 members strong—stretched out among the gathered citizens, wearing their starched white uniforms and carrying sparkling new brass instruments, ready to greet the president with the music of Hawaii. As the band began the immortal strains of “Aloha ‘Oe,” the crowd burst into cheers and applause at a gesture by Franklin Delano Roosevelt that was missed by few: Standing upon the gun deck of the *USS Houston*, Roosevelt removed his hat and placed it over his heart, standing at attention as the jubilant crowd joined in singing Hawaii’s best-loved song, composed almost 60 years earlier by Hawaii’s last reigning monarch, Queen Lydia Lili‘uokalani.

Later that evening, under the halo of the Honolulu summer moon, Princess Abigail Kawananakoa entertained more than 200 guests at a grand luau in honor of the president’s arrival. With the scent of plumeria, pikake and tuberose blossoms in the air, the String Ensemble of the Royal Hawaiian Band assembled on the veranda of Washington Place,

Queen Lili‘uokalani’s former home, tuning up and gently strumming in preparation for the night’s festivities.

The four guitarists marveled at the tones coming from their new matched quartet of Martin guitars, with Adirondack spruce tops trimmed in white mother-of-pearl shell and bound in grained ivoroid, gently braced over spiderweb-figured Brazilian rosewood backs and sides. Filling out the String Ensemble were four Martin ukuleles, two violins, a double set of upright basses and two singers, Lizzie Alohikea and Lena Machado, known as “Hawaii’s Songbird.” Less than one month earlier this royal quartet of Martin guitars was 5,000 miles to the east getting their final setup in Martin’s Pennsylvania workshop, before they were to head west by train and steamer to the Metropolis of the Mid-Pacific and their new home at the center of America’s longest-running and most influential string band ensemble.

If you had told C.F. Martin that, 100 years after his arrival in New York City, his family’s instruments would be played by the royal band of the only sovereign kingdom ever to fall under the banner of his new country, he likely would have grinned but would not have been surprised. Martin had seen his mentor, Viennese master guitar-builder Johann Georg Stauffer, pursue the coveted position of court luthier in 1827, while he’d been working as a foreman in Stauffer’s Vienna workshop. Royal patronage of the musical arts and lutherie was a strong tradition in most European courts, as the arts were considered the height of noble culture and sophistication. A royal commission meant the luthier need spare no luxury in the execution of design: extra purfling of abalone or mother-of-pearl, inlaid floral motifs, premium rare woods and elaborately inlaid tuning keys adorn many of the most historic royally commissioned instruments. To build for kings and queens allowed luthiers the luxury of embellishment with no bounds.

In the fall of 1833, Christian Frederick Martin arrived in the port city of New York with his young family and a trunk of hand tools, where he set up shop on the Lower West Side of Manhattan. Finally free of the stifling guild system in his native Germany—which insisted that a lowly second-generation member of the cabinet-makers guild had no business aspiring to the refined perfection of stringed instrument craftsman—Martin hit the streets of New York City running, taking full advantage of his newfound freedom to build instruments the way he imagined they could be built. Running a repair shop, music



A picture of Ernest Ka'ai's Hawaiian Troubadours. Musician Alexander Lono Munson, on the left in the back row, built not only the unique bridge on the teardrop-shaped guitar, but also the guitar itself, a Hawaiian hybridization of Portuguese style guitars and American flattops. He was also responsible for the unique bridge found on Kealakai's Martin. Photograph courtesy the Bishop Museum archives.

Right: One requirement the Royal Hawaiian Band had in their 1934 order with Martin Guitars was a custom endblock that stated "Property Royal Hawaiian Band, T.H." TH of course meant Territory of Hawaii, a designation found on many items in Hawaii until 1959, when it became the 50th state. Photograph by Richard Heirakuji





Miriam Leilani with the Royal Hawaiian Band String Ensemble and their Royal Quartet live at the Kapiolani Park bandstand, Honolulu, circa 1943. During WWII, the band was prohibited from performing at night due to curfew regulations instituted under island-wide martial law. Courtesy the Friends of the Royal Hawaiian Band Archives

store, in-house production operation and custom shop, he sourced his Honduran mahogany, Spanish cedar, Brazilian rosewood and African ebony from the diversity of New York's bustling docks, while strategically centering himself in the musical community. The Martin family slept and woke surrounded by the sounds and smells of the luthier's workshop—from the rhythm and pulse of handsaws and scraper blades to the scent of hot hide glue and spirit varnish. With the constant traffic of customers stopping in to buy everything from violin strings, new and used instruments, cases, and of course, Martin's increasingly popular flattop acoustic guitars, word quickly spread throughout the city and up and down the East Coast that Martin's instruments were the best that money could buy. They gained

the endorsement of the first generation of touring guitar soloists at a time when America was ready for an instrument of its own—an acoustic chariot for a fast-forming national identity of a people on the move.

