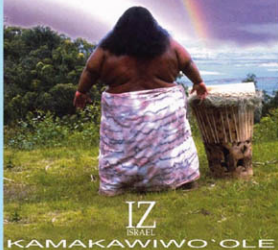


33 1/3

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**FACING FUTURE**  
by Dan Kois





## FACING FUTURE

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# FACING FUTURE



Dan Kois



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“It has been often remarked by musical teachers who have had experience with these islanders that as singers they are prone to flat the tone and to drag the time, yet under the stimulus of emotion they show the ability to acquit themselves in these respects with great credit.”

—Nathaniel Bright Emerson, *Unwritten Literature of Hawaii: The Sacred Songs of the Hula* (1909)

“What I do is minimum effort, but maximum pleasure. That’s part of being Hawaiian, brah.”  
—Israel Kamakawiwo‘ole

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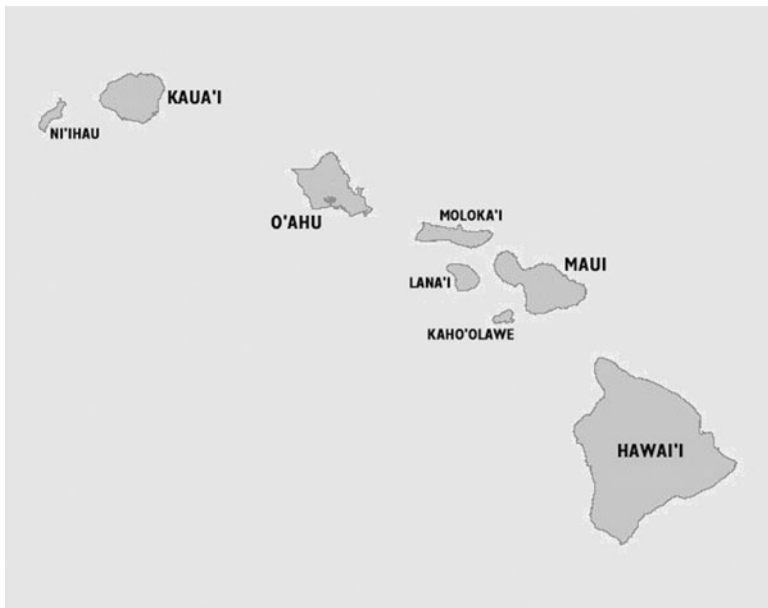
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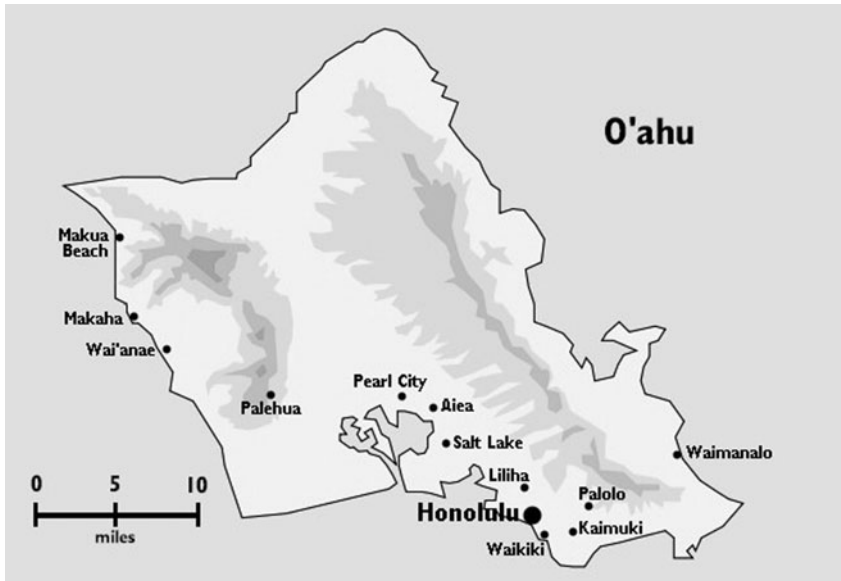
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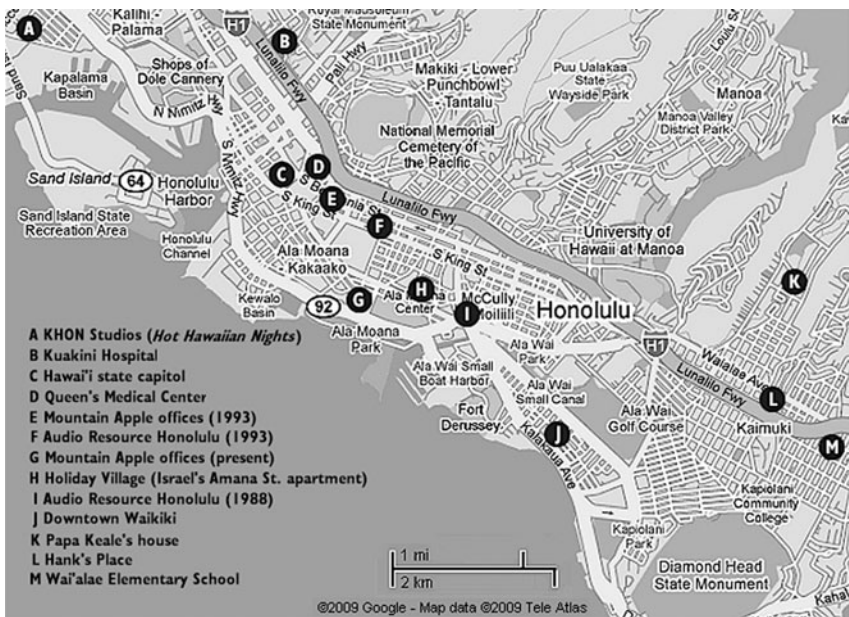
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## Prologue Honolulu, 1988

