

Simply put, Daniel Ho is one of the most prolific and successful musicians Hawaii has ever produced. Born and raised on Oahu, he has spent most of his adult years living in the Los Angeles area, but the Islands have always exerted a strong influence on his creative life, even when he wasn't playing explicitly Hawaiian music. Consider this seriously abridged recitation of some of his career highlights:

In his early 20s, after studying music theory and composition at the Grove School of Music in L.A. and then at the University of Hawaii on Oahu, the gifted multi-instrumentalist—he had already studied organ, ukulele, classical guitar, and classical piano by the time he started high school—became a songwriter/arranger and then keyboard player for the popular L.A.-based commercial jazz band Kilauea, a fixture on the contemporary jazz charts through much of the 1990s. In the late '90s he began to dive deeply into his Hawaiian roots, starting his own independent record label, Daniel Ho Creations, which has released more than 100 acoustic and “Hawaii-themed” albums to date, featuring a slew of top Hawaiian musicians (and others). He has 18 solo albums to his credit, most centered on ukulele and/or slack-key guitar (he also is an excellent pianist), and has produced more than 50 recordings for others, often lending his own wide-ranging musical skills to those works. He is also involved in the creative design, production, and marketing of DHC products.

Along the way Ho has amassed 11 Grammy nominations—six wins—for production and/or performance in the World

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Music Album, Pop Instrumental Album, and (now-defunct) Hawaiian Music Album categories. He has also been a multiple winner at the Na Hoku Hanohano and Hawaii Music Awards (for everything from Studio Musician of the Year to trophies for Inspirational/Gospel Album, Slack Key Album, Folk Album, New Age Album, even Best Liner Notes!), and also at Taiwan's Golden Melody Awards. He's written and published 14 music and instructional books, performed with the Honolulu Symphony, and toured the world as a solo artist.

The past few years have been remarkably productive for this tireless artist: There are his instrumental, production, composition, and arrangement contributions to a pair of extraordinary discs featuring music and players from Mongolia (2017's *Between Sky & Prairie*) and China (the 2019 release *Embroidering Melodies*); plus the exciting debut of a new, 50-minute stage production he conceived called *Pineapple Mango: Hawaiian 'Ohana*, for which he wrote the music, co-wrote the lyrics, and also performs in the lead role! Oh, and for the last several years he's been collaborating with Southern California-based luthier Pepe Romero Jr. on a line of Romero Creations ukuleles, which have been rapturously received.

The ukulele has no better promoter today than Daniel Ho. “I love the ukulele,” he told *Making Music* magazine a couple of years ago. “I can take it everywhere. It's a way to have music with you all the time.”

Recently, we caught up with the perennially busy Ho and asked about this spate of cool recent projects.

## HAWAII'S GREATEST CONTEMPORARY MUSICAL AMBASSADOR TALKS ABOUT HIS NEW 'UKULELE MUSICAL,' RECENT FORAYS INTO WORLD MUSIC, THE UKES HE PLAYS, AND MORE

BY BLAIR JACKSON



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**You describe your new stage show, *Pineapple Mango: Hawaiian 'Ohana*, as a “ukulele musical.” Can you tell me a bit about what inspired you to tackle this new (to you) entertainment form and what went into its creation?**

Anne O'Neal, a documentary producer, had been filming my various productions and performances for months before realizing that she needed a central theme to give the documentary coherence. She wanted to follow a project through from conception to completion, and to capture the successes and obstacles along the way. I learned that her husband, Sam, is a TV writer. And born was the idea to take on a dream of mine since high school: the making of a musical.

I had no idea how much was involved in this multi-dimensional art form. Crafting every second of dialog, choreography, music, staging, and lighting is a monumental endeavor, but it is only the first step. To convincingly present every aspect in real time before a live audience requires a dedicated team, numerous rehearsals, adjustments, concentration, and a bit of adrenaline. In addition to the 22 performers on stage—cast, ensemble, and band—there were many more backstage who had equally important roles in lighting, sound, and production.

**How does the ukulele figure into the story and the music? And what ukes are you playing onstage?**

I am always searching for something unique. On a molecular level, it could be a chord voicing I've never used before, or altering one melody note to add interest, or simply paying attention to the spaces between the notes. On a broader scope, the [Romero] Tiny Tenor ukulele and [Ohana] Bongolele and Shakerlele—all of which are used in the musical—contribute in function and aesthetics to my sound and identity as an artist. These are all lessons I learned along the way in my growth as a musician, and we address some of these moments in our 50-minute stage production.