A little more than a decade before Martin arrived in New York City, the Hawaiian Islands had begun to show up on mainland America's economic radar. With whale populations dwindling in the Atlantic and news of largely unexploited mid-Pacific whaling grounds reaching the States, Hawaii's ports were soon overrun by a seemingly endless influx of newcomers. Close on the whalers' keels, New England missionaries arrived in an island kingdom that had been primed for conversion to Christianity. The native religion—the Kapu system—had been abol-



Stowed among bibles, liquor, hardtack and contraband, strings tautly stretched over bone and timber in black wooden coffin cases, C.F. Martin's guitars found themselves chasing the sun, sail and sea ever westward.

ished by royal decree in 1819, just a year before the first Protestant missionaries arrived from Boston in 1820. While the missionary and the sailor found themselves at odds over many things, they did share a love for song and strings, and by the 1830s and '40s, arrivals from mainland America brought an incredible variety of stringed instruments, including the prized Martin guitar. Stowed among bibles, liquor, hardtack and contraband, strings tautly stretched over bone and timber in black wooden coffin cases, C.F. Martin's guitars found themselves chasing the sun, sail and sea ever westward.

Visitors to the kingdom of Hawaii in the second half of the 1800s were met by the complex and distinct sounds of traditional Hawaiian musical styles, but were also likely to be serenaded by Italian mandolins, Austrian zithers, German and Italian violins, cellos and upright basses, Spanish guitars, Japanese shamisens and African-American five-string banjos. Portuguese immigrants by way of the island of Madeira had brought the small four- and five-string *raião* and *machete*, and before long island furniture-makers-turned-luthiers began a ceaseless cross-breeding of stringed instruments, leading in a few short years to the royally endorsed symbol of Hawaiian pride—the *koa ukulele* and *taropatch fiddle*. Honolulu Harbor, located directly in front of the Iolani Palace, was the intersection of trade routes north, south, east and west, and every group passing through or hoping to stay brought with it its own rich instrumental and musical culture. String musicians from monarchs to harbor-side minstrels pulled from all these international string traditions, weaving a musical fabric that, by the time it hit mainland American ears, was simultaneously familiar and unlike anything heard before.

Few string-loving monarchs had as great an impact on the evolution of popular American string tradi-

tions as the Kalakaua dynasty of the Hawaiian Kingdom. The *Na Lani Eha* (“Heavenly Four”)—siblings King David Kalakaua, Princess (and future Queen) Lydia Lili'uokalani, Prince William Pitt Leileohoku and Princess Miriam Likelike—were all prolific composers and multi-instrumentalists, documenting in song their personal lives as well as the turbulent life and times of their people and kingdom. The string-backed singing groups, or “glee clubs,” of these monarchs provided mutual entertainment as well as friendly competition between siblings, and in time gave birth to the string band style that swept first Hawaii and then the world.

The Royal Hawaiian Band, founded in 1836 by King Kamehameha III, reached its peak by 1872 under the leadership of a Prussian military band leader named Henri Berger, who was appointed to full-time leader by David Kalakaua. Berger introduced rigid training in the Western classical tradition to generations of island musicians and is credited with documenting the vast and rich musical styles of Hawaii. In January 1893, the rulers of the sovereign kingdom of Hawaii were usurped by a band of settler industrialists backed by a rogue faction of the United States military. When the self-proclaimed provisional government demanded that all government employees sign an oath of allegiance denouncing the monarchy, the majority of the Royal Hawaiian Band, made up of native Hawaiians loyal to the queen, quit in protest.

They re-formed, calling themselves *Ka Bana Lahui* (the Hawaii National Band), and began a railroad tour of the continental United States, spreading the music and message of a kingdom at arms. The Hawaii National Band had added a feature to their performances that made them unique among the thousands of military-style brass bands spread across the United States: Featured in their concerts was the fiery string band sound of *Na Lani Eha's*

musical children, interjecting their high energy version of the kingdom's string music between their popular brass repertoire. Armed with their koa uku-
lele, flattop steel string guitars, violins, flutes, ban-
jos, mandolins and a 40-member-strong singing
chorus, the Hawaiian Band sailed across the main-
land's musical consciousness, introducing the heart-
land of America to the sounds, melodies and
rhythms that would come to shape the next century
of popular American music.

