

## Interview with Daniel Ho

by Annett Richter, Vice President, Minnesota Guitar Society

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**AR:** Welcome, Daniel. It is a great pleasure to have you with us for this interview. You are an inspiring artist that wears many hats in the world of music. You are a multi-instrumentalist (‘ukulele and slack key guitar among them), composer, arranger, performer, collaborator, producer, recording musician, teacher, pedagogue, and author. In addition, you are a multi-award and trophy winner (6 Grammys among them), and you were nominated for awards on many occasions. And you also film and produce music videos. We are excited to hear more from you about your past and current work in the many aspects of your productive career. Thank you for being here.



Daniel Ho. Photo credit: Lydia Miyashiro-Ho.

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**1) AR:** I am curious to learn more about your musical beginnings and how you came to the ‘ukulele and the slack key guitar. Both are instruments closely associated with Hawaii and Hawaiian music. You have spent much of your musical career on the continent (in L.A.), and you have to your credit an impressive list of accomplishments. In their Spring 2020 issue, *Ukulele Magazine* called you “one of the most prolific and successful musicians Hawaii has ever produced.” What was your musical life like when you still lived in Hawaii? Did you grow up in musical surroundings, and did you pick up the ‘ukulele and the slack key guitar there? Do you get to go back to Hawaii these days as we have begun to return, in one way or another, to life pre-pandemic a bit more (though the Delta variant has recently been causing more concern)?

**DH:** When I was around three years old, my mom introduced me to the joy of making music on a little red toy piano (like the one Schroeder plays in *Peanuts*). I think “Mary Had a Little Lamb” was the first melody she taught me. In second grade, my dad sent me to organ lessons with Mrs. Corley. In third grade, I picked up the ‘ukulele. After learning a few basic chords, I remember strumming along with my dad while he sang and played his guitar. We had a big three-ring binder full of popular local songs in Hawai‘i. It was a homemade collection of typed lyric sheets with chord symbols above the lyrics. I first tried to play guitar around then. It was so big that my head just cleared the top of the body when I held it. I would put my ear against the side of the guitar while I played and fell in love with its big, warm sound. When I was nine, my dad sent me to classical guitar lessons which I would continue for five years. At this time, I learned about artists like Andrés Segovia and Pepe Romero. I couldn’t have imagined that one day I would record an album with one of the greats! I put down my ‘ukulele and guitar for many years as I learned drums, bass, and piano in high school. And then I studied composition and film scoring at the Grove School of Music in Los Angeles. Following a period in contemporary jazz with my band Kilauea in the early 1990s, I picked up slack key guitar in the late ‘90s when it was experiencing a bit of a renaissance. While on tour in Japan, someone mentioned that I would have more value as a performer if I sang. Around the same time, a Japanese record label asked me to record an ‘ukulele album. So in 1999, I recorded an ‘ukulele album of originals, classical and jazz music, and even sang the song “The Best That I Can,” which was my first vocal recording. It wasn’t quite what the record company was expecting (they wanted Hawaiian music), and they turned it down. I was a bit hurt at the time, but it turned out to be a fortunate occurrence. The album was called *Pineapple Mango*, and the title track, which I wrote in music school as a TV main title assignment, ended up being perhaps my most popular song.

I have not been back to Hawai‘i lately, especially because of the pandemic, but it is always a part of me. You would think that my pidgin accent would have faded away after all these years, but people sometimes still have trouble understanding me. Haha!

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**2) AR:** Thank you for sharing this with us. You have traveled the musical path from very early on and have had experiences that, despite obstacles, ended up turning into fruitful outcomes. It is always worth the effort to keep forging ahead, no matter the challenges along the way. Through your record label, Daniel Ho Creations, you have released over 100 recordings so far, several of them with a Hawaiian theme. What about Hawaiian music or music connected to Hawaii have you found particularly fascinating?

**DH:** I had the great pleasure of meeting slack key guitar master George Kahumoku, Jr. in the late ‘90s. We have done many tours together and recorded thirteen albums. He is my mentor in Hawaiian music and taught me much of the traditional repertoire. After being under Uncle George’s wing, I began to write original Hawaiian songs with Amy Ku‘uleialoha Stillman, an esteemed cultural scholar and ethnomusicologist at the University of Michigan (<https://lsa.umich.edu/ac/people/faculty/akstill.html>). We have written three albums together

(*'ikena*, *He Nani*, and *Huana Ke Aloha*) and the songbook *Na 'ikena*. *'Ikena* (referring to a “panoramic view” or “knowledge” and a quest to expand one’s horizons) and *Huana Ke Aloha* (“*aloha* overflows abundantly”) both won Grammy Awards, and *He Nani* (“to behold beauty”) received a Grammy nomination. Our songs are based in traditional forms with lyrics steeped in personal experiences. I enjoy infusing elements from other genres and world music rhythms, like *bulerías*, *partido alto*, bluegrass, South African, odd meters, jazz harmonies, and classical choral. I do my best to be mindful of tradition, but also find creative freedom in opening up the music with new approaches and arrangements to give listeners a fresh perspective. One of the most rewarding aspects about writing original Hawaiian music has been the blessing of seeing hula choreographies set to the songs. It is amazing to see beautiful dance interpretations that give the music even more life.