The story, loosely based on my upbringing, is set in the Kaimuki area [of Honolulu] where I grew up. Some of my earliest musical memories include strumming chords on

ukulele to accompany my dad as he played guitar and sang. I thought doing all the music on ukulele would be a novel idea.

I play my spalted mango Tiny Tenor, we have an ST Concert that the characters Faith and Ray Kai play in a couple of scenes, Randy Drake plays the Bongolele and Shakerlele in his percussion set, and Steve Billman plays the Ohana bass ukulele. I used the AKG DMS300 wireless system for my ukulele so I could move freely around the stage.

**Of course, you are a multi-instrumentalist, not just a uke player. On what instrument did you compose most of the songs/music?**

I co-wrote all of the music with my friends Amy Ku'uleialoha Stillman (who wrote the Hawaiian language songs), Faith Rivera, Hope Mayo, and Siena Lee. I usually come up with melodies in my head and use ukulele, piano, or guitar to find harmonies. Many of the songs were written with ukulele, as I tend to have one with me all the time.

**Did you have any trepidation about appearing in it yourself? After all, acting is a completely different world than writing and performing music. Were you nervous?**

My original role in the production was music director. I thought it would be fun to have a bit part, but when the person we had in mind for the lead didn't work out, the director asked if I would do it. So, I was actually not first choice, but I'm always game to try something I've never done before!

The interactive, emotional nature of acting is a performing experience unlike anything I've ever attempted onstage. It is vulnerable, but I felt safe, inspired, and supported by the super-talented cast and

**'OUR GOAL WAS TO INTRODUCE THE JOY OF MAKING MUSIC IN A FUN AND EMPOWERING WAY.'**

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ensemble that surrounded me—Kumu Keali'i Ceballos and the members of Halau Hula Keali'i o Nalani. It will have a lasting effect on how I present my songs going forward, knowing that there is so much more I can do to connect with audiences and convey emotions through music.

**What has the reaction been to the musical so far? Did the process of actually performing onstage in front of an audience lead to any revisions/changes in the music or “book”?**

We did three full-house performances at The Broad Stage in Santa Monica—two student matinees for children from nearby school districts, and a sold-out show for the public. The response was very positive. It connected with the audience in many ways and the consensus was that it ought to be performed much more. Parts of the story were quite emotional, and people said they were moved and even cried because they could relate to what the characters were going through.

All of the revisions were made during rehearsals and the show was locked in the final week leading up to the performances to allow us time to memorize our lines and staging. The result was an endearing story with ups and downs about family, perseverance, and believing in oneself, with mini-lessons in ukulele, Hawaiian language, and hula woven throughout.

**What are your aspirations for it? More performances? Perhaps a “soundtrack” album?**

I hope to continue performing *Pineapple Mango: Hawaiian 'Ohana* at performing arts centers, schools, ukulele festivals, and wherever we can. I am an advocate for keeping music in classrooms and I would love to present the musical as a fundraiser to launch ukulele programs at schools. It would be a fun and effective way to announce the program to a community, while raising money for instruments, books, and supplies.

We collaborated with The Broad Stage and the Santa Monica Unified School District to create four lessons around Hawaiian language and dance, creativity, social justice, and overcoming challenges, which teachers shared with their students before

Performers in *Pineapple Mango*: Hawaiian 'Ohana (L to R): Kehaulani Matsuura, Kanani Toji, Daniel Ho, Lika Hirakami, Keali'i Ceballos.



attending the musical. This way, the students would have more to gain from the experience.

To help with classroom curriculum, I co-authored a one-year ukulele program for elementary school students called Ukulele at School [UkuleleAtSchool.com] with Dr. Steve Sano. He is the Chair of the Stanford University Music Department and a ukulele aficionado. Our goal was to introduce the joy of making music in a fun and empowering way. My percussionist of 25 years, Randy Drake, PhD, also wrote a Bongolele and Shakerlele rhythm book for the Ukulele at School program that precedes the ukulele method by teaching rhythm. It uses the same repertoire, so students can play together, foster friendships, and build a sense of community.

