

# Ka'apana is first-rate collaborator

'I can play with anyone just by listening,' he says

## CONCERT PREVIEW

### Led Ka'apana

**When and where:** Sessions stages today through Sunday; concert on stage 7 at 5 p.m. Sunday

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Impromptu music-making between newly acquainted musicians can be a real highlight of the folk festival. Keeping that in mind, Hawaii's Led Ka'apana is a player to watch when he makes his debut at this year's event.

At 55, he's a master of Hawaiian slack-key guitar, one of the more unique guitar styles in world music. But Ka'apana's interest in other genres, his gift for improvisation, awesome technique, agile voice, and spirit of good fun make him a first-rate collaborator.

"You have to play from within yourself," he says. "I wasn't taught to read music but I can play with anyone just by listening. In a second I'll be right there playing with them. It's all about feeling."

What is slack-key guitar? Without getting too technical, it's a finger-picking style with its own specific tunings, lots of open strings, with the thumb playing a bass line as the other fingers take over the melody and improvisation. Musicologists believe it was brought to the Hawaiian Islands in the 1830s by Spanish and Mexican cowboys and then adapted to suit Hawaiian singing styles. A solo slack-key player can have the effect of sounding like two or three regular guitarists.

Ka'apana grew up in a village on



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Led Ka'apana is a master of the Hawaiian slack-key guitar-playing method and has a gift for improvisation.

the big island of Hawaii. He recalls music was always central to daily life.

"Where I was brought up, we had no electricity, no television, no nothing, so entertainment was always music, guitars, singing and dancing. I never thought this would be a career until people asked me to play outside in nightclubs."

It's been 40 years now since he first performed professionally. By the late 1960s, he was playing clubs regularly. In 1972, he made his recording debut and toured off the islands for the first time, going to California. At last count he's made 72 albums, the most prominent on George Winston's

Dancing Cat label, including several with guitarist Bob Brozman.

Apart from the slack-key lessons handed down through his family, Ka'apana credits his meetings with Jerry Douglas and Tal Farlow as lasting influences. He's a fan of country, jazz and blues, and has been asked to open for the likes of Bob Dylan and Alison Krauss (another artist he's recorded with).

### Worldbeat at the festival

Various artists from West Africa make up the largest part of the world music contingent at this year's folk festival. One highlight promises to be Guinea's pioneering dance group Bembeya Jazz with their mix of guitars, horns,

percussion and singing. Guitarist-singer Djelimady Toukara taps the trance-inducing rhythms from his native Mali to spell-binding effect, while Senegal's Pape & Cheikh bring a fresh twist to their own traditional sounds.

From Europe, there's the new queen of fado music, Portugal's gifted singer Mariza, while Italian accordionist Filippo Gambetta brings varied Mediterranean musical streams together. The Cuban group Valle Son take their cue from the traditional song-based *son* style. Finally, singer Kiran Ahluwalia is one of the finest Canadian-based Asian artists to tap the classical and folk styles of India and Persia.