

HSGA QUARTERLY

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Summer 2021



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A nice shot of Jerry Byrd with Bobby Black (left) and a bandmate during Bobby's circa 2000 tour of the Islands with the Kapalakiko Hawaiian Band. Bobby closes the Friday portion of Virtual Festival 2, and a video of Jerry's 1988 Joliet performance caps the Saturday program.

HSGA Virtual Festival 2—October 8-9

By Roberto Alaniz

In the movie industry, it is not unusual to hear that a sequel to a hit movie is not as good as the first one. Not true in the case of our second virtual festival (VF2) scheduled for Friday and Saturday, October 8 and 9, 2021. Members who submitted videos for this round have really "stepped it up" for our viewers.

We are honored to feature Bobby Black as our featured guest artist. Bobby's professional music career as a steel guitarist has spanned 70 years, and his playing style is as smooth as silk. (See the article by John Ely on page 10).

Gerri Valdriz, our featured guest artist from the First Virtual Festival, makes a return appearance direct from his Maui backyard (what a view!). Down the road from Geri, Al Nip and Maui Jam provide us with another fine set of Hawaiian music.

Once again, our Japan chapter is strongly represented with performances by nine HSGA members, including Lion Kobayashi and several of his students and protégés. Member performers from Canada, Sweden, Switzerland and the USA round out the program with fine performances. We are also featuring performances by two of our HSGA scholarship recipients

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HSGA QUARTERLY

Volume 37, Issue 143



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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The Hawaiian Steel Guitar Association is a tax-exempt, nonprofit educational corporation in the State of Hawai'i under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Our primary purpose is to develop a global network of players and lovers of traditional Hawaiian music and to encourage the study, teaching, and performance of the Hawaiian steel guitar. Our primary financial goal is to provide scholarship assistance through donations to steel guitar students who demonstrate the ability and intent to become accomplished performers.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership is open to all steel guitar players and non-players around the world who support the perpetuation of the Hawaiian steel guitar. Annual dues are US\$30. The membership year begins July 1. Members receive the *HSGA Quarterly* and other group benefits. The *Quarterly* is mailed four times a year First Class to addresses in the United States and by Air Mail to foreign addresses. Members can obtain an Associate Membership for a spouse or family member at a cost of \$10, added to the annual dues; an Associate Member is entitled to discounts at certain HSGA functions and can vote in HSGA Board elections.

SUBMIT ARTICLES & COMMENTS TO:

HSGA Quarterly, 2145 Tiffany Walk, Manteca, CA 95336-9555 USA; E-mail: hsga@hsga.org. In addition, email submitted items directly to the editor at johnely@hawaiiansteel.com. Letters to the president and general club comments should be sent to: Christo Ruppenthal at 552 Apollo Way, Madison, WI 53718 or emailed to christo@christoruppenthal.com.

VIRTUAL FEST 2 *Cont. from Page 1*

from Hawai'i, Mālie Lyman and Justin Firmeza.

With Virtual Festival 2, we have taken the opportunity to feature and remember several key members and players, including Jerry Byrd and Herbert Hanawahine. In addition, we are saluting John Ely, our outgoing *HSGA Quarterly* editor of twenty years. The performance videos used for these segments are from the Paul Weaver Video Archives, now available exclusively to members through the HSGA website.

Member Troy Brenningmeyer has graciously provided us with a workshop on Hawaiian Steel Guitar in the C6th tuning. Have your instruments tuned and ready to play for this one.

We hope that you can all tune in for this event. There is no advanced registration required and no fee for viewing. The suggested donation is \$25, but do donate any amount that comes to heart.

(Note to members: you can help us spread the word that we encourage non-members to join HSGA, and they can do so with a \$30 donation to the festival). To access the festival, visit our website at hsga.org; go to our Facebook page at facebook.com/HawaiianSteelGuitarAssociation/; or search YouTube on "HSGA Festival" to stream it there.

As always, the festival is open to the public. If you miss the show on October 8 and 9, you will be able to access it afterward as well. Tune in, donate, share with your families, friends, and fellow musicians. Mahalo! ■

Please Contact Us!

Send news, comments and photos to:
HSGA Quarterly, 2145 Tiffany Walk,
Manteca, CA 95336-9555. Photos will
be promptly returned on request. Send us
an email at: hsga@hsga.org and cc your
editor at newsletter@hsga.org. Mahalo!

Lion Kobayashi and His New Trade Winds band performing on September 15, 2020 at Aloha Station in Rappongi, Tokyo where Lion performed monthly for ten years until the club's recent closing this past July. Joining Lion are: (l. to r.) Keiji Kusano, Hidezo Ito and Hideki Saito. They will be featured at the VF2 Saturday evening session.





HSGA President Christo Ruppenthal performing with his group Christo's Novelty Combo with bassist Forrest Evans. They will perform at VF2 on Friday, Oct 8. (Photo courtesy of Paula A. White)

A Letter From the President

By Christo Ruppenthal

Aloha HSGA Members,

Having been elected president of HSGA by our board back in March, I felt like it was important to reach out to the membership and express how excited I am to serve the club in this capacity. I have many goals and exciting ideas for our club.

Larger projects on the horizon continue to be exploring various ways to add more value to existing HSGA memberships, focusing on attracting new members, strengthening our online and social media presence, and archiving and preserving our history and legacy. I also want to emphasize the importance of finding a new newsletter editor to work with our team. I see reorganizing the newsletter staff as one of the largest hurdles facing the club in the coming months with John Ely's imminent retirement. If you or anyone you know has interest, please reach out to the board or myself.

