Hawaiians are taught to kōkua (share), knowing that what is given should be given out, and that what is given out will come back. For Cyril Lani Pahinui (born 1950), this adage has guided his life and his life’s work. Over a career spanning more than five decades, Cyril has dedicated his efforts as a performer, teacher, and cultural ambassador to perpetuating his family’s innovative, yet deeply rooted approach, to Hawaiian music.

Cyril’s approach to music might best be described as the “Pahinui Family Style,” based on the innovative and highly influential work of family patriarch Phillip “Gabby” Pahinui (1921-1980), Cyril’s father. In many ways, Gabby can be viewed as the father of modern kī hōʻalu (slack key guitar), as well as one of the leading figures in what is often referred to as the Hawaiian Renaissance, a reawakening of interest in Hawaiian culture across generational and social lines.

As the 20thcentury approached its midpoint, interest in Hawaiian music and the kī hōʻalu

style of tuning began to fade, and many tunings were being lost with the passing of the older generations. Gabby Pahinui learned kī hōʻalu as a child and felt that it was a very unique and valuable asset for preserving both Hawaiian traditional music and Hawaiian language. He began to encourage many of his musician friends to learn the tunings of their families and to use them in their performances. He also traveled throughout the islands learning from the kūpuna (older generation), and developed several of his own unique tunings as well. The result was a distinctive, full-sounding music that is still recognized and has never been matched even today.

Since childhood, Cyril has both meticulously learned and lovingly shared this important legacy. In Cyril’s words:

“I have spent my lifetime mastering what my father and my other master instructors passed on to me, and there is no other musician living who has this experience or information available to contribute. Today I work hard to teach as many students as possible, so what I learned won’t be lost when I pass.”

Cyril was born April 21, 1950 and grew up on the remote Windward Coast of O‘ahu’s on the Hawaiian Homestead in Waimanalo. The Pahinui home on Bell Street was a gathering place of almost mythological proportions. Jam sessions featuring the top Hawaiian musicians would last for days. Huge crowds would gather, and people would keep coming until the police would have to close the road.

Young Cyril began participating in these events from the time he could hold an ‘ukulele, around age five. By age seven, he was learning kī hōʻalu, and by age 12, he was performing with his father at public events of all kinds.

Once he began to learn, Cyril got up at 4:00 in the morning to make breakfast for his dad so he could spend one-on-one time with him before Gabby left for his job on the road crew and evening music gigs in Waikiki. In this way, Cyril would learn something new and then practice all day. Each morning, after demonstrating that he had mastered it, his dad would share something else. Cyril’s next responsibility and training was tuning all of the instruments to a variety of slack key tunings, which were each checked by his dad’s discerning ear before any playing began. This strict discipline taught Cyril a whole catalogue of unique tunings and to play by ear. Most importantly, it taught him to play from the heart. At age 15, his father recognized Cyril’s technical virtuosity on the guitar, and he was asked to join his father’s group, the “Gabby Band,” where he began his recording career under his dad’s guidance. Cyril and his older brother Bla also started a band, dubbed the “Characters” after which, Cyril joined “Sam and the Samlins,” continuing to sit in with his father at shows. In 1967, he was featured on *Meet Palani Vaughan and the Sunday Manoa* album for which the term, “Contemporary Hawaiian Music” was coined.

After returning from two year’s of military service in Vietnam, Cyril arranged songs for and played a variety of instruments on all five of Gabby’s groundbreaking albums recorded on the Panini Records label. Even though Gabby passed on in 1980, the distinct Pahinui Style, characterized by its pāna‘i (equal give-and-take), intricate rhythms, and complex pā‘āni (solos), continues to entertain and inspire through Cyril’s music.

Working both as a solo artist, and with Hawaiian musicians that include Peter Moon, Palani Vaughan, Bob Brozman, Greg Sardinha, Sonny Lim, Amy Hanaiali‘i, his brothers Martin and Bla Pahinui, and his nephew Kunia Galdeira, Cyril has recorded albums, for which he has received 17 Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards and 5 GRAMMY nominations, Most recently, he recorded and produced *Cyril Pahinui, Kani Pū Kolu* with his ‘alaka‘i (protégé), Jeff Au Hoy and Peter Moon’s son, Peter Wook Moon. Cyril has recently released Hi‘ilawe, a live solo album that captures the spontaneous authenticity and heartfelt aloha of four momentous concerts recorded in 1992, ’93, and ’94. The repertoire performed on 12-string Martin Guitar and in Atta Isaac’s C Major Tuning (C-G-E-G-C-E) includes three instrumentals and nine with vocals, including two original compositions, one a first-time release. The album has been nominated for 7 Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards. Cyril has also contributed guitar parts, vocals, and songs on many other artists’ award-winning albums.

