

“Fascinating Rhythm”--Sol Ho’opi’i and His Novelty Five (1938)

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Essay by Guy Cundell, PhD (guest post)*



Sol Ho’opi’i

In 1925, Hawaiian musician, Sol Ho’opi’i made his first recordings for a tiny and short-lived Hollywood record label, Sunset Records, under the name of The Waikiki Trio. His first sides included a version of George Gershwin’s “Lady Be Good” from a musical that had debuted the previous year. As steel guitarist and vocalist, Ho’opi’i merged Hawaiian techniques and sensibilities with cutting-edge American popular music, an approach he would maintain for the duration of his career as a commercial musician. Thirteen years later, in his final commercial recording session, he produced a joyous and spirited instrumental rendering of “Fascinating Rhythm” from Gershwin’s 1924 show. This recording stands at the crossroads of popular music, jazz and Hawaiian music and, furthermore, provided a pathway for the steel guitar into the heartland of American Country music through the emerging genre of Western Swing.

Born in Honolulu, Ho’opi’i was a devotee of early Hawaiian steel greats Pale K Lua and Joseph Kekuku, and in 1919 at the age of 17, he followed his idols who had moved to the mainland and he settled in Los Angeles. Unlike the earlier generation who traversed the United States in troupes of Hawaiian performers, he did not stray from the Los Angeles area and built a career as an instrumentalist and band leader in live performance and recording, with occasional movie appearances both as a musician and movie extra.

The steel guitar is a Hawaiian invention of the late 19th century. An adaptation of a standard guitar, the instrument is laid on the player’s lap and played with a steel bar that slides along the neck, giving rise to the name “steel guitar.” In the early 20th century, its popularity grew as the Hawaiian troupes performed across North America for Vaudeville audiences, in tent shows and at trade and cultural exhibitions, most notably the Panama-Pacific Exhibition in San Francisco. Enthusiasm for the instrument, and Hawaiian music more generally, gave rise to an industry

encompassing music performance, recording and music publishing and a large educational network of schools and teachers.

The acoustic instrument that began Sol's recording career differed greatly from that which he used 13 years later on "Fascinating Rhythm." A quest for increased volume had led instrument developers through mechanical experiments with metal resonators to the enduring solution of electronic amplification. Hawaiian steel guitarists were quick to adopt the new instruments whose sustain also enhanced the vocal-like qualities of Hawaiian steel guitar stylings. Thus, the first electric guitars to be manufactured and distributed at scale were steel guitars. Within bands this development elevated both steel and standard guitarists from accompanists to frontline soloists. Such was the quality of the Bakelite Rickenbacker B6 guitar used by Ho'opi'i on "Fascinating Rhythm" that similar models are still highly valued having become an integral part of the contemporary sound of artists such as Ry Cooder and Dave Lindley.

Ho'opi'i's output was designated "Hawaiian" throughout his career although his repertoire was drawn from three musical traditions. Two distinct categories were lyrical and evocative Hawaiian tunes and contemporary American popular music. Ho'opi'i's mastery of Hawaiian tunes saw him playing for Mary Pickford to help her achieve proper emotion for sad scenes while his penchant for popular music was evident from his first recording session. Between these two categories was a third stream, an amalgam known as Hapa Haole or half-white music. This form was introduced by Hawaiian composers at the beginning of the 19th century as a commercial endeavour to satisfy mainland tourists to Hawaii. Its commercial success was soon identified by Tin Pan Alley composers and it became an identifiable genre employing popular music language with English lyrics or Hawaiian subject matter to reference the islands.

The energetic display of swinging improvisation establishes "Fascinating Rhythm" as jazz while it is also infused in part by the lyricism of Hawaiian music and employs Hawaiian techniques on a Hawaiian instrument. The three-minute track consists of four repetitions of Gershwin's 32-bar form, fully utilizing the timespan afforded by the 78rpm pressing. Ho'opi'i is accompanied by a ukulele, two acoustic guitars and double bass. Each repetition offers strong contrasts in approach and instrumental technique. The first iteration presents Gershwin's original melody with some embellishments but, from there on, Ho'opi'i demonstrates varied improvisations. His approach is a modern one of abstracted improvised melodies in the tradition that had been established by Louis Armstrong. This contrasts with the earlier method of the embellishment of existing melodies.

In the second chorus, Ho'opi'i employs a remarkable and ground-breaking chord melody. The piquant harmony must have pricked up the ears of steel players everywhere who struggled as the harmonic complexity of popular music increased. Steel guitarists were restricted to sweeter harmonies by a fixed tuning of simple major triads which were fretted with a straight bar. Employing different angles of the bar across the neck provided some answers but Ho'opi'i's solution, a tweak to the standard E tuning, represents a significant milestone in developments that culminated decades later in the pedal steel guitar.

In the third chorus, Ho'opi'i improvises a melody in octaves up and down, using the full range of the instrument, the first half on the top strings and the second half on the lower strings. The final

chorus is a virtuosic display abstract improvisation finishing with a final recall of the innovative chord melody.

“Fascinating Rhythm” stands as an example of a stylistic model that inspired subsequent Country players, many of whom had been primed by instruction within the educational network that had been established across America. Bob Dunn, the father of Western Swing steel guitar with Milton Brown’s Brownies, cited Sol as an early influence. Players such as Herb Remington and Leon McAuliffe with Bob Will’s Texas Playboys adopted the Sol’s new tuning while the greatest virtuoso of Western Swing, Earl “Joaquin” Murphey, emerged from the steel guitar cauldron that was Los Angeles of the 1930s and 40s as a prodigy who could mimic Sol’s style with great accuracy.

“Fascinating Rhythm” represents a remarkable crossroads of musical culture which can remain masked by the sheer exuberance of the performance.

Guy Cundell, PhD, is a musician, independent researcher and music educator who has written extensively on the history of the steel guitar.

**The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.*