We designed the musical to be scalable, so it can be performed with a full ensemble or pared down to a core group of five—in which case I play all of the music on ukulele—for smaller productions.

All of the songs in the musical are on my

albums *The Original Collection* and *Aukahi (Flowing Harmony)*.

**Let's turn to your ambitious recent album packages. On your latest, *Embroidering Melodies*, you dive deep into Chinese music with your own arrangements of traditional songs, as well as original pieces, using a combination of Chinese instruments and your contributions on a variety of Western instruments, from piano to requinto guitar to various ukuleles, including standard, baritone, and bass ukes. Can you talk about how the ukes are used on the album and what specific models you employed?**

It has been a pure delight to weave ukulele into my world music projects. I've met many people in my travels who had previously not seen or heard the instrument, and it is fascinating to introduce its voice to indigenous instrumentations and various genres. It has been embraced by collaborators that range from Taiwanese aboriginals (*On a Gentle Island Breeze; To & From the Heart*) to Mongolian nomads (*Between the Sky & Prairie*) to Platinum

album-selling rock stars in Japan (*Electric Island, Acoustic Sea*) to deeply revered Spanish classical guitar legends (*Aloha Española*). And most recently, to Suzhou, China, to record the folk and theater art traditions of Pingtan and Kunqu (*Embroidering Melodies*).

My main recording ukuleles are a hand-made Pepe Romero [Jr.] tenor with Brazilian rosewood back and sides and a spruce top, and the spalted mango Tiny Tenor. The DHo Six String is a baritone ukulele with a Tiny Tenor body shape. It has a 21-inch scale and is tuned exactly like a guitar (E A D G B E), but I use mine in the G Kilauea tuning (D G C G B E). The bass ukulele I used on this album is an Ohana OBU-22.

**What does a bass uke contribute to the sound that a more conventional bass guitar would not?**

The acoustic tone and ADSR—attack, decay, sustain, and release—of the Ohana OBU-22 matches the ukulele, acoustic guitar, and most plucked stringed instruments—pipa,

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guzheng, sanshin, koto, tovshuur, doshpulur, bouzouki—perfectly. I recorded and tested the prototype of my signature model OBU-22 in the studio last year, and I'm excited that Ohana is debuting it at Winter NAMM in 2020. The new signature model is a pro version of their OBU-22, with a longer scale for more sustain, abalone rosette, new bridge, and pro setup.

Of course, a full-scale electric bass guitar has a much longer sustain, similar to the low strings of a grand piano or an electric guitar. When I use one in these orchestrations, it's a Yamaha TRB-5P electric bass.

**Are the harmonics at the beginning of “Water Sleeves Waltz” from a regular uke, with the bass then falling in?**

Yes, I played those harmonics, which sound an octave higher, on my handmade Pepe Romero tenor, then played the melody in normal fingerstyle. I used a stereo digital delay on the harmonics to create an echo effect, scoring the movement of falling droplets of water.

**When I listen to the uke line on a piece like “Mountain Pink,” I can almost hear the sound of an Asian plucked instrument. Are your lines transcriptions from passages that would likely be played on traditional Chinese instrument? If so, what does the character of the uke bring to the melody?**

I used a technique called *campanella* to emulate a guzheng [zither] or yangqin [dulcimer] on ukulele. Campanella is a bell-like technique where linear passages are played on adjacent strings instead of on the same string. This allows the notes to sustain rather than be cut off when the next pitch is played. I also echoed melodic themes of the traditional composition to create a thematic ukulele part. Performing these traditional-sounding passages on ukulele adds a twist to the otherwise familiar.

**It's interesting that you note that on “Peach Blossoms” the 6-string baritone is in Kilauea slack-key tuning, and indeed there are moments when a whiff of Hawaii comes blowing through as a result. Are there are other tunes that required non-standard guitar tunings?**

In my quest for unique guitar voicings, I created the G Kilauea tuning (D G C G B E) in 1998 and have been using it for all of my fingerstyle playing ever since. It is a hybrid of standard guitar tuning (E A D G B E) and the most popular Hawaiian slack-key guitar tuning, G Taro Patch (D G D G B D). The *nahenahe* [“sweet and gentle”] sound often associated with Hawaiian music is inherent in this slack-key tuning. Every now and then, I may tune a string down on guitar to a lower pitch if a song or section calls for it.