Besides playing ‘ukulele, steel guitar, and banjo, Cyril has mastered 15 distinct *kī hōʻalu* tunings, most developed by and taught to him by his father and his father’s closest friends, slack key masters that include Sonny Chillingworth and Leonard Kwan. Cyril specializes in a Major C tuning (C-G-E-G-C-E) developed by Gabby’s sideman Leland “Atta” Isaacs to accompany Gabby’s own variation of a C tuning. This combination of tunings is another of the distinguishing aspects of Gabby’s unique phrasing, tone, and exceptional arrangements that Cyril continues in his own productions, while adding his own finesse to this most distinct, impressive, and challenging style.

Having received the gift of Hawaiian music from his elders, Cyril now views it as his kuliana (responsibility) to carry their legacy into the next generations. This mission has taken him well beyond a career as a recording artist. For the past eight years, he has hosted the Gabby Pahinui Waimanalo Kanikapila, which annually attracts more than 100 musicians who come to celebrate and perpetuate Hawai‘i’s unique musical identity, acknowledge the musical heritage of Waimanalo community, and honor Gabby’s contributions. He also produces an annual Slack Key Festival in Seattle, Washington, now in its 7th year.

One of Cyril’s current projects is a video series that features kanikapila (jam) sessions with musicians in the backyard, hearkening back to his earliest years. To get this started, he worked with Hawaiian film producer, Naalehu Anthony, to produce *Let’s Play Music! Slack Key with Cyril Pahinui & Friends*. The project, created for Pacific Heartbeat with support from Pacific Islanders in Communications, was first released exclusively as a fundraiser for PBS Hawai‘i. The video received the 2013, Na Hoku Award for Music Video of the Year. Production has now begun for Part Two, which will be followed by an ongoing monthly webisode to be broadcast online.

Cyril’s deep aloha (love) for Hawaiian music and his desire to share has also led to his work as a teacher. Classes at Hālau Mele Hawai‘i o Pahinui (Pahinui School of Hawaiian Music) are taught in the kanikapila style, the same way music was taught to Cyril and to generations before: nānā ka maka; ho'olohe ka pepeiao; pa'a ka waha, which means “watch with the eyes, and listen with the ears.” Thus, one learns.

Through this interactive, in-the-moment kind of learning, students of all levels are guided through simple exercises and pa‘ani to create the unique Pahinui Hawaiian music sounds. Through a Traditional Arts Youth Outreach Program, Cyril has extended his teaching State-wide and into the schools, where he now teaches about 1,000 young students each year in public and charter schools. He has completed three State Foundation on Culture and the Arts Master Apprenticeship Programs and is beginning another with three students in 2015. At the request of Hula Loea and NEA Fellow, George Lanakilakeikiahiali‘i Naope, Cyril is also teaching “He Huaka‘i E Pana Na I Ke Ea,” (A Journey to Bring Pulse to the Living), a succession of workshops that honor the mele wai pana (storied/treasured place), featured in most Hawaiian songs.

Over a career spanning five decades, Cyril dedicated his efforts as a performer, and world-wide cultural ambassador to perpetuating his family’s innovative, yet deeply rooted approach, to Hawaiian music recording on over forty albums, three of which have won Grammy Awards and two others, Gammy Nominations. He produced and co-produced several of these and has been recognized for his contributions with 17 Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards. Cyril was selected as the Recipient Fellow in Music for the 2013 NACF Artist Fellowship and the FPF Jennifer Easton Community Spirit Award in support of his teaching. He received the Duke’s Ho‘okahiko Award, honoring those who, live, exemplify and pass on the traditions. Cyril has served on the BOD of the Recording Academy’s Pacific NW Grammy Chapter and on the BOG for the Hawai‘i Academy of Recording Arts. In 2014, Cyril was also honored with the Hawai‘i Academy of Recording Arts’ Lifetime Achievement Award. And in 2017, was honored for his artistic excellence in Slack Key with a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship.

Although there are many who have supported Cyril’s musical journey, the honor he pays is to his father, Gabby, who taught him his craft, encouraged him to continue, and inspired his greatest achievements. In the late 1990s, when Cyril first walked onstage at Carnegie Hall, he announced, “Dad, we made it.”

Cyril has indeed “made it”—as a recording artist, ambassador for traditional Hawaiian music, and master of *kī hōʻalu*. Just as he was taught to play “straight from the heart,” his passion now is to teach and inspire Hawai‘i’s young musicians, still thinking every day about making his father proud.