Sidedoor Season 3, Episode 19:
Aloha, Y'all

Haleema Shah: This is Sidedoor. A podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Haleema Shah.

[JIMMIE RODGERS MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: This is Jimmie Rodgers. You may have heard of him, but, if you haven't, know this: in a short, six year recording career, he managed to become the Father of Country Music. Seriously, his plaque at the Country Music Hall of Fame calls him quote "The man who started it all".

Haleema Shah: Rodgers grew up in Mississippi, and worked on the railroad from childhood. On the tracks, little Jimmie learned about life. But… he learned a lot about music. He was a sponge, soaking up all the sights — and sounds — around him. Here's musicologist Mary Davis, who edited a book about Jimmie Rodgers.

Mary Davis: He was around blues, he was around Hillbilly music. He was around American roots music. He was exposed to the African American work songs.

Haleema Shah: Even when Rodgers became a full-time musician, his railroad years were never entirely behind him. Davis says that Jimmie did something no one else did before him: he took morsels of different musical traditions that he encountered in his railroad work, threw them all in one pot, and, put them over a burner. Kinda like he was making musical gumbo.

Mary Davis: He was the guy who pulled all those things together into something new and exciting.

Haleema Shah: You can hear his fusion of styles in songs like this one, called "Everybody does it in Hawaii"...or as Jimmie would say, Hawai-ya.

[SNIPPET FROM "EVERYBODY DOES IT IN HAWAII"]

> … Talk about Hawai-ya, I didn't know it was so grand. I pick me out a hula hula girl before my boat could land. Everybody does it in Hawai-ya...

Haleema Shah: One of the really interesting parts of that song too is how he harmonizes his yodeling with his steel guitar and it kind of works.

Mary Davis: It does. And again, this is, this is a really distinctive, strange sound, don't you think? But, the steel guitarist on this recording is a guy named Joseph Kaia Kypo, who was in fact Hawaiian. And this was the third record he made with Rogers in which he played steel guitar.

Haleema Shah: In fact, we know that Jimmie Rodgers performed with as many as 10 different Hawaiian steel guitarists. And those musicians played the sounds that today, are considered a defining part of country music. But, the names of his Hawaiian band-mates aren't listed in the liner notes. And, they're definitely not in the Country Music Hall of Fame.

Haleema Shah: And, that's because the story of the birth of country music, and, music in the American South more broadly, has been oversimplified: basically, that the earliest country music was made by white musicians, essentially in a vacuum. And blues? It's a genre developed by African Americans in the segregated south...And yet, the real story of southern music isn't so tidy. There were so many other musical traditions at play. Including? Yep… Hawaiians.

Mary Davis: What we do know is that the...the Hawaiian influence in country music is something that started with Rogers and continued on down through country music and still exists to this day.

Haleema Shah: So, this time on Sidedoor, we're telling the long overlooked story of how Hawaiian performers changed the sound of American music. They inspired icons like Jimmie Rogers and influenced country and blues...and rock music -- pretty much from the beginning -- with an indigenous Hawaiian invention…the steel guitar.

[MUSIC]
[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: Haleema Shah: One of the most dramatic events in Hawaiian history took place on January 17, 1893. A militia of mostly Americans, barricaded themselves inside the capitol building of Hawaii...and demanded that the Kingdom's very popular Queen --- Liliuokalani ("Lily"-oo-oh- "kalani") --- step down. And within a few years, Hawaii would be annexed into the United States.

The overthrow came after decades of colonization and efforts to gather wealth and power into the hands of a few American oligarchs….Just a century earlier... Hawaii first came into contact

with westerners. And… things were rocky from the start. Americans and Europeans eyed it as a port, the perfect mid-Pacific stop for goods flowing between the U.S. and Asia….But, after decades of global trade, a coup, and the Queen's arrest… Hawaii had radically transformed.

Haleema Shah: Here's John Troutman, American Music historian and curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

John Troutman: Well, the overthrow of the queen is unexpected and it's horrific and it's traumatic in 1893. Um, and, the Hawaiian people, um, spend the next few years strategizing on how to, um, reverse the conditions and to restore the kingdom.