Our online presence helps us in many ways. It focuses new eyes to our organization. It functions as a fundraising mechanism. And it increases engagement with you, our membership. Obviously due to the ongoing pandemic we were not able to gather in 2020 or 2021. So I am very happy that we were able to have another virtual festival this fall. This is something we plan to continue doing periodically, perhaps on a smaller scale, even after we are able to gather again.

Through our creative use of online marketing and engagement we have been able to reach new people. I'm very pleased to say that we have added 28 new members since the beginning of the pandemic in March of 2020. We

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Virtual Festival 2 Schedule

(Times given are in U.S. Eastern Time Zone)

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 8

Session 1 (5:30-7:30pm)

- Opening/Welcome
- Roberto & Jorge Alaniz
- Al Nip & Maui Jam Band
- Lion's Ohana I
- Christo's Novelty Combo
- Nui Loa with Shinichi and Kumiko Kakiuchi
- Honolulu Punks with Einar Baldursson
- Mālie Lyman, HSGA scholarship student
- Joe Stewart
- 2004 HSGA Joliet Video: Duke Ching & Friends

Session 2 (8:30-9:50pm)

- Lion Ladies Steel Guitar Ensemble
- John Mumford
- Mahana Lua with Masakatsu Suzuki
- Tribute to Herbert Hanawahine

Guest Artist Bobby Black – Performance and “Talk Story” (9:50-10:30pm)

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 9

Session 3 (1:00-3:00pm)

- Opening/Welcome
- Lion's Ohana II
- The Li'ili'i Hawaiians with Benjamin Rudy
- Justin Firmeza, HSGA scholarship student
- Eric Rindal & APE
- Ian Ufton
- 2005 HSGA Joliet Video: L.T. Zinn & Paul Kim

Workshop with Troy Brenningmeyer (2:30)
 “C6th Hawaiian Steel” (30 minutes)

Session 4 (4:00-6:00pm)

- Maile Swing with Jerry & Karen Wagner
- Anegogumi with Yoshiko Seo
- Tribute to John Ely & 2009 Joliet performance video

Annual Membership Meeting via YouTube (5:30pm)

Session 5 (7:00-8:30pm)

- Paul Okubo with Mont Hawaiians, Moana Winds
- Frank Della-Penna
- Lion Kobayashi & His New Trade Winds
- Dean Owen
- 2008 HSGA Joliet Video: Steve Cheney
- Rick Aiello
- Geri Valdriz

Festival Finale: Jerry Byrd, HSGA Joliet 1988 video performance (8:30-9:00pm)

The festival streams live at these locations:

- HSGA Website: hsga.org
- YouTube: HSGA-Hawaiian Steel Guitar Association
- Facebook: Hawaiian Steel Guitar Association

Our 2021 “Live-Streamed” Membership Meeting

By Roberto Alaniz

We are planning our first ever “online” membership meeting as part of Virtual Festival 2, as membership meetings have been an important part of our annual in-person festivals.

The meeting will be live-streamed at 5:30 PM Eastern on Saturday, October 9 on the HSGA YouTube and Facebook channels. If you are already viewing the Virtual Festival near the projected start time, just stay tuned and the meeting will begin automatically. Otherwise, click on either the YouTube or Facebook festival links on the hsga.org website to enter the meeting. To get there click on “Festivals” in the main menu and select “Second Virtual Steel Guitar Festival” from the drop-down menu.

During the meeting, members can text questions or comments to (510) 449-3936 or email them to hsga@hsga.org, or via the “comment” section of YouTube and Facebook. We will make every effort to respond during the meeting.

HSGA Membership Meeting Agenda

1. Call to Order
2. President’s Report
3. Treasurer’s Financial Report
4. Scholarship Program Revisions
5. Update to 2022 In-Person Festival Planning
6. Response to Questions from Members
7. Adjourn

We realize that not every member has internet access or cell phone service. Be assured this will be an informational

From Sweden, Einar Baldursson recording his virtual festival set with his band, Honolulu Punks, at the Cavern Club in Stockholm.



Shinichi Kakiuchi and wife Kumiko recording their performance for Virtual Festival 2. Catch them in Session 1 on Friday, Oct 8.

meeting only and not a decision-making meeting. Whether or not you are able to join us for this meeting, we ask that members submit any questions or comments in writing before the meeting, or the week after the meeting. Those can be sent via email to hsga@hsga.org or by regular mail to: HSGA, 2145 Tiffany Walk, Manteca, CA 95336.

The Fall issue of the *Quarterly* will include a report on member questions, comments and responses. Mahalo. ■

HSGA Annual Financial Report

By Treasurer Roberto Alaniz

The following is a summary of our finances for the 12-month period beginning July 1, 2020 and ending June 30, 2021.

HSGA 2020-2021 Assets

General Fund (Chase Checking)	\$19,421.14
Scholarship Fund (Chase Savings)	\$6,895.45
Total Assets	\$26,316.59
HSGA Japan Bank Balance	\$3,119.53

HSGA 2020-2021 Income & Expense

Income	\$20,003.86
Expenses	\$15,841.27
Net Income	\$4,162.59

This is the first year in the past four years that HSGA has realized a positive net income instead of a loss. This is primarily due to the cancellation of the annual festival in October of 2020—historically, the expenses of our annual festival have been greater than the revenue it generates. By contrast, the Virtual Festival in January 2021 realized more

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In-Person Festival Planning for 2022

By Roberto Alaniz

Will the Annual HSGA In-Person Festival return in 2022? The short answer is that we are planning on it.