As the majestic voice of Hawaii's Songbird soared over the waves of ukulele, guitar, violin and double bass that summer night in 1934, the president fell under the spell of Royal Hawaiian strings. He shared the dinner table with a humble older gentleman and former Royal Hawaiian Band leader, Major Kealakai, known in retirement affectionately as "Professor." Kealakai sat in the company of the president, listening to a style of music that had taken shape in his hands over the last 50 years. He heard the String Ensemble perform one of his most recent compositions, "Makuahine O Ka Lahui" ("Mother of the Nation"), written in tribute earlier that year not to the president, but instead to his wife, Eleanor.

Major Kealakai was born October 15, 1867, named in honor of his father's rank of sergeant major in the King's Royal Guard. By 1934, his life had spanned four Hawaiian monarchs, the overthrow of the crown, U.S. annexation, WWI, the Jazz Age, the Great Depression and the inventions of the phonograph, film, radio and television. Kealakai had become a child prodigy under the guidance of Henri Berger, who was teaching at the boys' reformatory school where Kealakai had been sent at age 12 for, in his own words, "playing truant" from school. The music-filled harborside docks and nearby hills of Honolulu's Nu'uaniu Valley were an irresistible temptation for the young rascal.

Upon graduation from the reform school in 1882, Mekia (Hawaiian for Major), an accomplished multi-instrumentalist and budding composer able to produce lyrics and melodies upon request, found himself lending his songwriting skills to both Lili'uokalani and King David Kalakaua, as well as playing full time with Berger's Royal Hawaiian Band. When the king accompanied the band on an award-winning tour to San Francisco in 1883, 15-year-old Mekia got his first taste of life on the road, one he would come to live and travel on nonstop for the next 40 years. In 1901, at the age of 26, while leading the Hawaiian Glee Club (a combined band made up of Kalakaua and Lili'uokalani's best glee club players and singers), Kealakai was asked by John Philip

A sample of the extensive correspondence between Honolulu's Bergstrom Music Company and Martin Guitars in the first half of the 20th century.
Courtesy Martin Guitar Company Archives

Sousa to join his legendary brass band; Sousa pronounced him "the greatest flautist I have ever heard." Lifelong friends with the widely accepted inventor and synthesizer of the Hawaiian steel guitar, Joseph Kekuku, Mekia Kealakai had been at every major intersection in the evolution and spread of Hawaiian music to the world stage, and like Kekuku, he had chosen exclusively to play the flattop instruments of the Martin family everywhere he went.

In 1916, following the success of Hawaiian music at the 1915 Panama Pacific International Exhibition in San Francisco, Kealakai and his band relocated from California to Indianapolis, where they could easily reach the Midwest and East Coast to accommodate their tireless performance schedule. It was during this period, performing as the Kealakai Royal Hawaiian Sextette in a concert hall that a few months earlier had hosted Russian pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff, Major Kealakai met C.F. Martin III. Traveling on a break from his studies at Yale University, Martin was likely helping his father, Frank Henry, by making the rounds of the family's retail music store partners. Martin and Major struck up a conversation, Martin possibly commenting on Kealakai's small-bodied 0-30 model guitar with a unique customized, tropically inspired bridge, recently repaired at the Martin Company.

Considering the ever-increasing size of Major's audiences, a natural topic of conversation between luthier and performer would have been the volume and projection of Kealakai's acoustic guitar. Hawaiian string ensembles at the beginning of the 20th century were on the leading edge of acoustic guitar playing and design. Sextets like Mekia's band welcomed the opportunity to play to crowds of 300 or more listeners long before the aid of P.A. systems, pushing the boundaries of what was possible with the strength of wood, wire and muscle. Within a few months' time, Martin had completed a custom jumbo Kealakai model guitar, a half-inch larger than the biggest guitar Martin had made up to that time. The extra-large jumbo guitar in Mekia's able hands was an acoustic cannon capable of slinging notes across concert halls built for classical pianos. From the farthest stretch east to the farthest stretch west, Martin and Kealakai hammered out a guitar design born of hard travel across endless miles of sand,

BERGSTROM Music Co., Ltd.