Daniel Ho. Photo credit: David Ho.

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**3) AR:** Fascinating to learn about your contribution to the fusion of various musical styles and to a kind of globalization of music. We see it frequently these days, and it is always interesting to me to learn more about individual approaches to such musical cross-fertilizations and to collaborations with scholars. You have been immensely prolific as a multi-instrumentalist and a recording musician with 18 solo albums to your credit, many of them on ukulele and slack key guitar. It is remarkable and inspiring to see how tirelessly you have worked with these instruments. What are some of your current and/or in-the-near-future recording projects that you are thinking about or that are in the works?

**DH:** I’ll answer this question and the next together.

**4) AR:** During the pandemic this past year and a half, many artists were adversely affected by this global health crisis and yet became creative in unpredictable new ways. It is always striking to see what creativity and good things can come out of a predicament of this scale. What challenges did you experience during the pandemic, and what creativity and positive events came about for you?

**DH:** In January 2020, I was on tour in Brunei and Thailand as a cultural ambassador for the US Embassy. There were 300 Covid cases in the U.S. when we left. On our return a few weeks later, there were 30,000 and countries like the Philippines were beginning to close their borders. We made it back in time for “Safer at Home,” and I think “surreal” would best describe how it felt. While I tried to figure out which direction to take (like everyone else on planet earth), I decided I would just bide my time and record an album. Dani Joy and I recorded *Drop In My Flower* in March and April of 2020, hoping that things would get better. They didn’t. I heard on the news that even if you survive a Covid infection, you can permanently lose 20 to 30 percent of your lung capacity. There were two original songs that I had been singing in the shower for years—“So Long As” and “Will You Be There”—with the hopes of recording them some day. They are at the top of my range, and I never felt that I sang them well enough to record them. The news that there is the possibility I may never sing again inspired me to record the vocal parts immediately! So I did. This led to more “time-biding” as I recorded my solo album *Playing through Changes*. In jazz, that means to rehearse the chords or “changes” without playing the melody. I chose this title as it implies the improvised nature of our existence (no point in making plans) as well as how we play music to see us through those unprecedented changes.

“Oceandance,” one of the tracks on *Playing through Changes*, is a toccata I wrote in 1989. It is a piece I have always wanted to play, but never carved the time from my schedule to learn it. Another gift of the pandemic—time! In July 2020, YAMAHA Pianos sponsored a music video of this piece which features American cellist and recent Stanford graduate Danna Xue (<https://youtu.be/I87HfI8Ygfo>). It was the middle of 2020, and I had been following the news and talking to friends for months about the ongoing predicament. I guess you can say that “Oceandance” was the catalyst for my new career in music video production! I was never comfortable with the audio/video resolution of live, online performance, and music videos seem like a good way for musicians to share their art with high-quality, immersive visuals and audio.

For the past year, I have been learning about lighting, cameras, editing, and color grading. We have filmed over 24 music videos since then, including a live concert/album, *East West Players Presents Daniel Ho & Friends Live in Concert*. (<https://www.danielho.com/physical-shop/cd-east-west-players-presents-daniel-ho-friends>).

Another project I have in the works is a solo ‘ukulele album. It would be like a sequel to my *Pōlani* (“Pure”) album, a compilation of all original fingerstyle ‘ukulele compositions. I have about five pieces completed to date. I also plan to release a songbook written in tablature and notation to accompany it. Archiving my music has been important to me. It is a way to further

share what I am passionate about, and I hope people will find enjoyment in playing my ‘ukulele, slack key guitar, and piano compositions many years from now.

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**5) AR:** Thank you for sharing this with us, Daniel. Your efforts in branching out into music video production are admirable and inspiring, and as we all have learned and experienced since the beginning of the pandemic in our own individual ways, human creativity continues to take place and survives regardless of the circumstances, and oftentimes counter our expectations. Your collaboration with luthier Pepe Romero Jr. in creating the Tiny Tenor ‘ukulele is unique. This instrument has been popular among ‘ukulele players. Why is it called “tiny” and what inspired you to design such an ‘ukulele? How did you connect with Pepe Jr.? Also, could you tell us a bit about the process of designing this instrument with Mr. Romero and where the Tiny Tenors are made?