The Board of Directors has established a 2022 Festival Planning Committee that includes Christo Ruppenthal, Teri Gorman, Tony Fourcroy and myself to consider possible locations for an HSGA festival sometime in 2022. The options being considered include a return to Fort Collins, Colorado, or a first time event in the San Francisco Bay Area. We have also done some investigation of hotels and pricing in Las Vegas, San Diego and Anaheim, California. The favored option so far is a Northern California option, which is discussed in more detail below. However, the planning committee is still open to other ideas for locations and dates.

One of the greatest challenges is finding a location that is reasonably accessible to the most members. There is no way around the fact that some people will need to travel longer distances than others. Even the change from Joliet to Fort Collins made it difficult for some members to attend the festival.

As you know, our membership is world-wide, so locating the event close to a major international airport does make a lot of sense. There are other considerations, including members' ability to travel, costs, and convenience. HSGA has members throughout the continental United States, as well as Hawai'i, Canada, South America, Japan, Australia, and Europe.

In addition, any festival requires considerable "behind the scenes" preparation and set up, so a location that is reasonably close to members who are willing to do that work is important.

One location that has a lot of appeal is San Mateo, California. San Mateo is

south of San Francisco and only a 7-minute drive from the San Francisco International Airport.

The San Mateo option would involve a collaboration with a nonprofit organization in Northern California named the Pacific Islander Cultural Association, also known by the acronym PICA. Prior to COVID-19, PICA held an annual Aloha Festival in the San Francisco Bay Area drawing thousands of attendees. These festivals have been held alternately in San Francisco and San Mateo and feature Polynesian dancers and musicians from throughout California. PICA has announced that it has scheduled the Aloha Festival in San Mateo on August 13-14, 2022, a weekend event that is open to the public with no entrance fee.

We have contacted the president of PICA, and she shares our excitement about the prospect of a doing some-



Troy Brenningmeyer in St. Louis with his Hawaiian group St. Luau. Troy will present his C6th workshop at Virtual Festival 2.

thing together. In summary, the proposal is that HSGA hold its own festi-

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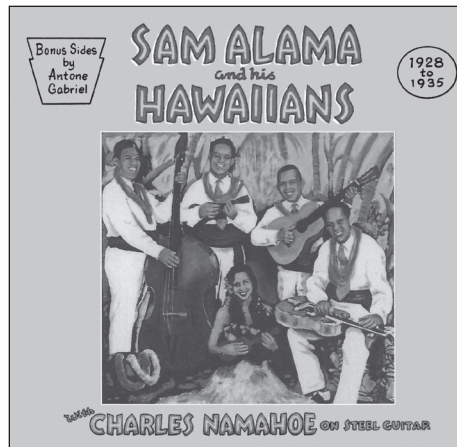
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DISC 'N' DATA

Sam Alama and his Hawaiians
Grass Skirt Records (GSK 6001)

CD Review by Christo Ruppenthal

The new record by Les Cook's Grass Skirt records *Sam Alama and his Hawaiians* is a welcome addition to my music shelf! A few of Sam Alama's recordings have been previously reissued on Hawaiian LP and CD compilations, but until now the vast majority of these recordings were only available to avid collectors of original Victor and Brunswick shellac phonograph records. As with all other Grass Skirt releases, this re-issue of scarce and in some instances extremely rare early Hawaiian 78s has been meticulously restored and packaged in an informative, appealing, and interesting way.



(Left) The CD cover for the Grass Skirt release, *Sam Alama and his Hawaiians*. (Right) The disc label for the original Brunswick recording of "I Went to Hilo" featuring Alama.

I'll be honest. This collection is from what is essentially my favorite era of Hawaiian music from the Golden Age. There's a sweet spot for me after the invention of the National Tricone and preceding the invention of the electric guitar (roughly 1926 to 1934) which really resonates with me both as a listener and a player. The fusion of traditional Hawaiian melodies and instrumentation with vaudeville and early jazz had really come into its own by this time. And the recording process used during this period had improved substantially from the earlier type used to record the first generation of players to arrive on the mainland in the 1900s and 1910s. This made for higher-definition, better-sounding source recordings used in this project.

Sam Alama and his Hawaiians also benefits from top notch repertoire. Some of my favorite hapa haole songs from the era such as "Sassy," "Hula Girl," "I Went To Hilo" and "Honolulu Tomboy" are performed splendidly. Other Hawaiian favorites like "Ama Ama," "Maunaloa," "Haleakala," and "Lei E" are also very enjoyable! "Laie Blues," which was only released on an extremely rare Japanese 78, sticks out among the others in a surprising way. Currently only one copy of this disc is known to exist!

Grass Skirt's always superb CD packaging includes biographies of Sam

and his band members as well as photos, press clippings, and 78 rpm record label scans. This feature makes the CD both enjoyable and informative. So you can both hear the splendid steel guitar work of Charles Namahoe and read about him in the liner notes.

A nice addition to the release are bonus tracks from recordings by steel guitarist Antone Gabriel and his band, the Aloha Players. It is speculated that Gabriel is also the steel guitarist on recordings by King's Hawaiians and the Honolulu Players, also presented here. These sides, recorded during the Columbia label's trip to the Hawaiian Islands in 1928, have always been some of my favorites. If you love early Hawaiian music like I do, you will certainly enjoy this CD!

To order the CD email Les Cook at grassskirtrecords@gmail.com. USA buyers will be able to use PayPal or send a check. Les will provide details. USA orders will be shipped from within the states. For other countries the payment option is PayPal except in Europe and the UK where other choices will be given. ■

Renewal Alert...

