

Rohnert Park singer Faith Ako brings Hawaii to Sonoma County



Faith Ako, of Rohnert Park, rehearses her Hawaiian music with her fellow musicians in Windsor on Tuesday, January 14, 2020. (Christopher Chung/ The Press Democrat)

DIANNE REBER HART
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Award-winning singer/songwriter Faith Ako does more than entertain audiences with her sultry voice and ukulele skills. She shares the stories and culture of her beloved Hawaiian homeland and spreads the aloha spirit that's always in her heart.

Although Ako, 62, moved to the mainland in 1985, the islands are never far away. As the Bay Area's premier female artist in traditional and contemporary Hawaiian music for more than two decades, the Rohnert Park resident sings of the beauty and paradise of Hawaii - the beaches, mountains, flowers, plants and volcanoes, and of the traditions, warriors and spiritual powers central to Polynesian culture.

Whether recording, performing or going about her daily life, she thinks about Hawaii, where many family members live, “all the time, every day,” she said. “Every day, nonstop.”

Her long-anticipated fourth album, “Ku’u ’Aina Aloha” (“The Love of My Homeland”) takes listeners to Hawaii - without the airfare and travel. Scheduled for release in March, she spent four years working on the project.

“My job is to share the stories behind the music and the hula,” she said. “I know that’s my purpose and the reason I’ve been given that gift. It’s like going to the islands. My voice transcends that vibe.”

Ako visits Hawaii at least twice a year, sometimes four or five times. “I need to get grounded in the ocean. The ocean could run all the psychologists and therapists out of business.” She heads there for her “Big Island Reunion Tour” in May, following her “Hawaii Live Tour” across the Pacific Northwest in March. Locally, she performs at the Luther Burbank Center for the Arts on April 3.

She recorded “Ku’u ’Aina Aloha” in Honolulu, working with top musicians and Grammy Award-winning producer Dave Tucciarone, “a tall Italian guy” who moved to the islands from New York. She said she learned more about music and singing working with him “than I have in my whole life.”

The album features 11 songs, including three written by Ako, one a “pretty cool” Christian song celebrating “my brother, Jesus, and what he’s done.” The arrangement of Hawaiian melodies also features Hawaiian classics and hula songs.

“I love hula and have to keep my hula people happy. If they hear music they love, they feel it when they dance,” she said. The album “has a nice Hawaiian vibe to it.”

Ako began singing, dancing hula and learning piano and ukulele in her childhood. She has fond memories of growing up as the youngest of 15 children in a talented Mormon family in the small town of La’ie, on the north shore of Oahu, home to the Polynesian Cultural Center. Her maternal grandparents laid roots there as missionaries from Samoa, and it’s where her father, serving in the Navy, courted her mother, “with my grandma in the back seat of the car.”

The family was musically inclined, with everyone singing and at least half of Ako’s siblings playing instruments. They include, with 24 years from oldest to youngest, Audrey, Arthur, Yolanthly, Norman, Clyde, Noel, Earl, Helen, Eldon, Angus, Hope, Gill, Timmie, Kerry and Faith, 10 brothers and five sisters. (Ako’s parents and seven siblings have died.)

Her grandparents, who lived close by, often sang in their native Samoan. "I loved how they sang harmony and melody and they were right on key," Ako said.

May Day was a big celebration in her town, with public and private schools hosting performances for the community. Students trained in music and dance (and Hawaiian dance implements) and were taught the stories behind the lyrics, instruments and movements before performing in costumes crafted by family members.

Ako took piano lessons, but is self-taught in voice. "I was 6 or 7 before I discovered my voice," she said. She recalls singing her first songs, 1960s standards "Silence is Golden" and "Love is Blue," and "I figured it all out by ear."

Music was central at home and church. Ako sang in choirs, and grew up like mainland kids - watching "The Beatles" make their black-and-white TV debut on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and listening to rock 'n' roll, soul and rhythm and blues.

Her influences include Linda Ronstadt, Karen Carpenter, Diana Ross and Eva Cassidy. Ako spent countless hours carrying around a transistor radio - at school, the beach and church - tuning in and singing along to pop music from the States, preferring Jimi Hendrix, The Supremes and The Monkees to Hawaiian music.

"I'm really a rhythm and blues girl," Ako said. "My voice is unique in that way. I can sound Hawaiian, but it's different from other Hawaiian singers and doesn't sound as original. I can sing high, but I can't sing falsetto."

