

# Hawaii's Hardest Working Slacker

ANA HAYS INTERVIEWS SLACK KEY GUITAR MASTER BARRY FLANAGAN

**T**ired, having spent the previous night at The Who concert and wondering if I should've postponed my interview, I made my way to the counter of a Maui Upcountry coffee shop and inquired if Barry was in. The girl behind the counter pointed towards the screen door, "he's out back." Stepping onto what appeared to be a porch, I was greeted with a hug. "Welcome to my office," Barry Flanagan beamed. Isn't it grand?" I glanced around nodding my head, my mood shifting to match his pleasant, friendly demeanor as he directed me to a chair. I was glad to find the space shady and breezy, unlike the oven air out on the busy street. An intriguing hide-away for an office! An intriguing man and musician!

Several months before our meeting, a friend had invited me to Wailea nights at Mulligans to see Barry Flanagan of HAPA and Eric Paul Gilliom. Truth be told, Hawaiian music isn't my thing, but HAPA was a name I'd heard over and over since my arrival on Maui. Not one to say no to live music, I went having no expectations and was blown away. Who was this New York born and raised in New Jersey man of Irish decent playing slack key guitar? I had to know because the Hawaiian melodies flowed from his soul as sweat streamed into his eyes. I grabbed the waitress, "get that man a towel."

"If I haven't lost 2-3 pounds during an evening," Flanagan told me, "I haven't played. Every time I perform or record I play like it's the last day on earth. That's the way you should live your life, isn't it? Live like it's your last day."

The man whose hand the San Francisco Chronicle described as "an iron fist and a velvet glove" holds his guitar like a cello on his knee. Melding with the strings, Barry picks notes higher than one's realm of comprehension as the melodious tunes wrap ribbons of longing around your heart.



Eric Paul Gilliom and Barry Flanagan with Maile at Mulligan's in Wailea Maui.





“The way I hold my guitar is my own style for a few reasons. For one, I think it’s boring to look at somebody who holds a guitar like this (he air-guitars for me). And two, it’s really, really challenging to play this way. Probably only other guitar players could tell that I’m not looking at the neck most of the time. This is challenging to a good extent where it makes me slow down to think about the notes I’m playing, which gives them more meaning.”

I noted the hole in his guitar. “Oh, that used to be the pick guard. This guitar is 25 years old and has been played in over 7500 appearances. (He winks at me.) Willie Nelson has one too.”

### DRIBBLE OR PICK

You might think someone who plays guitar with such passion had played from an early age. Wrong! Barry’s first love was basketball. He intended to play pro.

“It was 1970, the year the New York Knicks won the championships with Willis Reed and I went to his basketball camp in New York City. I was 14 years old and was awarded most valuable player out of 350 kids. It was quite a heady experience. There were reviews in the paper – stuff about me. And I was walking around thinking I was all that. My Dad pulled me aside one day and said, ‘today’s newspaper wraps tomorrow’s fish.’ It was a great lesson in humility.”

“I was raised to work at something you loved. And if it became your job, then you were lucky. I played basketball from 8-10 hours a day for pretty much of my upbringing and when it didn’t look like I was going semi-pro, I turned my focus to a career in music. Thirty years later, I focus on music most of my day.”

With no Knicks or Boston Celtics jersey in sight, Barry had only to pick up his older sister Maura’s guitars. She and her teenage girl rock band played Paul Revere and the Raiders cover songs. “When I hit 18, I started playing guitar because it was the thing to do in my town and it wasn’t as if my parents had to go out and buy one. We already had two. I was committed and practiced every moment I could. I kept track of my hours and a lot of days I spent twelve hours at it.”

Having studied bluegrass flatpicking, jazz and blues, Flanagan’s style is an amalgamation, which he weaves into the slack key genre. “It’s like my aural signature in slack key is actually thirty years of studying fifty different guitar players. Probably the men I admire the most have aural distinctive signatures such as Jeff Beck, BB King, Doc Watson and Stevie Ray Vaughan. To me it’s important that whether in song writing, vocally or performance wise you concentrate on developing a style or sound that is unlike anyone else.”

Slack key, which Barry believes originated with players “noodling” with their guitars, is an indigenous form of Hawaiian guitar playing. “The way I play slack key is very contemporary, mostly in C and G with taro-patch tuning.”

“Traditionally, guitars are tuned to fourths and the Hawaiian musicians being inventive started slacking or loosening the tuning keys, creating an amazing guitar art form. Slack key allows the guitarist to perform bass and melody patterns simultaneously and is becoming more and more popular around the world.”

