

Faith Ako's new album brings aloha spirit to Sonoma County

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Hawaiian musician Faith Ako remembers, as a child growing up on the north shore of Oahu, frequently playing music with her 14 siblings — all older — in the family living room after dinner. Her brothers strummed guitars and ukuleles and her sisters played the family's black piano.

The Rohnert Park artist carries these memories with her, and they appear in her songs and lyrics. Ako, an award-winning singer and songwriter, tells colorful stories of the islands and her culture through her sultry, mighty voice and ukulele.

Now, after a pandemic pause, she's bringing her fourth album to the stage with a performance Nov. 5 at the Luther Burbank Center. "Ku'u 'Aina Aloha" (The Love of My Homeland) was released in

March 2020 and had been scheduled for a summer tour before the coronavirus pandemic intervened.

Ako already has garnered high-level recognition for the new album — she was one of five finalists for the Na Hoku Hanohano Award 2021 for Hawaiian Album of the Year.

"It doesn't matter if you're from Hawaii. What matters is what's inside," Ako said of her music, as she pointed to her heart.

New album

Ako recorded "Ku'u 'Aina Aloha" in Honolulu with Oahu-based musicians. The album's 11 songs include six hula covers, three original songs and two about her hometown which, Ako said, had never been recorded.

The busy artist spent four years traveling to Honolulu to record the album while also working full-time as a special-education teacher at Rancho Cotate High School in Rohnert Park, a job she retired from this spring.

With every song, there's a story, developed over time. Take, for example, one of her original songs, [“Pulelehua”](#) (“Butterfly”).

In 2016, as she and her grandkids watched a Hawaiian storytelling play at the Rincon Valley Regional Library, Ako was struck by the depiction of butterflies as ephemeral, free-spirited and flitting from place to place. The same can be said of people, though we also return to those places “that made us feel like, ‘This is home,’” she said.

Later, on a hike with her family in 2018 at Sugarloaf Ridge State Park, Ako paused to sit on a rock and write in her journal. As she gazed into the forest of Douglas firs, she was visited by two butterflies, one yellow and black and the other with blue wings.

“The butterflies kept going, one by one,” Ako said. “Then I just started writing down words on paper” — the butterflies alighting on trees, branches and leaves. Ako was fascinated by their “soft and quaint” nature.

In the song, her words are simple, paired with soft acoustic strings and Ako's powerful voice: “Pulelehua, ho'okauahehe ana,” she sings — “Butterfly, flying softly, gently, continuously.”

“I always write my first thoughts, yeah? It's whatever thoughts attract you to that connection, emotion, that song or dance you're experiencing,” Ako said. “It's whatever arises inside of you first. Then I create around that.”

In 2019, she came up with the melody for “Pulelehua.” It had been playing in her head for years, she said, sprouting from the tunes she heard while grocery shopping and from movie soundtracks.

“I picked tunes that grabbed my ear then hopped on my piano and tried to play the melody over and over,” Ako said. “Then I connected it to another line, another bridge. Then I tested it out on the ukulele.”

One day she heard the gong of a grandfather clock at the Santa Rosa Junior College and was reminded of chimes. That made it into the song, too. The “chimes,” restyled by her band members into acoustic guitar plucking, can be heard at the beginning of “Pulelehua.”

“I hope people feel hopeful when they listen to this album,” Ako said. “I hope they feel the strength to carry on, to keep moving and to enjoy life. ‘The party is today’ — that's my motto. We don't know what's coming up. Don't take things for granted.”

Stories of family and culture

Ako remembers her childhood vividly, playing with other kids, climbing trees and coming home to butterfish, hot rice and beans. But music was always important to Ako's family.

She took piano lessons, learned ukulele from her grandmother and sang in a church choir. She lived around a variety of tunes.

Behind the Akos lived the Pualoa family, who often played music from a radio.

“They’d play some funkadelic music,” Ako said with a laugh. “I remember hearing Jimi Hendrix, the Doors, Motown, Steely Dan, Diana Ross. That family had a big influence on my music, too.”

Like many artists during the pandemic, Ako needed to find ways other than live performance to market her music. After the release of her fourth album, she promoted her music on the distribution channel mele.com, and on social media and streaming sites like iTunes and Spotify.

“I sat tight and prayed hard that my music could get out,” Ako said. “Pushing it on Mele and on streaming companies was my only hope that people were listening to it without me performing live.”

Just before the pandemic, in January 2020, she underwent knee surgery. She was planning to recover while performing on her summer tour.

“On one end I was like, ‘I work on this album for nearly five years, I get ready to perform and then the world shuts down?’” Ako said. “God was like, ‘Aye, you can’t have your cake and eat it too; you need to rest.’”

Now that she’s back to live shows, what’s next? Enjoying retirement from her teaching day job, to start.

“Now that I’m retired, I’m gonna do some bucket-list things,” Ako said. “I’m ready to rest, spend time with my kids and grandkids (and) reflect on all the hard work I put into this album.”



For more information visit: faithakomusic.com

You can reach Staff Writer Mya Constantino at mya.constantino@pressdemocrat.com.
[@searchingformya](https://twitter.com/searchingformya) on Twitter.

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
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT
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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**
jberger@staradvertiser.com

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

Singer Faith Thompson Ako returns to Laie for two shows in March at the PCC Marketplace Gazebo

By [Anna Stephenson](#),
March 11, 2022

Faith Thompson Ako said she was born and raised on Moana Street and left Laie at 27 with two small children. She was the youngest of 15 children and described her family as a musical one. She said they all played instruments and sang, though they had no formal training aside from the church choir. "My piano was my first love."