Milan Bertosa was exhausted. The recording engineer had moved from Chicago to Hawai'i a year ago and was still struggling to make a name for his fledgling studio, Audio Resource Honolulu. Which meant that when a big-deal client called saying he had a bruddah with him who wanted to record, he took the gig. Even if the guy was calling from a pay phone at 2:30 in the morning. Even if Milan could barely hear him over the bar noise in the background and the guy was obviously completely out of his skull. Even if Milan asked who the singer was and the guy said some long-ass Hawaiian name Milan couldn't even understand, "Israel Kalakalakaka."

He took the gig because every gig counts, even bullshit gigs of the type often sprung by this producer. Plenty of Milan's business in 1988 had come from this guy—legitimate daytime recording, but also lots of late-night sessions with giggling girls picked up in bars, convinced by a smooth-talking producer that he could take them places.

“She’s perfect,” he’d say to Milan in front of the bar girls. Milan never saw those girls twice. Sometimes you do stupid little things to make clients happy and make the checks show up on time.

He almost turned it down anyway. He could barely keep his eyes open after yet another grueling night trying to record James Arceneaux’s girl group. Arceneaux had a lot of money, which he said he’d received from an NFL team after suffering a career-ending injury. Wherever the money came from, he was blowing it all trying to become a music mogul. His latest project was a dance-oriented girl group, four women whose only qualification for pop-music stardom was an impressive performance in the wet-bikini contest at Shorebirds in Waikiki. Sadly for Milan, they couldn’t sing, and so he’d spent all night recording them word by word: “I” . . . and then he’d punch *Stop*. “LOVE” . . . *Stop*. “YOU” . . . *Stop*. It was horrible, but on the upside it was taking so long to record them that James Arceneaux had kept the studio booked three nights a week for a month. It seemed he’d continue until his patience, or money, ran out.