For the most part, I've always stuck to standard tuning on ukulele.

**The style of singing on this album is unique and quite different than most of what we in the West are used to. How, if at all, did the range and drama of the vocals affect your arrangement choices in terms of instrumentation and layering of parts?**

My philosophy when presenting world music is to “frame” traditional art with musical elements that contribute but do not distract or alter. I create counter melodies by embellishing motifs found in the

songs, and harmonies are inspired by the emotions portrayed—happy, sad, consonant, dissonant.

The tessitura, or general range, of the vocals and instruments are in the middle to upper registers, so I would sometimes fill in the lower registers with my DHo Six String baritone ukulele or piano.

**When you were developing your arrangements, did you know from the beginning the full extent of which instruments you wanted for each song, or did the process of recording them suggest to you new or different things to add or subtract from them?**

The pieces that had the most orchestral density were my originals, particularly “Five Silken Threads” and “Water Sleeves Waltz.” I love to experiment with unique instrument combinations, as well as melodies, rhythms, and harmonies that are foreign to a genre.

For example, “Five Silken Threads” was inspired by the beautiful embroidery artwork of Suzhou. Master artisans weave subtle shades of color and shadows into cloth with detailed needlework and thread. From a distance it simply looks like a painting, but a closer look reveals intricate layers of thread work. Musically, “Five Silken Threads” begins from a distance. The guzheng plays a simple melody in a meter of two. A recorder soon enters and plays along in two, then evolves into a polyrhythm of five over two. The caxixi follows, suggesting a waltz-like feel in 3/4 time. The yangqin, with its dynamic dulcimer tone, introduces a syncopated accompaniment in five as the bass ukulele establishes the harmonic foundation. Those five interlacing instruments weave together in melodic and polyrhythmic counterpoints, just as thousands of lovingly stitched threads would to a masterful work of embroidery.

**Last question about this project: How “live” were the sessions in terms of whether the instruments and singers were all playing at once? Were most of your parts added later?**  
The Kunqu and Pingtan songs were all



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recorded together in small groups, exactly as they normally perform them on stage. I overdubbed my parts when I returned to Los Angeles. My original instrumentals were just the opposite—I recorded my tracks first, then overdubbed the Chinese instruments during our recording sessions in Suzhou.

**Your previous transcultural album, *Between the Sky & Prairie*, with the Grasslands Ensemble, visited a different culture and musical tradition (though adjacent to China and sharing similarities) and also used the ukulele in different, but no less effective, ways. Can you talk a little about the differences in approach between those two projects, and the challenges of integrating your skillset as a musician into each?**

I feel most apprehensive when I embark on a new transcultural project, because I don't know anything about the music and I am not certain that I will be able to contribute anything of value. Our trips begin with a few eye-opening days of discovery where we visit historic and scenic locations, and meet musicians, artists, government officials, ethnomusicologists, and teachers as we dine together on local cuisine. I avidly take in as much of the sights, sounds, and tastes as I can, always imagining how these experiences could be reflected in music. Gradually, songs reveal themselves to me, sometimes on the tour bus, sometimes scribbled on a hotel note pad.

The title song, "Between the Sky & Prairie," was written while riding in the back of an SUV through the grasslands of Inner Mongolia. In awe as we drove through an endless expanse of blue and green, I wondered to myself if there was a musical way to

capture my feelings at that moment—peaceful, excited, and grateful for this gift of music, which had somehow brought me to this majestic land only a stone's throw from Russia. I came up with a melodic theme that gently rippled, like the rolling hills of the steppe. In contrast to the mountainous terrain of the Hawaiian Islands, the Mongolian sky and prairie meet on a fairly straight horizon. [See Ho's ukulele transcription of this piece on page 24.]

**I hope this is not an improper question, but is your own ethnic derivation as a Hawaiian from Chinese ancestry, and if so, is that one reason you have explored the traditional music of that part of the world?**

I don't identify too strongly with anything, which is why I don't have a tattoo [laughs]. I loved growing up in Hawaii and I enjoy learning everything I can about my Chinese heritage. I don't even know where in China my ancestors are from, but I plan on

researching this the next time I'm back on Oahu.

I have been so fortunate to work with Wind Music [a Taiwan-based record label] on these world music collaborations. They are like family, and thanks to them, we have made many new friends in far-off places and a lifetime's worth of memories over the past eight years.