If you received a renewal form with your newsletter, then your membership expired on June 30. See the form for details and easy payment options.

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Newsletter Correction/Update

From John Ely

I remember the good old days when we had a team of four Hawai'i-based writers to help proofread the newsletter! Sadly, errors do creep in.

Mahalos to former HSGA president Don Weber and longtime member Wally Pfeifer for a correction and an update to content in the latest issue (the Spring 2021 *Quarterly*) that went out last month.

Don pointed out that in the page-14 photo caption, I misidentified Herbert Hanawahine as the musician on the top right of the photo. I know well that Herbert was the guy on the top left, but for some reason when I wrote the cap-

tion I put myself "in" the picture instead of looking "at" the picture. Old-timers, dyslexia creep? Don't answer! Joking aside, my apologies to all.

I'd also like to pass along Wally Pfeifer's addition to the page-six story on how the Paul Weaver collection of HSGA convention performance videos was acquired by HSGA. Paul's widow Hideko Weaver emailed Wally Pfeifer, who was a longtime friend of the Weavers, and asked if he would like to have the DVDs. He told her yes and she sent all 75 videos to Wally. Writes Wally, "I intended to watch them all but there were so many, I decided I couldn't do it."

In the end Roberto Alaniz reached out to Wally, and Wally agreed that HSGA should have the videos. Mahalo, Wally, for the update and again for your contribution to the archive. ■

Treasurer's Report

(Balances as of September 30, 2021)

Beginning Balance	\$26,316.59
General Fund	\$19,956.83
Scholarship Fund	\$7,790.62
End Balance	\$27,953.09
Japan Account	(unavailable)

Expenses

Newsletter/Postage	\$1,796.83
Web/Software/Subscript.	\$639.49
Virtual Festival 2	\$800.00
Total Expenses	\$3,236.32

Income

Dues	\$2,990.14
Donations—General	\$275.00
Donations—Scholarship	\$165.00
Total Income	\$3,430.14

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Aloha 'Oe

(Queen Lili'uokalani)

Arrangement by Troy Brenningmeyer

Ballad (♩=70)

A G C G 1. D7

Steel Gtr. (Open D)

6 2. C D7

12 **B** G C G 1. D7

19 2. D7 G

For a link to the videos go to
www.LWTstreaming.com or
www.YouTube.com/troitone

Aloha 'Oe

(C6th Version)

Arrangement by Troy Brenningmeyer

Ballad (♩ = 70)

A G C G 1. D7

Steel Gtr. C6th let ring-----

6 2. C D7

12 **B** C G 1. D7

19 G 2. D7 G

The Bobby Black Story

By John Ely

As mentioned in the last issue, I've long wanted to do a feature on Bobby, and it seems especially appropriate to do so in this, my last issue as newsletter editor, and, of course, given that Bobby is our guest artist at Virtual Festival 2. Special thanks to writer Rich Kienzle and Vintage Guitar Magazine for permission to excerpt from Rich's excellent article on Bobby's career titled "Bobby Black, Steel Before and After Commander Cody," which appeared in the Vintage Guitar Magazine December 2011 issue. It's one of the most comprehensive, well-written pieces I've seen on any prominent steel guitarist.

Bobby Black is probably best known among pop, rock, and "crossover" music audiences for his great work with the hit-making group Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen and with other prominent bands such as the New Riders of the Purple Sage, the Moonlighters and Asleep at the Wheel. What many in those audiences probably don't know is that Bobby cut his teeth on steel guitar without pedals during the latter stages of the western swing movement, and that Hawaiian steel guitar was one of the inspirations that propelled him early on and throughout his career.

Bobby was born in 1934 in Prescott, Arizona, and was followed by brother Larry in 1936, who was to have such a big impact on Bobby, both personally and throughout his music career. Their dad pushed a broom at Woolworth's but quickly rose in the company's ranks with promotions that took the family to Tucson and eventually to Burbank, California.

Young Bobby Black (left) and brother Larry, in their teens and already climbing up the music business ladder (1953).



Bobby Black playing his trusty 11-string West Coast steel guitar at Scotty's 1984 convention in St. Louis. Cool is the rule!

Both Blacks took piano lessons at an early age, and this proved to be a great help to Bobby in his understanding of chord construction. In a long phone conversation with your editor prior to press time, Bobby related that Larry, though younger, was ahead of Bobby in music development and had an excellent jazz guitar teacher. Bobby quickly soaked up knowledge that Larry had acquired, which served him very well in the western swing environment that was still in force at the time.

Those of us who got to know Bobby in the 1970s forget that, despite his youthful appearance, Bobby grew up in the era where radio was the primary medium. Bobby first heard Hawaiian music on the radio and on one notable occasion was riveted by the steel guitar work of Eddie Bush with Harry Owens's band. In Kienzle's article Bobby states, "I thought 'What is that?' It was simple stuff, sliding notes. All I knew was I wanted to learn how to do that, whatever that was."

Bobby got his first steel guitar in his early teens but had no idea how to tune it, so he started out by tuning it like a standard guitar! Not making much headway, he took a couple of lessons from a local old-timer, most likely in the E7th tuning that was taught at the time, and was frustrated by his teacher's strident system of learning all the note names on the fretboard with little if anything on actually making the sounds Bobby wanted to play. Everything changed for Bobby when he heard Jerry Byrd's "Steelin' the Blues." Writes Rich Kienzle in his *Vintage Guitar* piece,

Formerly with Grand Ole Opry star Ernest Tubb's Texas Troubadours, Byrd at the time was America's most visible, influential country (as opposed to western) steel player. Along with his solo records, Byrd enhanced hits by Tubb, Hank

Williams, and Red Foley, among many others. “He and Joaquin were my very favorite players, the most influential and inspirational,” Black asserts. “They were opposing styles. Jerry had more of a Hawaiian, smooth, legato type of playing, Joaquin more of a sizzle. I’d recognize those guys the minute I heard them.