Haleema Shah: But powerful non-native families made efforts to prevent that from happening. Key parts of Hawaiian culture were banned - the language, surfing, hula- all with varying degrees of success. Amid the political turmoil, Hawaiians resisted by holding onto their culture. Queen Liliuokalani herself was a prolific composer of songs while under house arrest, which Hawaiian musicians performed for large audiences.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: During this time of patriotic musicality, a young man named Joseph Kekuku was growing up in a town called… Laie. (LA-ee-AY).

John Troutman: Laie was essentially formed as a Mormon community. Um, Mormons in the United States at the time were being persecuted and pushed westward, onward and onward. Um, eventually they sought refuge in Hawaii. And, one of the things that the Mormons had learned was that, um, if they essentially let them, kind of, do their thing, in terms of maintaining their cultural traditions, while they attempting to proselytize and convert them to, um, Mormonism, then they would gain greater success. So, Joseph Kekuku came from a community of native Hawaiians who were living among these Mormon missionaries.

Haleema Shah: These missionaries figured they had a better shot of earning the trust -- and faith of Hawaiians... if they let them live out their culture. Which meant Joseph Kekuku's hometown stayed a very musical place.

John Troutman: One of the really interesting things about that Laie... is that, literally dozens of.of well known in Great Hawaiian musicians grew up there.

Haleema Shah: Kekuku's parents were devout Mormons who ended up moving to Utah for a few years. But, Joseph stayed behind; and enrolled in the Kamehameha School for Boys. This school was made to teach native Hawaiians. And, it's a really musical place. Even today, they host a traditional Hawaiian music competition that's broadcast on TV all around the state.

John Troutman: Joseph enrolled in the school, and, had been playing music for all of his life; playing some of the most popular modern Hawaiian songs of their day in the 1880s and early 1890s.

Haleema Shah: So picture this. Joseph Kekuku is in high school, living in a dorm with some friends, playing music in his free time.

John Troutman: And, while Joseph was a student, he begins to develop a new technique for playing the guitar.

Haleema Shah: So… the popular story goes this way: Joseph Kekuku was walking along some railroad tracks, as one does. He found a railway spike. He put it in his pocket. He went back to his dorm later that day and started playing the guitar. Then… in a moment of inspiration. He ran the steel railroad tie along the guitar strings and started strumming. And, he noticed this: the steel created a soft lilting sound that was different from usual guitar strumming.

John Troutman: I, I think what's really important to take note of here in the story about the steel guitar is that people have been running objects over strings all over the world for centuries on end.

Haleema Shah: But, here's where Kekuku is unique:

John Troutman:….He took the guitar, modified it, created a tool to play on top of the strings of the guitar.

Haleema Shah: Joseph Kekuku created a smooth metal cylinder in his high school's machine shop to run over the guitar's fretboard -- that's the thin neck part -- while he strummed. [GUITAR STRUMMING] He also raised the strings higher off the fretboard to give this steel cylinder some extra clearance. And… he practiced.

John Troutman: And, got very good at it, refined it and made it musical. He developed a technique that could be replicated by others.

Haleema Shah: And, to me -- this is kinda the wildest part of the whole story: his friends and classmates start playing this way, too….and, pretty quickly, musicians all around Honolulu pick up his invention.

[MUSIC 'Aloha 'Oe']

Haleema Shah: This song is 'Aloha 'Oe'. And it's only like… the most famous Hawaiian song of all time -- you might know it from Disney's *Lilo and Stitch*, but, it was actually written by Queen Liliuokalani. This version is being played by Alan Akaka. And he's kind of the guy if you want to

learn to play Hawaiian guitar. He lives outside of Honolulu, but, he teaches students all over the United States by Skype. He feels so strongly about the steel guitar -- that he actually petitioned the Hawaiian legislature to make it the state's official stringed instrument instead of the ukulele.

Alan Akaka: And, what I told the legislators is that, the ukulele, it was adapted and adopted by the locals here because it came from Portugal originally. It was not invented in Hawaii. The steel guitar, however, was...

Haleema Shah: The Hawaiian government still went with the ukulele. Anyway… Akaka fit me in between lessons for a quick intro to the steel guitar. So… when we talk about Joseph Kekuku's steel guitar… you should picture this.

Alan Akaka: The steel guitar is an instrument with strings like a guitar played normally on the lap..thus, the lap steel guitar. Unless it has legs, and, uh, use a bar of some sort to slide over the strings.