WEBER AND STECK
DUO-ART REPRODUCING PIANOS
AEOLIAN PIANOLAS

HAWAIIAN DISTRIBUTORS
VICTOR TALKING MACHINES
UKULELES AND HAWAIIAN
MUSIC

1140-1142 FORT STREET
P. O. BOX 576
HONOLULU, HAWAII

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS
"BERGSTROM"

February 18, 1927.

RECEIVED MAR 7 - 1927

ANSWERED 11 - 8 - 11

C. F. Martin, & Company,
Nazareth, Penna.

Gentlemen:

We have your letter of January 26, with reference to securing an article gotten out by the Bishop Museum dealing with the origin of steel guitar playing in Hawaii. This, they claim they are selling for four dollars a copy, so before ordering we thought we would give you this information.

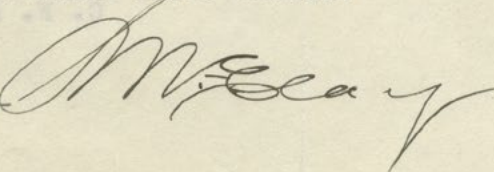
We have with us a Hawaiian by the name of Major Kealakai who was a boy and grew up with Joseph Kekuku mentioned in your letter. The straight guitar was then in use having been brought over by the Portugese and these boys first got the idea of playing a guitar in steel fashion by trying to imitate the actions of some German sailors off a German ship here at that time, about 1882. These men made up a bass violin out of a cracker box and a bass drum from an empty salmon barrell, and a narrow long box strung with two steel wires and a metal belaying pin run up and down and the strings strummed with the thumb. This latter instrument is what the boys tried to imitate on the guitar, first with a pen knife and another tired a file and Mr. Keakuku was the first to try a file. Mr. Keakuku is now in New York and has been for many years and possibly could give you a verification of this or his version of it if you could get in touch with him. You might be able to locate him through the National Vaudeville Artists' Association of New York.

(N.V.A. Club - 229 W. 46th)

Yours very truly,

BERGSTROM MUSIC COMPANY

By



McC-IGS

CHICAGO MUSICAL INSTRUMENT CO.
309 South Wabash Avenue :: Chicago, Illinois

THIS ORDER NUMBER MUST
APPEAR ON YOUR INVOICE
AND PACKAGES

PURCHASE ORDER

No 5537

C. F. Martin & Co.,
Nazareth, Pa.

Date 5/15/34

Kindly ship direct to Us
Send Invoice to Us

Quantity	Stock No.	MERCHANDISE
2 Pc	0-42	Martin Guitars
2 Pc	00-42	" 2

PLEASE RUSH

RECEIVED MAY 18 1934
ANSWERED
1232

Merchandise on this order for _____

ACKNOWLEDGE ORDER AND STATE WHEN YOU WILL SHIP.

AJ Form 213 SM Sets 5-33 C. P.

CHICAGO MUSICAL INSTRUMENT CO.
Per _____

The receipt for the Royal Hawaiian Band's four Martins, two 0-42s and two 00-42s. Even in the '30s, consumers were price conscious. Rather than purchase these guitars from long-standing Martin dealer Bergstrom Music Company, the ensemble ordered from a competitor, who purchased the guitars through distributor Chicago Musical Instrument Co. Courtesy Martin Guitar Company Archives

prairie, mountain and sea, essentially bookending the United States to create a guitar that in time would evolve into the dreadnought Martin.

Today, in a darkened basement corner of Honolulu's Iolani Palace, sits an aged wooden coffin case, lid resting open on a polished koa table. Peering through the window into the darkened room, one can make out the signature silhouette of a Spanish-style headstock and the unmistakable contours of a Martin parlor guitar trimmed in ivory. Royal Chamberlain Curtis Pi'ehu Iaukea served both Prince Leleiohoku and the "Merrie Monarch," King David

Kalakaua, in a remarkable career that spanned Hawaii's transition from kingdom to American territory. Like the monarchs under which he served, Iaukea took great pleasure in playing stringed instruments, and like many of his countrymen, selected a Martin guitar for purchase in 1887.