### HOOKED ON SLACK

So how did a man from New Jersey end up in Hawaii playing slack key guitar? Flanagan jokingly blames one of his closest friends, Ray Drzymala, a guy he met in 1977 while working part-time in a record store saving money to become a poetry and creative writing





teacher. Ray, a local boy from Honolulu, gave Barry one of Gabby Pahinui's early recordings. "I was hooked. That was it. I couldn't understand the singing at the time but I loved the twelve and six string guitars together. Gabby passed away in October of 1980, three months before my first visit to Hawaii. It was Gabby's music that got me here and the music of the Brothers Cazimero and Olomana made me stay. I'm a melody lover, and Hawaiians sing some of the most beautiful melodies in the world."

When Barry made the commitment to relocate to Hawaii, he immediately began studying the art of Kiho Alu, slack key guitar, and Haku Mele, Hawaiian poetic song composing. He has since gone on to compose many of Hawaii's most popular and cherished songs. In 1994, the Hawaii Academy of Recording Arts honored Flanagan, and Hawaiian language instructor/translator S.H. Kiope Raymond, with the prestigious Haku Mele Award. The award, bestowed for the now classic Hawaiian love song, Lei Pikake, acknowledged "excellence of song composition in the Native Hawaiian language." Currently Barry is immersing himself in the study of the Tahitian language for the composition of three Tahitian songs that will appear on the new HAPA CD scheduled for fall release.

"After arriving in Hawaii, I soon learned that I had a love for all things Polynesian and still do. Hardly a day goes by that there is not some reading or studying of the Polynesian ways, language or music. It's one of those commitments I've made that has been really good for me."

## HAPA NEW YEAR

In 1983, at a holiday party just a few days before the end of the year, Barry met Keli'i Kaneli'i and together they formed HAPA and performed together for eighteen years. HAPA, which is Hawaiian slang for "half-half" or "ethnically mixed," has created a loyal following. The 1993 self-entitled HAPA release was nominated for the 1994 Na Hoku Hanohano Awards, the Hawaiian equivalent of the Grammy's, and swept all six categories. Record sales in 1993 broke all sales records in Hawaii and catapulted HAPA to international recognition where they consistently sell out to shows in Tokyo, New York, The Barns of Wolf Trap – The National Center for the Performing Arts – in Vienna, Virginia, The Great American Music Hall in San Francisco and various other mainland and Canadian venues.

In 2002, Flanagan released his first solo project, Instrumental Peace, which was the biggest selling instrumental recording by a Hawaiian artist in 2003. Instrumental Piece reached the #1 spot on New York City's world music cable station MP1, prompting Borders Books and Music to commission it for a nationwide in-store promotional campaign.

For the release of HAPA: MAUI (January, 2005) Flanagan will be joined by new partner Nathan Aweau, replacing Keli'i who retired in 2001. Aweau's solo CD E Apo Mai garnered him male vocalist and album of the year at the 2003 Na Hoku Hanohano Awards. HAPA: MAUI will also feature performances by chanter Charles Ka'upu who has chanted with HAPA for 12 years.





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ROOTS MUSIC

Seeing and hearing this Irish/New Jersey bred man play, you'd think he was Hawaiian in another life. When I told Barry this, he laughed. "You know, there's always been a connection with the Irish and the Hawaiians. The cultures and the folk lore stories, I think, are very similar. There's the [little people] menehune in Hawaii and the leprechauns in Ireland. Misty upcountry areas have inspired poetry and song in both cultures for centuries.

Listening to Barry live or on CD, I find that the Hawaiian melodies tug at my heart strings. "It's roots music!" he explained. "Roots music comes from sounds that has its anchor in things cultural and is firmly planted in the ground. Blues, of course, goes back to slaves hollering to each other in the fields. Put to music this became blues. Irish poetry is the foundation of Gaelic music and Hawaiian music comes from 'Oli, or the chants of Polynesia. All music I have ever loved has been roots music."

"What Hawaii is truly about is told through its music and hula. The commonality is respect and Aloha 'Aina, love for the land. Hawaii has a culture of great depth and awareness and is filled with beautiful people with great hearts. If you are open to it, take the time to understand what it's about, Hawaii will center your soul and will be the place you will forever wish to return to one day."

For information about HAPA, the release of Barry Flanagan and Nathan Aweau's new CD HAPA: MAUI, their mainland and European tour schedule, and information on Charles Ka'upu's CD Waika, visit [www.hapa.com](http://www.hapa.com). Currently you can see Barry Flanagan and Eric Paul Gilliom, a special guest at occasional HAPA shows, at Wailea Nights – an intimate dinner show - on Thursday and Friday nights at Mulligans on the Blue. Dinner seating starts at 5 PM with performances beginning at 8 PM. Call 808.874.1131 or visit [www.mulligansontheblue.com](http://www.mulligansontheblue.com) for reservations.

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