“I wrote a letter to the Grand Ole Opry – to Jerry Byrd – and told him I bought his record.” Though Byrd had left the Opry, “Within a few days, I got this letter back and he gave me his C6th tuning. He was so kind. I put that tuning on, and it started me on steel guitar. I immediately recognized what was in that tuning from what I heard on the records. I learned how to play by ear, thanks to Jerry Byrd. Joaquin also used C6th; that’s what got me started playing. From there on, I started copying all the solos on those records.”

So Bobby was “off to the races” with the C6th tuning thanks to his superb ear. He soon became obsessed with the steel guitar. Perhaps the funniest anecdote in Kienzle’s article is the following:

Ruth Black fretted over her son’s obsession. When his doctor asked, “Does he have any heroes?” she cited Byrd, explaining he was a musician, not an athlete. Inexplicably, the physician prescribed cold showers!

Kienzle chronicles the Black brothers’ early musical exploits, starting in 1950 with bands such as the Double H Boys, Shorty Joe Quartuccio and his Red Rock Canyon Cowboys, and the house band at Tracy Gardens, which (as Kienzle notes)

Bobby recalls as “a big old-fashioned dance hall where almost anyone of note in the hillbilly/western swing field played at one time or another.” The brothers recorded two singles with the band, the opening act when touring stars played [there].

It’s evident that by this time, still in his teens, Bobby was already making a name for himself in the club circuit. It was only a matter of time before Bobby would heed the “call of the road” in search of bigger game. Writes Kienzle,

Late in 1952, Larry remained behind as 18-year-old Bobby joined Blackie Crawford and his Western Cherokees, in Oklahoma City. The band, who’d backed Frizzell and Webb Pierce, relocated to Beaumont, Texas, in ’53. As they played Houston and Gulf Coast dance halls, Black awaited delivery of his first pedal steel – a triple-neck, four-pedal Bigsby (A6, C6, and E13 tuning) with his name inlaid on the front. It arrived at Beaumont’s railroad station in May. As Black and another band member opened the crate to inspect the instrument, ex-Marine



On the set of the Hoffman Hayride TV show in 1953, Bobby Black sporting his Bigsby steel guitar, and Big Jim DeNoon (top right).

George Jones happened by. He was back home and ready to sing professionally.

Neva’s, a Beaumont club, became the Cherokees’ home base. Owner Jack Starnes had just co-founded Starday Records, and used them as house band on the label’s early recordings. Black was showcased on a Western Cherokees’ single titled “Cherokee Steel Guitar.” They also backed singer Arlie Duff on “Y’All Come,” Starday’s first national hit, and accompanied George Jones on the Starday session that kicked off his storied career. Black’s Texas days, however, were numbered. “At that time, I was so homesick and my high school sweetheart wanted me to come home and get married.” Jimmy Day replaced him on steel.

Newly married and basing out of San Mateo, Bobby joined forces with his brother Larry again on the local TV show “Hoffman Hayride” (later called the “California Hayride”) featuring fiddle player Big Jim DeNoon and hosted by Cottonseed Clark. The band backed many national acts and also featured the Black brothers playing classic Jimmy Bryant-Speedy West arrangements. However not everything was rosy on the Hayride set. Writes Kienzle,

Cottonseed Clark, feeling Bryant-West instrumentals too jazzy, insisted [that the Blacks] play other songs. After they ignored him, they were fired. The All Stars later disbanded, and with rock and roll becoming dominant, steel guitar’s popularity faded for a time. That began changing in 1959, with Santo and

Continued on Page 12

Johnny's guitar-steel pop hit "Sleepwalk." The Blacks, both divorced, and ex-DeNoon drummer Jack Greenback began writing songs and recording on a two-track Ampex in Larry's bedroom.

The Blacks' and Greenback's attempt to change with the times in the early '60s produced some really interesting recordings in a kind of exotic surf vein, and they did achieve some local chart success with the release of "Gently My Love" in 1961 on the Dore label under the name The Triplets and Lionel Hampton's "Midnight Sun" for Dolton (the Ventures' label) in 1962 under the name the Five Whispers, which topped the charts in the Bakersfield market. Both these recordings can be heard on YouTube and they are definitely worth a listen. Perhaps the group's attempt to "fit in" took them into areas they ultimately did not want to go. Kienzle elaborates,

Now full-time musicians, Black, playing an early Sierra steel built by Chuck Wright, ditched his pedals and stood onstage, using electronic effects to mask the twang. Reacting to the British invasion, the band, wearing green Beatles wigs, renamed themselves the Green Beans. When they visited Nashville, Pete Drake, one of Nashville's top pedal steel players, got them signed to United Artists Records. But musicians they knew there didn't buy the emerald image. "You guys are too good," Jimmy Day told Black. "You don't have to resort to this crazy stuff." Off went the wigs. Renamed by the label and now going as U.S. 6, they blended vocals, choreography, and also backed up singers in the Bay Area.