California newspapers from as early as 1866 had been advertising "Martin's Guitars," specifically targeting travelers to the Hawaiian Islands as well as citizens of Hawaii, one of the few international destinations for Martin instruments at the time. Several mercantile shops in Honolulu were proud to

announce Martin's instruments in stock by 1883. By 1896, a young organ-builder named James Bergstrom, originally from San Francisco, settled in Honolulu and opened the Bergstrom Music Company, the first official Martin dealership in Hawaii. Bergstrom had arrived a few years earlier, completing several major church organs in the kingdom, including the one he built at Oahu's oldest church (made entirely of hand-cut coral slabs weighing over 1,000 pounds each) across the street from the palace grounds, the Kawaiaha'ō Seminary. Bergstrom opened his storefront a few short blocks from the palace in the center of old Honolulu's downtown shopping district named for the Russian fort that once fronted the shoreline, the bustling Fort Street Mall.

Correspondence between The C.F. Martin Company and Bergstrom Music Company offers insight into the early stringed instrument trade. Martin instruments still regularly show up in the islands with the Bergstrom decal on the back of the headstock or occasionally boldly emblazoned on the top below the bridge. The Bergstrom Company is credited with being the first to ask the Martin Guitar Company to build copies of Hawaiian-made ukuleles as early as 1907, one of many landmark collaborations between the islands' music community and Martin. This partnership would lead to the first Martin guitars in regular production exclusively designed for steel strings and Hawaiian-style lap playing, made from Hawaii's prized native koa, with logs sourced for Martin by the Bergstrom Company from the Kona side of the Big Island.

In February of 1934, Bergstrom requested an estimate from the Martin Company for a recent Honolulu city- and county-approved purchase of a complete new set of instruments for the Royal Hawaiian Band, and in addition to brass and woodwinds, the band requested "4 Martin Guitars, 6 strings, finest quality, concert size, complete in leather cases... to be engraved 'Property Royal Hawaiian Band TH'." Being a city and county contract, the order was open to bids, and Thayer's Music, a Bergstrom competitor located directly across Fort Street Mall, entered into the fray.

Thayer's, however, not being an official Martin dealer, sent their request to the Chicago Music Company, one of Martin's largest mainland distributors. Large distribution houses often sold instruments at a discount to music stores unable to attain official dealer status—a practice dealers frowned on as it undercut their exclusive control of a region, but one that was nonetheless tolerated by Martin. The Chicago Music Company offered Thayer's Music a bid

for all the Royal Hawaiian Band's needs, including a top of the line Conn Brass section, and on May 18th Martin began work on two oo-size and two o-size guitars with pearl trim, Adirondack spruce tops, Brazilian rosewood back and sides complete with "Property Royal Hawaiian Band, TH" engraved in the ivoroid endstrip, as requested by the city and county contract. In a remarkable display of efficiency, Martin had the guitars on their way to Chicago in under two months from receiving the order. When the instruments arrived, Thayer's Music proudly displayed them in its Fort Street store windows and later for all to see at Honolulu's City Hall.

In March 1935, the String Ensemble of the Royal Hawaiian Band sat down in a Honolulu studio with a traveling Victor Record Company engineer to record 22 Hawaiian songs using instruments spanning hundreds of years of Hawaiian music. From traditional gourds used as percussion instruments in the arts of the sacred Hula to the ukulele and pearl-trimmed Royal Quartet of Martin guitars, the recordings feature songs composed by Mekia Kealakai as well as his Queen Lili'uokalani. These recordings capture a moment in Hawaiian music when the influence of the pioneering architects and veterans of Hawaii's string band tradition were still present in the islands' music community, as was the memory of their queen.

After traveling the world, Mekia Kealakai returned to lead the Royal Hawaiian Band in 1920, and immediately placed the band's focus on Hawaiian music and the string band sound of Na Lani Eha. Coming full circle in his retirement, he gave back to his beloved Hawaii by teaching music at the boys' reformatory school, and also at Bergstrom Music Company's Fort Street shop. One can imagine him at the end of a long day spent teaching ukulele and steel guitar, pulling a jumbo Martin from the showroom wall and sitting down to play a bit, the notes rolling out the door and reverberating through the brick-lined alleys of old Honolulu, across the palace grounds to the harborside docks, and out over the wide Pacific Ocean, a knowing and well-traveled grin likely spreading across the professor's proud and seasoned face. **FJ**

For more information, visit the author's website: krstrings.com. The Friends of the Royal Hawaiian Band, an organization dedicated to preserving and celebrating the history of the band and its many musicians, in 2014 established a scholarship fund in Mekia's name to support young island musicians desiring a career in the world of music. Donations can be made at royalhawaiianband.com.