Reviewers have praised Ako for her compelling vocals and sincerity. "Home is where the heart is, and Hawaii is in Faith Ako's heart," noted guitarist/vocalist Jon Yamasato of Pure Heart. "You can hear it in everything she does."

She's won several awards for her music and dedication to her culture. She earned Hawaii Music Awards for Best New Artist and Traditional Hawaiian Album for her debut album in 2008, praised by John Berger of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin (now the Star-Advertiser) for her "lovely voice" and excelling at Hawaiian standards in the traditional soft, melodious "nahenahe" style.

Among other honors, Ako received an Honorary Citizen Award for Island Culture Heritage in 2015 from San Francisco's then-Mayor Ed Lee for sharing and promoting Polynesian culture.

Music is just one of her pursuits. She's in her 23rd year as a special education paraprofessional at Rancho Cotate High School, working directly with students. She and her husband, Chauncey, have three grown children and four grandchildren. The

couple discovered Sonoma County when Chauncey was recruited to play football for Santa Rosa Junior College by Marv Mays, the late coach regarded as a local sports legend. The Akos are high school sweethearts who married in 1978.

Ako was a stay-at-home mother and daycare provider when her children were young. Her youngest child indirectly led Ako to pursue a musical career. Ako first provided music to accompany her daughter's hula class 25 years ago, "and eventually I started getting my name out there."

She's performed at private engagements and venues across the West Coast and beyond. She's performed and taught music at ukulele and hula festivals in the North Bay; one engagement at Napa Valley College led to an invitation to share Hawaiian culture and music on the Massachusetts island of Martha's Vineyard.

As well, she's hit every note of the national anthem at Oakland A's and San Jose Sharks games, and - with considerable practice - sang the Canadian national anthem, "O Canada," at a Sharks game. She'll sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" during Polynesian Heritage Night at the Sharks on Feb. 27.

Ako has performed with groups and as a solo artist. She's at home at every venue, from San Francisco to Honolulu, but is particularly fond of one stage - at Rancho Cotate High School. She participates in the school's annual Unity Week program celebrating diversity. The program, coming up next month, culminates with a rally showcasing music, dances and costumes of various cultures.

"Identity is very important," she said. "It's important to know who you are and where you come from, your roots."

Through her music and stories, Ako keeps her Polynesian culture alive. Her music takes listeners along the paths of her childhood, that "fearless" girl with a transistor radio, ready for adventures climbing trees, visiting beaches and hiking to La'ie Falls to pick mountain apples, guava and litchi, a sweet, tropical fruit.

She developed a deep appreciation for Hawaiian music as an adult, and shares that with her grandchildren, all of whom sing on her new album. It's something that likely would please the "kupuna," the church and community leaders revered during her youth.

"Hawaiian music is so passionate, and it's also connecting with things. I feel connected because I have my stories," Ako said.

AKO SHARES HER PASSION

“Ku’u ‘Aina Aloha”

Faith Ako
(Faith Ako Music)

By **John Berger**
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Faith Thompson Ako grew up in Lai’ie, the youngest of 15 children in a home where everyone sang and played an instrument. She has maintained her cultural ties while raising children and grandchildren on the mainland, and her newly released fourth



album builds on that foundation. Most of the songs are Hawaiian—they include compositions by kumu hula Mae Loebenstein, Alvin K. Isaacs and John K. Almeida, Ako and her musicians treat all of them with respect.

Ako’s soothing arrangement of “Nohili E,” a song whose lyrics describe the emotion of love in particularly romantic terms, is gorgeous. Presenting “Tau Ha Ua La” and “A ‘oia” as a medley knits two classics together in fine style.

A surprise comes with her treatment of “Sophisticated Hula.” Sol Bright’s musical signature is traditionally sung in English. Ako’s decision to sing it with Hawaiian Lyrics transforms a hapa haole standard into something familiar but new.

Ako switches to English with “Keiki O Ka Hula” to describe the experiences of children learning hula. Kids can be heard participating along the way.

The final songs are originals Ako co-wrote with different collaborators.

“Water Through Taro,” co-written with Laurel and Ed Aiona, describes a return to rural lands that once were home.

“Your Love,” co-written with Nathan Aweau, is a straight-from-the-heart testament of the eternal love of Jesus Christ gives mankind.

For more information on Ako and her music, visit faithakomusic.com