**DH:** I met Pepe Romero Jr. around nine years ago, and he has influenced my music and sound in ways I could only have dreamed of. I presented him with an idea that I had been conceptualizing and modifying for some time, inspired by my lifelong experience with the ‘ukulele. Essentially, I wanted to combine the most attractive qualities of the different size ‘ukuleles into one instrument. The Tiny Tenor is based on a lute. By eliminating the waist, we created more cubic volume in the body. This allowed the side panels to become more like soundboards (bending the sides to form a waist stiffens them—like corrugated roofing is bent to stiffen the metal) and reduced multiple resonant frequencies which produces a more even sound from pitch to pitch (this is wonderful for recording and reduces feedback when amplified). We shortened the headstock (which doesn’t contribute much to the sound) to make the overall length 23”—the length of a concert size ‘ukulele. It is called a Tiny Tenor because it has the full sound of a tenor ‘ukulele but fits into a concert gig bag. This is perfect as it is easy to quietly play on the airplane, train, or in a car! There are a lot of design points—like the sound hole size and position (which is moved towards the neck to make the soundboard bigger, and the larger-than-normal sound hole would be like singing with your mouth open), the string-in-body bridge (direct transfer of vibration from string to soundboard), a reverse fan-braced top (it moves more freely in the center of the soundboard), and no parallel surfaces (no standing waves)—that all contribute to the big sound of this concise instrument. The Romero Creations instruments are all handmade in Vietnam. The first few Tiny Tenors Pepe built were so well received that he needed to look into sourcing out production in order to keep up with the demand. You can find more details at <https://www.romerocreations.com/tiny-tenor>, and I also created a short video explaining our design here: <https://youtu.be/zNR6VHMFrn0>.

In May of 2021, the Grammy Museum introduced my spalted mango Tiny Tenor via one of their exhibits. Working with Pepe on the Tiny Tenor was like co-writing a song with wood. It has given me a unique voice, which is something we as artists are always seeking (<https://youtu.be/5ETjpcSpRM0>).

We have five designs in the Tiny Tenor family, including a 21”-scale baritone sized six-string instrument called the DHo Six String that is tuned like a guitar (E A D G B E). This instrument is really a dream come true for a touring musician because it has a rich and balanced sound, and ... it can be easily carried on a plane (<https://youtu.be/xpnWeew5Fts>)!



From left to right: Pepe Romero Sr., Pepe Romero Jr., and Daniel Ho.  
Photo credit: Lydia Miyashiro-Ho.

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**6) AR:** What an innovative creation, the Tiny Tenor, one that combines a unique design, engineering, sound, and practicality, all in one. Thank you for your insights into this fascinating collaboration. Speaking of the Romero family, you have also performed with Pepe Romero Sr. What brought you together as collaborating musicians? What kind of music have you performed together, and how do ‘ukulele and classical guitar work together when it comes to the music itself (i.e., range, timbre, and texture)?

**DH:** Pepe Jr. invited me to meet his father around eight years ago when Romero Creations debuted his signature parlor guitar. We sat in his living room in Del Mar, California, where the Romero family has been rehearsing since the 1970s and played *Romanza* together. I have been a fan of his since I was ten years old and could barely contain myself. Here is a video of that day: <https://youtu.be/Hji1oFUPmnI>.

We really connected musically and ended up recording *Aloha España* together. It is an album of classical guitar and ‘ukulele duets. One of the biggest challenges was composing ‘ukulele parts to these solo guitar pieces that everyone knows and performs. I used classical composition techniques (diatonic transposition, inversion, inversion retrograde, augmentation, diminution) to create ‘ukulele counterpoints that were derived from the composers’ themes. Out of respect for the composers, everything I wrote and played were direct references to the original motifs. The result: an ‘ukulele obligato to beloved guitar parts in a perfect blending that allows the listener to hear both instruments. Pepe Jr.’s handmade ‘ukuleles are built to sound like miniature classical guitars. They have higher tessituras than his guitars, and the marriage of sounds is almost seamless. Mr. Romero was very pleased with the album and our performances, and he insisted that we do it again someday with a suite of Gaspar Sanz pieces.

