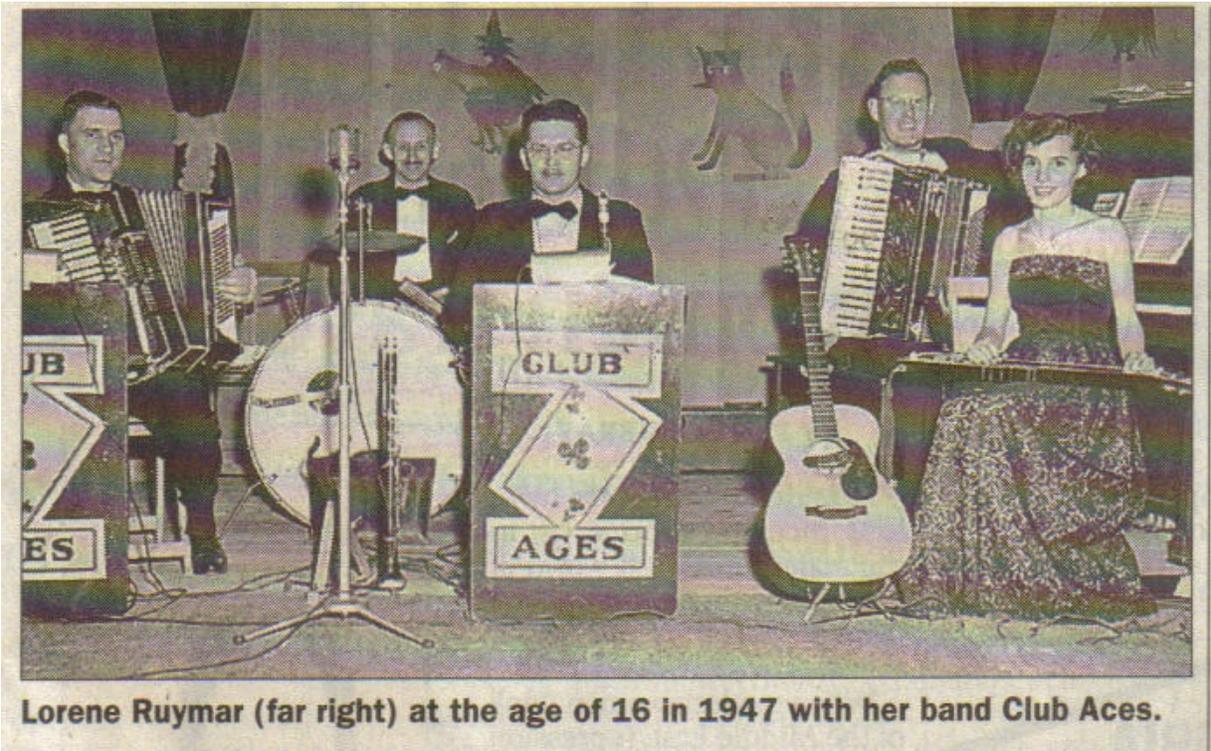


Slack is slick, but steel is the real deal

Reader has a bone to pick with The Sun's story on
Hawaii -- her favourite instrument was left out



LETTER TO TRAVEL

Lorene Ruymar
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Aloha, Linda:

I just read Ann Campbell's *The Real Hawaii* (Travel, Oct. 29) and I was happy to see someone report on the Islands in a non-touristy way, but there was one omission I just have to rant about.

It's the traditional music of Hawaii. She picked up beautifully on the ukulele and the slack key guitar (ki ho'alu), but she totally missed the most significant, the steel guitar (kika kila). If she spent any time on Kalakaua Ave., she'd have heard it playing every day of the week from 5 to 8 p.m. out under the banyan tree at the Sheraton Moana Hotel. Many other places too, of course.

The steel guitar is the only instrument of modern music invented in the U.S.A. and that was around 1889 in Hawaii.

Guitars came to Hawaii with the crews on trading ships, and with the Mexican cowboys (paniolos) who came to work the cattle ranches.

Hawaiians changed the tunings to straight major chords, called slack key tuning (ki ho'alu). Young Joseph Kekuku, born in 1874 in La'ie, Oahu, at age of 8 took to playing with the guitar flat on his knees, sliding a comb or a knife up and down the strings.

He continued to play that way and when he enrolled at Kamehameha School for Boys (a boarding school) the shop teacher helped him to build a solid cylinder steel bar to slide up and down the strings and a converter nut to raise the strings high off the fretboard, instead of the pencil he'd been using. Then he changed from gut to metal strings by using piano wire.

Joseph took it to mainland U.S. in 1904. He played and toured with big success, left for Europe in 1919, toured and played with a group, even in royal palaces. Married Adelaide, an Englishwoman. Returned to the U.S. in 1927 where he stayed, played, taught, wrote arrangements, never to return to his homeland.

Steel guitar maintained huge popularity in Hawaii and in most countries of the world until the Beatles and rock music took over. A few of us in remote places stayed true to playing it, and small special-interest clubs were formed here and there. I formed the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Association in 1985.

We grew to approximately 600 members in 18 different countries, and the club is now based in Hawaii.

There is a man in England who claims someone else invented the steel guitar, but I proved beyond a doubt that Joseph Kekuku is indeed the inventor. My book, *The Hawaiian Steel Guitar And Its Great Hawaiian Musicians*, came out in 1996, published by Centerstream Publishing, Anaheim Hills CA.

During research, I was able to learn where Joseph Kekuku is buried, next to his wife Adelaide in the cemetery of the little town of Dover, N.J. Someone there bought my book, checked the cemetery and had trouble finding the headstones. They were overgrown with prickly bushes.

With great enthusiasm the people of that little town got to work to clean up the gravesite and hold a huge celebration, the proceeds to go to building a suitable monument for this important man. The celebration took place Oct. 8 and 9 this year and my husband and I attended. The graveside ceremony had to be cancelled because of bad weather, but the show was held at the majestic Baker Theater.

Back home in Vancouver I got phone call from CBC radio. They asked me how I first heard of the steel guitar and I told them of growing up on a very remote farm in Saskatchewan, 14 miles from Earl Grey and 17 miles from Strasbourg.

In the cold, cold winters mum knew how to set the radio dials to catch radio waves coming up from the south, from Council Bluffs Iowa, where a beautiful steel guitar could be heard. She was in heaven listening. I saw the look on her face, and I was in heaven too.

Then mum heard of a teacher at a near-by school who could give lessons. She ordered a wooden six-string steel guitar complete with steel bar and picks for \$7 from the Eaton's catalogue. Took veggies from the garden for payment. She and my older sister went in for the lessons; I was told I was too small, I had to play on the swings with my two littler sisters.

Heck, I was four years old! That wasn't fair! I hung over them as they practised and grabbed the guitar when they let go of it. Lessons followed, and by 16 I was playing in a dance band, the men in tuxedos, I in strapless gowns.

In 1953 I moved to Vancouver, got married, got a teacher's degree at UBC, had two kids, no time between teaching and family for my steel guitar until recent years. And now, if you read the opening paragraphs again, you see I jumped into a whirlwind that hasn't stopped whirling.

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