Ako said she drew inspiration for her album, "Ku'u A'ina Aloha," from her childhood in Laie. "I remember [songs] from the May Day programs at Laie Elementary and Kahuku High School," she said.

Ako returns to the North Shore for two shows at the Polynesian Cultural Center's Marketplace Gazebo on March 14 and 19 from 5:30 to 7 p.m. each night.



Photo by Courtesy Faith Ako

Laie Heritage

She also attended BYU-Hawaii for two and a half semesters, and she was exposed to music from around the world through various clubs there, Ako said.

Additionally, she is an avid participant in hula, having found “quite a few” hula groups to work with in California, she explained. “I play. I sing. They dance,” she said. “We tell the story together.”

Her work with various hula group directors inspired and motivated her as she worked on the album, she said, because of their passion and support for her.

Another one of her inspirations, she said, was Auntie Genoa Keawe, an influential Hawaiian musician who spent part of her own childhood in Laie and was also a lifelong member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. According to the NEA website, Keawe, who was born in 1918 and passed away in 2008, received a National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts in 2000.

Ako also spoke of her maternal grandmother, who lived in Laie who inspired her music. She said her grandmother was blind in one eye, played the harmonica and “was a firecracker!”

According to Ako, it was through this side of her family, and this grandmother specifically, where her family gets their musical talents.

When Ako’s grandparents came to Laie from Samoa, she said, Laie was a “purely Hawaiian” town with very few Samoans. She said her grandmother, a “visionary woman,” was the one who prompted the move. “She said, ‘We’re gonna go on a boat somewhere. We’re gonna go on a mission,’” Ako said. “That mission was to Laie.”

Ako said her grandfather, a carpenter, helped build the temple, as well as the Church College of Hawaii (now BYUH).

Her Album: “Ku'u A'ina Aloha”

“Ku'u A'ina Aloha” contains two songs written about Laie: “Nani O Laie” (“Beautiful Laie”), and “Laie Kuu Aina” (“Laie, My Beloved Land”). The latter was written by Sam Kamaouha during the 1940s, and Ako said she received permission from Kamaouha’s family, who are from Laie, to cover it in her album.

Ako said it was common for Hawaiian artists to go to a certain beach, hill or mountain to cultivate the feelings they needed to write their music. “I can’t do that,” she said, “because I live here in Northern California, and right now it’s about 40 degrees.”

“If I lived at home in Hawaii, it would be so much easier for me,” she said. “I didn’t appreciate it until now that I’m older and have lived in California for 37 years ... When I’m home in Hawaii, I look at the mountains and the ocean, and it brings on new meaning for me. How did I not realize [how beautiful it is] growing up here?”

Many of Ako's family members live in Hawaii, and she is able to visit frequently, she said. On one such visit in 2015, she took the photo that is now the cover of her album. In the background of the photo is Mokolii, or Chinaman's Hat.

Another topic on "Ku'u A'ina Aloha," which took four years to record and produce, is the Savior. The song "Your Love" is written about him, and Ako's feelings about "what our Primary teachers ... [and] kupunas used to talk about."

Ako said her entire album, not just "Your Love," was inspired by "all the church leaders I've ever had," including Primary and Young Women's leaders.

"The Church has always been great about teaching ... music from a young age," she said.

A Family Pride & Joy

Hope Moea'i, a Hauula resident and Ako's older sister, said she was proud of her sister. "I always think of my mom as looking down on her with pride." Moea'i said her favorite song on the album is "Nani o Laie."

"She didn't mention it," Moea'i said of her sister Ako's nomination for the Hawaiian Album of the Year award. "She didn't dwell on it." The nomination came as a surprise to Moea'i, but she thought it was well-deserved.

"Every album I think she's just getting better and better," Moea'i said. "Ku'u A'ina Aloha" is Ako's 4th album.

Ako said she received and continues to receive a lot of support from her family with her music career. Moea'i said Ako always makes them feel very appreciated.

Chauncey Ako, an adjunct faculty in Exercise Science, and Faith Ako's son, said when his mom first went into music professionally, he was shocked. "I was a senior in high school ... We said, 'You're too old already, Mom!'"

He said his mother worked incredibly hard to record and produce her albums, and that he was "extremely, extremely proud of her for following her passion."

"She never would have thought about getting this nomination 25 years ago," he said.

His own children, he said, love "Ku'u A'ina Aloha" and play it "all the time" at his house. His personal favorite songs are "Nani o Laie" and "Your Love."

His children provided vocals for the song "Keiki O Ka Hula," but they didn't hear the song until the album was released.

"I feel blessed and privileged to have her as a mother," he said. "I think this is full circle for our family, and our [great-]grandparents who came to build the temple and had a vision of thriving in Laie."

New Releases

In December 2021, Ako released a new single, a duet with her cousin and BYUH alumnus, Joe Napeahi. Ako said she returned home, they recorded the single in studio on Dec. 9, and "nailed it!" The song, "Behold Laie," has been sung by many people before at town gatherings and functions, said Ako, but she and Napeahi are the first Laie residents to record it.

She credited Esther Macy, a music teacher at Kahuku High School, for encouraging her to record "Behold Laie," and also thanked Honolulu-based Dave Tucciarone, music producer and recipient of the Grammy Award and the Na Hoku Hanohano Award, for the use of his studio and recording equipment.

"This one's for you, Laie," Ako said. "Behold Laie" is available to listen to on Pandora, Apple Music and Spotify.

Ako will also be performing in Northern California at the Blue Note Napa on April 12 at 8 p.m. She said people can get ticket information on her website faithakomusic.com.