In 1965, the Blacks pulled the plug on their attempt to make waves in the rock and roll field and cut an instrumental LP titled "Corn Shuckin' Time" under the name Country Cut Ups that garnered rave reviews in *Billboard Magazine*. As Kienzle notes,

It symbolized the brothers' weariness with rock. "My playing suffered. Larry's did, too," Black says. "We weren't really playing the stuff we wanted to be playing. We were just goin' with the times to make a living. We decided, 'Let's get a country band and go back to the clubs and play like we used to.'" The Black Brothers band, including several U.S. 6 members, became house band at Cowtown. Robert Black helped his sons open Peninsula Sound, a San Carlos recording studio. In '67, Bobby adopted a Baldwin Sho-Bud Crossover, allowing the player to switch pedals between necks. "It had a few bugs and as a result it never really caught on," he says. "But I really liked mine, and it was probably the prettiest guitar I've ever owned."



At Cotton's Club in Belmont, California (1953), Bobby Black (top right) and Big Jim DeNoon (top row, middle). In the middle row (left to right), Tommy Duncan, Cottonseed Clark and Merle Travis. Wow!

In 1970 things really picked up for Bobby and he was about to be launched onto the national stage. Kienzle lays out the how Bobby first hooked up with Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen:

The next phase of [Bobby's] career began at Cowtown, where in 1970-71, Wednesday Amateur Nights offered a \$50 prize. Contestants included Lost Planet Airmen Kirchen, Tichy, who sang, and fiddler Andy Stein, whipping up crowds with a dazzling "Orange Blossom Special." Despite their looks, Black recalls, "The audience liked them. They were different to look at and sounded pretty good." [The group's] LP *Lost in the Ozone* also showcased Farlow, pianist-rapper George "Commander Cody" Frayne, bassist Bruce Barlow, and drummer Lance Dickerson. Original pedal steel player Steve Davis (The West Virginia Creeper), relatively new to the instrument, had departed, and Stein, impressed by Black's virtuosity, urged him to join.

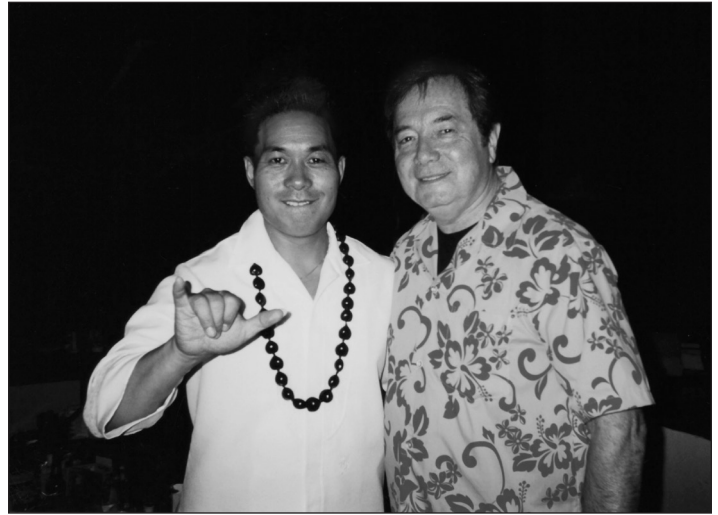
Black, who'd worked with many of the acts the [house] band admired from afar, wasn't sure about joining. "I remember Andy called me several times," he says. While not impressed by the album, he grew to appreciate the Airmen's quirky but admiring spin on country. "They did a lot tongue in cheek, weren't making fun, but doing it in sort of a respectful way, like

‘Mama Hated Diesels,’ a play on the maudlin part of country. They listened to all that old stuff with respect. It wasn’t like Poco or the Burrito Brothers. They had their own way of doing it, closer to the source, much more than others.”

Bobby signed on with the band in December 1971 and made waves with the band’s *Hot Licks*, *Cold Steel*, *Truckers’ Favorites* release in early 1972. The album features blistering Bobby Black solos on “Truck Drivin’ Man” and “Looking at the World Through a Windshield.” The Airmen were absolutely beside themselves to have such a pro in their midst, as Kienzle records here:

“I always thought we were a bunch of inspired amateurs,” Tichy reflects. “All of a sudden, Bobby joins, and the whole thing came together...” Kirchen agrees. “It certainly was a revelation to hear somebody who could play like that in our band. Make no mistake, we knew he was special. Bobby could play rhythm steel, which you don’t hear that many people doing. He wasn’t sitting there smoking a cigarette, waitin’ for his turn to show off. Just to hear him comp along with stuff was a whole music lesson in itself. That’s an aspect of steel guitar that isn’t as known – him back there, kind of propping you up. I’d play a solo and there’d be some little cool thing under there that would kick me up a notch.”

“We started whippin’ out those Western swing tunes. With him and Bill and Andy, it suddenly became a real western swing



Alan Akaka and Bobby Black (at the Hawaiian Regent?) during Bobby’s tour of the Islands with the Kapalakiko Hawaiian Band.

band,” adds Farlow. On rockers, I thought he was just awesome. At first, I didn’t know how much he wanted to play the rockin’ stuff. But we worked out how he would take the first solo on ‘Good Rockin’ Tonight,’ at the start of the set, when all eyes were on everybody. And he’d jump right into it, totally out front.”

Now on the national scene with a high-profile group, Bobby was increasingly in demand as a session player and

Continued on Page 14

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recorded notably with rockers Link Wray and Robert Gordon. Subsequent albums with Cody, including *Country Casanova* and *Live From Deep in the Heart of Texas*, recorded at the famous Armadillo World Headquarters in Austin, cemented Bobby's reputation as a virtuoso performer on both the E9th and C6th pedal steel necks.