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**7) AR:** I eagerly await the Gaspar Sanz project. When I listened to *Aloha España* recently, I felt as though I walked into a concert hall filled with the sound of many (i.e., far more than two) plucked string instruments on a stage. The combination of a variety of timbres drew me in, and the fact that each instrument was clearly audible at all times made it transparent and a joy to listen to. The clarity in sound of the ‘ukulele on this album both enriches and balances with that of the guitar. This allows the listener to follow effortlessly the individual lines and the counterpoint in the texture of each piece. I am also curious to hear more about your first live album that you recorded last year in November, during the pandemic months. You brought together several musicians for this project, including your spouse, Lydia. What did you find most rewarding and what were some of the challenges you encountered? Given that you are also a studio artist and recording musician, what inspired you to record a live album?

**DH:** The year 2020 was my thirtieth year as a working musician, and I had never recorded a live album before; therefore, this project was quite a milestone. It was originally just a filmed performance, but the audio came out so well that we decided to make a live album as well. The group that performed are my closest artistic collaborators. Randy Drake has been recording and performing with me since 1994. He is a beautiful person and a world-class musician. Keali‘i Ceballos and his hula troupe Hālau Hula Keali‘i o Nālani have danced with me for over a decade, bringing an amazing visual element to our music. Kanani Toji and Keali‘i were also leads in our musical *Pineapple Mango* (<https://youtu.be/pUCfRY0kVP0>). And my wife, Lydia, has been doing everything and going everywhere with me for the past 18 years. She typically stays behind the scenes, so bringing her to the stage was a lot of fun and truly special!

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**8) AR:** Can you enlighten us a bit about the slack key guitar? How is it connected to Hawaii? What does the term “slack key” refer to? How is the guitar tuned and how does one play it?

**DH:** Hawaiian slack key guitar is a traditional style of guitar playing that was used to accompany hula. Guitars were first brought to the islands by Mexican cowboys who taught the Hawaiians how to manage their cattle. They left their instruments but never explained how to tune them, and this resulted in strings that were usually slackened, or tuned down, to open major chords. Using open tunings, we try to create a *nahenahe* (“sweet and gentle”) feeling when we play. I have been playing the G Kilauea tuning (D G C G B E) for all my fingerstyle parts since 1997. In slack key, the goal is to play melody, harmony, and bass at the same time. Another premise of stringed instruments is to maximize the use of open strings to take advantage of sympathetic vibrations, simplify left-hand parts, and have longer sustain to connect transitions. The bass strings of the guitar are tuned to the most commonly used chords in Western music—the I chord, IV chord, and V chord. In the key of G, they are G, C, and D. The top three strings are the same as standard tuning, so scales are familiar and easy to play without changing positions. The third string is the “secret sauce” of the Kilauea tuning. In the key of G, it is a common tone in the I and IV chords, the two most frequently used chords. This allows a player’s left hand to focus more on the melodic elements. Like the Tiny Tenor and the DHo Six String, this tuning has helped me define my sound as an artist. Voicings in the Kilauea tuning are distinctive and unique to this tuning. Here is a book about the G Kilauea tuning:

<https://www.danielho.com/physical-shop/book-slack-key-guitar-the-g-kilauea-tuning>.

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**9) AR:** To circle back to your upcoming concert with Dani Joy Herreid for the Minnesota Guitar Society on November 20, give us a bit of a taste of what kind of music you will be sharing with us. What instruments will you two be playing? Concerts featuring ensembles on stage are special for us in their own way and provide variety. And how did your partnership with Dani Joy come about?

**DH:** Dani Joy falls into a coveted group of professionals who always show up with their game on. It is a quality that top studio musicians all possess. She is diligent, completely prepared, and immensely musical. We first performed together in 2019 at the Auburn Ukulele Festival. When we got together the day before the show to go through the music, she sang and played everything as if she’d been playing it all her life. And the performance was even better. In addition to being a great musician and vocalist, she is a kind, thoughtful, and grounded person. After the show, we talked about writing and recording together, which resulted in our EP *Drop In My Flower*. We are now working on more music videos of our songs and broadening our performance repertoire. Dani Joy will be singing and playing ‘ukulele and bass in the show. I’ll be singing, playing ‘ukulele, slack key guitar, and bass as well. We’re keeping our fingers crossed that the pandemic situation will get better, and we look forward to playing for the Minnesota Guitar Society!





Dani Joy Herreid. Photo credit: Perry Stauffer.

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**AR:** Thank you for your time and all your insights, Daniel. We are all very much looking forward to your concert. Thank you for this interview and for sharing with us what has inspired you in your many creative roles in music in the past and in current times. Safe travels to you and Dani Joy!



Daniel Ho. Photo credit: Shane Tegarden.