The girls had just cleared out when the phone rang, and Milan tried to convince the client that it was too late, he was too tired, but then the singer got on the phone. His voice was high-pitched, quiet, but audible over the noise in the background. “Please?” Israel Kalakalakalaka asked him. “I want to come in. I’ve got these ideas, and I don’t want to lose the ideas. You know how that is?”

Milan sighed. “Where are you?” he asked.

“We’re at Sparky’s”—a bar a few blocks away from Milan’s studio, and the city’s number-one place to score. Great. But the singer was sweet and friendly, and so Milan finally said, “You’ve got a half-hour to get here, and then you’ve got a half-hour *when* you get here, and then I’m leaving.”

As he cleaned up the studio, he left his back door open, facing the parking lot of his building, the Century Center, an office and condo tower at the corner of Kalakaua and Kapiolani on the western edge of Waikiki. Even at four in the morning, the neighborhood was still hopping; the tower was surrounded by strip clubs and watering holes, with the brand-new Hard Rock Cafe the only mainstream tourist attraction around. A while later—more than half an hour, Milan knew—he heard a car pull into the lot, and soon the biggest man Milan had ever seen walked in the door. He looked like a house carrying an ‘ukulele. When he stepped into the studio, the floated floor shifted unnervingly beneath Milan’s feet.

He was six foot three and about 500 pounds. He was wearing a giant custom-made aloha shirt the size of a tent and huge versions of the same rubber flip-flops—slippers—that every local guy wore. His long black hair framed a wide, cheerful face, the eyes deep-set above broad cheeks. Israel Kalakalakalaka engulfed Milan’s hand in his and said, “Hi, bruddah.”

The client who was responsible for this whole mess stayed in the car, so Milan was on his own. The first step was finding a chair for Israel to sit in. Everything he had in the studio was flimsy—a 500-pound Hawaiian like Israel would flatten it. There was a drummer’s stool, but given Israel’s size, it would serve better as a suppository than as a seat. Israel waited patiently as Milan called up to his business partner, asleep in his condo on the building’s 20th floor, who barely managed to answer before brushing Milan off and going back to bed. So Milan called security, and the guard brought down a steel chair, into which Israel settled gratefully. He was breathing heavily just from the effort of staying on his feet.

Milan set a couple of microphones in front of Israel and, back in the control room, threw some two-inch tape on the 24-track recorder. He asked Israel to strum and sing something so he could set his levels. Milan kept picking up Israel's breathing on the vocal mike, but there was nothing he could do about that. He rolled tape and told him, "Go ahead."

Israel looked down at the mike. "Kay, dis one's for Gabby," he said. He strummed the 'ukulele, like a child's toy cradled in his big arms, and began singing, a long series of *ooohs* in a high falsetto, and then lyrics: "Somewhere over the rainbow..."

When Israel Kalakalakalaka left close to dawn on that morning in 1988, Milan Bertosa handed him a cassette of his performance. He saved a copy for himself, and every once in a while for the next few years, he dug it out and played it for a girl he wanted to impress. He certainly never thought the product of that late-night recording session would wind up on an album, much less become the most famous song in Hawaiian music history. Or that the medley of "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" and "What a Wonderful World" would become the engine that drove sales of the most popular Hawaiian album ever, one that would simultaneously empower and imperil Hawaiian music worldwide. Or that Israel Kamakawiwo'ole—the morbidly obese, drug-addicted singer with the soft voice and the unpronounceable name—would become a Hawaiian hero and then, less than ten years after that session, a Hawaiian martyr. He certainly didn't think that the lovely, simple song he'd recorded that night would become, for hundreds of thousands of Mainlanders, their sole connection to Hawai'i, a foreign country that just happens to be part of America.

All Milan knew was the revelation that had hit him that night in the control room, half-asleep at four in the morning, listening in wonder. This guy was really playing music. It didn't matter that he mixed up the words, or that he occasionally hit a bum chord on his 'ukulele. He wasn't a bikini-contest winner barely managing to eke out syllables. He could really sing. *I get it*, Milan thought. *I get it*. *This is what I'm supposed to be doing for a living*.

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