Per Keinzle, Bobby left the Cody band in 1974 and he and Larry relocated to Nashville. Keinzle continues,

Pete Drake again rolled out the welcome mat. "He was always willing to help people he liked," Black explains. He ran Drake's song publishing and the brothers did extensive session work at his studio, Pete's Place. The brothers then joined singer Barbara Mandrell's band, a far cry from the Airmen since Mandrell, a gifted pedal steel guitarist, and her manager/father, ran a tight ship so far as dress and deportment. "She wanted every solo the same on every show – no deviations. If (yours) was different, you were asked about it. She was a whip-cracker."

Kienzle corroborates something I had always heard through the grapevine—that Bobby wasn't all that comfortable with Nashville music business politics, so by 1975 Bobby was ready to return to California. An abortive attempt to resurrect the fortunes of the Cody band followed, in which Bobby had two of his pedal steel guitars stolen, among other misadventures.

With Larry returning to California in '77, the Black Brothers band reunited and worked with Bobby on his '78 solo album, *California Freedom*, issued by the Pedal Steel Guitar Record Club. Soon after, playing a 10-string Franklin, he replaced

Bobby Black (top row, fourth from the right) with the Kapalakiko Hawaiian Band during their Hawai'i tour around the year 2000. Late bandleader Saichi Kawahara is standing on Bobby's right.



Bobby playing his Sho-Bud Professional on a gig with Barbara Mandrell in 1974—brother Larry Black is second from the left.

Buddy Cage in the New Riders of the Purple Sage for an uncomfortable year and a half, explaining, "They were trying another type of country-rock approach, tied to the Grateful Dead. I never thought I fit too well. Some of the gigs back east, people were hollerin' out, 'Where's Jerry?'"

The next gig was a far better fit; at Cowtown in late '71, Black met Asleep at the Wheel founding members Ray Benson and Lucky Oceans, soon after the group arrived from West Virginia and settled in at the Airmen's house in Oakland.

"The Wheel were there when I went to the first rehearsal with the Cody band," Black recalls. "We became friends quickly. I really liked the Wheel." In 1980, with Lucky departing for Australia, Black stepped in. "That was our dream, to get Bobby," says Benson. He played on *Framed*, the Wheel's sole MCA album (and at the label's insistence, a non-western-swing effort). "Live, it was a pleasure to listen to his solos," Benson adds. "Bobby came up with the greatest influences and fulfilled them. What's so cool is he also had that Hawaiian flavor. It never left his tone." The feeling was mutual. "The band I had the most fun in, musically, was the Wheel," Black says. "For me, it was closer to the kind of stuff I'd grown up listening to. I really did enjoy it."

In 1981, Bobby recorded another steel guitar album titled *Honky Cat*, showcasing his ability to stretch out beyond "tried and true" areas of steel guitar. Other steel guitar records followed, including *The Steel Guitar of Bobby Black* in 2001, and his gorgeous Hawaiian steel guitar album *Steel Guitar Paradise* in 2010, which we reviewed in the Winter 2010-2011 *Quarterly*.

Over the last thirty years Bobby has played with the western swing band Lost Weekend, Jim Campilongo, the Saddle

Cats with Dan Hicks violinist Richard Chon, and at various reunion shows with Commander Cody and Asleep at the Wheel. He has also been an active performer in the California Hawaiian music scene and was a longtime member of Saichi Kawahara's Kapalakiko Hawaiian Band and has played with other Hawaiian groups such as Haopinaka. He was inducted into the Western Swing Hall of Fame in 1992 and the Steel Guitar Hall of Fame in 2004. The inscription on his plaque reads: "For over 50 years he inspired diverse audiences with his proficiency in country, swing, rock, pop and Hawaiian music. With thousands of appearances, backing over 100 major artists at concerts, on radio, in television, motion pictures, stage productions and on his own recordings, he earned his title of 'Mr. Versatility'."

Bobby's main gigging guitar these days is his custom-made West Coast 11-string steel, and he'll only bring his pedals if the guy hiring him insists on it. His tuning is like the standard pedal steel C6th except he tunes the bottom string to D and replaces the high G with chromatic strings (D and B).

In my long conversation with Bobby I was brought back over and over to stories about his love of Hawai'i and Hawaiian music, and his admiration for his musical mentor from afar, Jerry Byrd. In Bobby's growing-up years, his father made several business trips to Hawai'i as he was intimately involved with the building of a Honolulu Woolworth's store. His father's many stories about Hawai'i kindled Bobby's imagination early on. And in the late '50s/early '60s he was captivated by the sounds and romance of the Islands as packaged in the live TV broadcasts of *Hawaii Calls*.

In the mid-1980s, Bobby and his wife Sheila made a vacation trip to Hawai'i for the express purpose of meeting Jerry. He began by asking for Jerry around town, which did no good (Bobby thought everyone knew the great Jerry Byrd!). He went to the Blue Dolphin room where Bobby knew Jerry would often play. It turned out that David "Feet" Rogers was playing there along with Norman Isaacs. Feet told him that Jerry was about to start his set at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel's Surf Room. Shortly thereafter, Bobby walked into the Surf Room with his wife Sheila and saw Jerry alone on the stage tuning up. As Bobby explained it to me, Jerry always had his "radar" up for the presence of other steel players, and after a semi-awkward "stare-fest" Bobby humbly introduced himself. It only took Jerry a moment to reply, "I didn't recognize you without your whiskers!" and that was the beginning of a 30-year-long friendship and correspondence. Jerry invite them both to stay for dinner with a front-row seat at the show and they shared Mai Tais after the show. Then, the following morning Jerry kidnapped Bobby for breakfast at his favorite North Shore hangout with Jerry sharing priceless stories.