**Now that we're a few years down the line from *Aloha España* and you have had the chance to perform that music onstage with Pepe a number of times, what are your thoughts about that fusion of Spanish music and Hawaiian instrumentation, and does it suggest there are other classical avenues—not necessarily Spanish ones—you'd like to explore with the ukulele?**

I studied classical guitar for about five years beginning when I was nine years old. I have been a fan of Pepe Romero since then and recording *Aloha España* was a dream come true and a high point of my career. Although it is some of the most challenging music I've ever played, performing with him is surreal—while I'm playing, I often smile to myself because I can hardly believe I'm on stage with him!

I sincerely believe that the ukulele is as legitimate and capable an instrument as any, and it fits comfortably in any musical setting. I've had the opportunity to produce a handful of chorale and orchestral works—Hadyn, Duruflé, Brahms, Satie—and it makes me realize there is still much more that can be done to expand the ukulele repertoire. I welcome any and every opportunity to learn while exploring the ukulele's potential.

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With classical guitar giant Pepe Romero.

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**I see you every year at NAMM with Pepe Romero Jr.'s line of ukes. Can you tell me how that collaboration has been going—the reaction, changes you might have made along the way, plans you have for the future?**

I've been designing instruments with Pepe Jr. for about eight years and we still talk almost every day. He is steeped in tradition and wide open to innovation—an unusual combination of traits. Romero Creations now has a dozen models that Pepe Romero Sr., Pepe Jr., and I have designed, with function and aesthetics as our top priorities. It is exciting to see the instruments resonating with people, and he is selling them as quickly as they arrive in his warehouse.

My philosophy about music has always been to see a note through from beginning to end—from composition to playing, singing, recording, mixing, mastering, and graphic design. Designing instruments precedes this entire process. Now it begins with the tree, which is like writing a song with wood!

**You certainly keep busy! I'm almost afraid to ask, but what other new projects do you have coming up in the next year or so?**

I just released an online ukulele course with Yamaha that starts from the very beginning—for someone who has never touched a ukulele—and covers everything I've learned about music, including improvisation, classical compositional techniques, every chord you need to know to play any song, polyrhythms, etc. It is part of Yamaha's new Musician's Creativity Lab series, which features Bob James teaching piano, Lee Ritenour teaching guitar, Billy Sheehan teaching bass, and Akira Jimbo teaching drums. [Website: [musicians.online](http://musicians.online)]

Jason Arimoto, the authorized advisor for my Yamaha online course, provides video feedback to students' questions. Jason and I also developed PhD Strings together. We researched and tested many types and gauges of ukulele strings to find the best-sounding and most comfortable to play. It has cultivated somewhat of an underground following and business has been growing steadily over the last nine years.

I'm also working with Doug Reynolds, the producer of the Palm Springs and Reno Ukulele Festivals, on a concert series called Guitars & Ukuleles. We've presented duo concerts in Reno, Carson City, and Palm Springs with Muriel Anderson, Laurence Juber, and the Makaha Sons' Jerome Koko. It has been a wonderful opportunity to interact with world-class guitarists.

Yamaha has just picked up Romero Creations as their ukulele brand in Japan and made the Daniel Ho Ukulele Pack their official recommended instrument for their Yamaha schools nationwide.

I am also mixing and mastering an orchestral project, the Duruflé *Requiem* [Op. 9], with the Grammy-nominated St. Lawrence String Quartet and the Stanford Chamber Chorale, conducted by Dr. Steve Sano.

I just published a new songbook called *Daniel Ho 'Ukulele Instrumentals*, which contains instrumentals from five of my recent albums—*Ikena*, *Aukahi (Flowing Harmony)*, *Aloha España*, *Between the Sky & Prairie*, and *Embroidering Melodies*—written in tablature and notation.

I also updated my *Polani* songbook this year, which is an exact transcription of the Grammy-nominated solo ukulele album.

**Last question: How often do you travel to Hawaii? I know there are many Hawaiians in L.A.—are there also a lot of Hawaiian musicians living there? And do you tend to hang out together?**

I get back to the Islands around once or twice a year. There are a lot of Hawaii transplants in Los Angeles, but I don't get a chance to hang out as often as I'd like to. **U**

