

Steel guitar player Gerald Ross brings Hawaiian sound to mainland

Posted by Mark Wedel | Special to the Gazette March 27, 2008 09:22AM

KALAMAZOO -- From the lilting music of Hawaii to the wail of country and western, from the tropical islands to Kalamazoo, the Hawaiian steel guitar made its mark during the 20th century.

But the history of the instrument, which is sometimes known as the lap steel because it's played on the lap with one hand plucking the strings while the other runs a steel bar along the fretboard, dates back much further than that.

The story starts with a boy named Joseph Kekuku in the 1880s.

"Rumor has it, when he was a schoolboy in Hawaii, he dropped his comb on his guitar which lay across his lap," said Ann Arbor musician [Gerald Ross](#), who will play the instrument Saturday at the Fretboard Festival.

Ticket stub

Gerald Ross, 1-2:30 p.m.
Saturday, followed by a
workshop at 3 p.m.,
Kalamazoo Valley
Museum, 230 N. Rose
St., Free. 373-7990.

Kekuku slid it on the strings and invented a new musical form. Ross thinks there might a bit of myth in the story, but Kekuku was the Hawaiian steel guitar's first big star. He was recorded on the earliest records, toured the world with his guitar in the early 1900s "and it just took off like gangbusters."



Ann Arbor's Gerald Ross holds a 1936 Rickenbacker Bakelite lap steel guitar. Ross will perform at the Fretboard Festival.

The phenomenon really took root in 1915 during the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. Hawaii was a new U.S. territory, and people flocked to the island exhibit to hear this tropical music that played as people danced the hula in grass skirts.

"People went nuts for it because it was a brand new sound, it was kind of exotic; these people were half-naked dancing, so it was just hot and exciting," Ross said. The Hawaiian steel became the exotic go-to sound of early recording artists. Jimmie Rogers, the first country music star, used the steel guitar on most of his records in the '20s and '30s. It then became one of the main instruments of Western swing, evolving into the electric pedal steel guitar that's still on country radio.

Instrument makers also took advantage of the craze. In 1931, the first commercially available electric guitar was Rickenbacker's Hawaiian steel guitar. Electricity added volume, and the singing strings could be made to wail with amplification. The sound of the music changed "because now they could play almost horn-like melodies," Ross said.

"All these companies started to jump on the bandwagon for steel guitars, most notably, in Kalamazoo, Gibson," he said.

Gibson guitars came up with their EH (electric Hawaiian) 150 in 1935. It was Kalamazoo's hottest-selling electric until the electric jazz guitar became popular. The craze continued into the 1940s. By then, "the funny thing is, the highest concentration of Hawaiian steel guitar players was not in Hawaii, it was in the Midwest," Ross said.

The Oahu Publishing Company of Cleveland sold instruction books, sheet music, guitars and even leis and grass skirts. The company's salesmen covered the Midwest.

"They'd go door-to-door, approach a parent and say, 'We could teach your son or daughter how to play the Hawaiian steel guitar for only 79 cents a week,'" Ross said.

Photos on the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Association site (hsga.org) show large groups of Midwestern kids in guitar classes during the '40s.

Evidence shows that "the Midwest was the center of Hawaiian music in the '40s," said Ross, who played rock guitar as a teen in the '60s but got into country and bluegrass in college. He later was a member of the nationally touring Lost World String Band, playing many forms of folk from 1978-93.

His love of Western swing led Ross to the Hawaiian guitar in 1998. He plays the post-World War II styles that serenaded tourists in the tiki lounges of Hawaii.

"I play the somewhat touristy style," he said. "I like that sound, I like the electric instrument ... probably because I also like playing Western swing."

The sound of the Hawaiian steel guitar should be instantly familiar to anyone -- just listen to the music on "SpongeBob SquarePants." But when Ross does shows, "people will come up to me and say, 'I've always wondered what type of instrument made that sound. I've heard that sound my whole life.'"