Not long afterward, Jerry invited Bobby to perform at his Steel Guitar Ho'olaule'a in 1987. He, along with Australian



Bobby Black during the presentation of his Steel Guitar Hall of Fame plaque at Scotty's 2004 convention in St. Louis. Awesome!

player Jim Jensen, were the only haoles on the show. One of the highlights of the show for Bobby was meeting one of his early heroes, Alvin Rey, who was in the audience (Billy Hew Len and Herbert Hanawahine were also there). Bobby played a D-8 Rickenbacker lap model with metal necks, one of the best multi-neck Ricks ever built. Jerry had sort of "scripted" Bobby's segment of the show with a song list of favorites like "Sand" and "How'd Ya Do" but Bobby had promised Sheila that he would play "Bali Hai." I got a chuckle from the way Bobby told me the story; as amiable a guy as Bobby is, he ended up going "off script" throwing Jerry a bit of a curveball. At the show, without rehearsal, he turned to Benny Kalama and asked if the band knew "Bali Hai." In classic fashion, Benny replied, "What key?" And you know the rest of the story (see the previous newsletter, page 3). In short, the set went off without a hitch and from Jerry, more than a nod of approval.

Bobby's story is far too long to be told in a few pages. And his career achievements are so hard to categorize; his musical interests and work broadly summarize the history of the instrument, which is already breathtaking in scope. And then he has always been willing to go a step further.

What I find remarkable is that, despite his success and fame playing in all kinds of musical areas, Bobby told me his most cherished memories are of his trips to the Islands, the friends he made there and his enduring friendship with Jerry Byrd. So it is only fitting that the Second HSGA Virtual Festival features them both. ■

Did You Pay Your 2021-2022 Dues?

This is your FINAL issue if your newsletter included a renewal form. Dues are \$35 for a hard copy newsletter and \$30 for the electronic version. You can renew via our website. Convenient!

HSGA Donations

Thanks, members, for your donations this past quarter. **Ralph Czitrom** from Ringwood, New Jersey came through again with a generous \$200 donation to our General Fund. Mahalo, Ralph!

The following members donated at least \$10:

Daryl Brooke, The Grateful Guitar,
Key West, FL
Dennis McBride, Portland, OR
Dick Morris, Salisbury, MD
Gloria V. Umbarger, Rancho Palos
Verdes, CA

FINANCIAL REPORT *Cont. from Page 4*

revenue than expense, which also improved our bottom line.

HSGA Quarterly newsletter publishing, printing and mailing remains our largest expense, at approximately \$7,000 per year. Scholarships for our young students totaled \$4,950 for the year.

Membership has increased slightly (10) for the first time in four years, for a total membership of 264.

Our financial goal is to continue this positive trend in future years by:

- Continuing virtual festivals (frequency to be determined).
- Pursuing additional revenue opportunities.
- Carefully managing expenses.
- Increasing membership, thereby increasing dues revenue and member donations.
- Developing in-person festival plans and budgets that are closer to “break even” propositions.

Thank you, members, for your continuing support! ■

Changed Email?

Please send email changes to both our office (hsga@hsga.org) AND to John Ely (johnely@hawaiiansteel.com). Mahalo!

FROM THE “PREZ” *Cont. from Page 3*

have lost some members as well, but this helps reverse the long-term downward trend in membership numbers we have been experiencing for many years. And I strongly believe that our online presence and festival events have had a direct connection to this reversal.

I remain hopeful that we will be able to gather in the summer of 2022. And I am excited by the various visions of how this might take place. Our discussions continue. We will be further exploring options in California and other locations. There have been a lot of meetings and considerations being weighed in finding a suitable location for our next in-person festival. I understand there are concerns about travel distance and cost. This has definitely been on the list of variables we are taking into account at committee meetings. Since there is membership in our group from many far-reaching locations, it’s an ongoing struggle to figure out the perfect place. There are numerous exciting benefits to our top contender on the West Coast, as explained in the 2022 Festival Planning article.

I also want to emphasize how excited we all are to be introducing our legacy video archive of performances from past HSGA functions. Previews from the Paul Weaver Video Archives, now available exclusively to members through the HSGA website, have been included as part of Virtual Festival 2. However, the archive contains many more hours of entertaining memories from past events for you to enjoy.

Again I’d like to express how excited I am to have the opportunity to dedicate my time to our club. I think that our board is unified and we are all working to improve the club experience for all current members and find new ways to reach new potential members. I look forward to working with the other board members and any other willing volunteers on the variety of upcoming projects we have to work on.



Bobby Black and wife Sheila at Waimea Falls in 1987, around the time when Bobby performed at Jerry Byrd’s Ho‘olaule‘a.

If you have any thoughts, questions, or suggestions for the future of the club I look forward to hearing them.

Mahalo, Christo Ruppenthal, HSGA President ■

“IN-PERSON” FEST *Cont. from Page 5*

val on Thursday and Friday, August 11-12 at a San Mateo area hotel, and then co-locate with PICA on the weekend at the San Mateo County Event Center. HSGA would have its own building for member performances, but would also invite Aloha Festival attendees to stop by and listen in. We have also been offered a 25-minute performance slot on the Aloha Festival’s outdoor main stage. HSGA members would also be able to spend some time enjoying the Aloha Festival program and visiting the vendor booths.

The event as envisioned has the potential to increase the visibility of our organization and potentially attract new members.

We would like to hear your suggestions and ideas, and about your interest in attending a festival in San Mateo in August of next year. ■