Haleema Shah: These days, the steel guitar can come in a lot of different shapes and styles -- some are acoustic, others are electric. But, they all evolved from the instrument that Kekuku invented. How do you play the Steel Guitar?

Alan Akaka: Okay. So, I'm holding the bar in my left hand, a metal bar made of steel. Thus, the name steel guitar. That's where it came from.

Haleema Shah: At this point, Alan reached for these.. kinda short metal claws and slipped them onto three of his fingers. And...what is that that you just put on your fingers?

Alan Akaka: Finger picks. I have, uh, pick a pick for my thumb and my pointer and middle finger. Now, just to let you know that, uh, early in the 20th century, this guitar was known as a Hawaiian Guitar. There steel guitar name came up later. I'm not sure when, but, later on. So, this is what the steel guitar

[STRUMS]

Alan Akaka: So, at that bar...I can actually slide over.

[STRUMS]

Alan Akaka: People love sliding like that. They love hearing that. Especially this oactive... slide...yeah

[STRUMS]

Haleema Shah: So how would you describe that sound?

Alan Akaka: It’s the sound of Hawaii.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: So that’s the steel guitar. But, here’s the thing... Joseph Kekuku invented this in 1885. But, by 1916? Hawaiian music records, starring the steel guitar, were outselling every other genre of music in the United States. And, it’s very likely that Jimmie Rodgers would have first heard Hawaiian music -- and steel guitar -- right around then…..So, coming up after the break, we find out how this uniquely Hawaiian invention made its way into the hands of generations of Americans who played country music, blues and rock.

[MUSIC]
[BREAK]

Haleema Shah: This is the sound of the steel guitar. And, some say, it’s the sound of Hawaii. But, it wasn’t always: a teenager named Joseph Kekuku invented this sound by taking a normal acoustic guitar -- and modifying it.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: The steel guitar quickly spread all around the world, fueled in part because many native Hawaiians were leaving the islands, afraid of what would happen to them once Americans took over.

John Troutman: And, so, we see this kind of..this dispersion of Hawaiian people, dancers and singers leaving the island right around the 1890s and early 1900s.

Haleema Shah: That’s Smithsonian American Music historian and curator John Troutman again:

John Troutman: In part because they knew that by traveling, they could continue to perform their traditions that were being prohibited in the islands. Um, and, partly because they were quite concerned about what was going to happen in the islands.

Haleema Shah: So, as part of this diaspora, Joseph Kekuku left for the mainland U.S. in 1904. He lived up and down the west coast and within a few years settled in Seattle, where he taught students his steel guitar techniques and played with other Hawaiian musicians...And Kekuku’s music found a receptive audience. Shortly, after he moved to Seattle, a newspaper called him quote “the world’s greatest guitar soloist.” ...It was because after 1910, two things happened

that created a national obsession with America's new exotic islands and their culture. The first: a play named "Bird of Paradise" opened on Broadway.

[MUSIC ADAPTATION FROM BIRD OF PARADISE]

Haleema Shah: That's from a film adaptation of the same play. And, the play spurred the public's appetite for all things Hawaiian -- think of it as the "Hamilton" of its day. It toured the country for nine years, playing 112 shows in New York; and slowly worked its way down to some of the country's smallest towns, from Anaconda, Montana to Xenia, Ohio….And while this was going on: the San Francisco World's Fair opened.

John Troutman: So, by 1915, uh, when one of the more significant world's fairs opens in San Francisco, many Americans had been, um, prepared already; and become acclimated to the sound of Hawaiian music...and become entranced by it. But it's really celebrated at that fair for the first time in terms of propelling the popularity of those musical traditions.

Haleema Shah: An estimated 19 million people visited the World Fair, and had the opportunity to hear the steel guitar performances in the "Hawaii Pavilion" that the island's government -- now part of the U.S. -- used to attract tourists...So, in a period of about 15 years the Hawaiian steel guitar transformed from a charming regional sound -- to part of mainstream American music. And, its influence reaches beyond the country sound of Jimmie Rodgers. It also influenced early blues musicians.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: As part of the Bird of Paradise shows, and a lot of other independent Hawaiian acts traveling from town to town, many Hawaiian musicians toured the South. In a part of the country where African Americans faced especially intense racial aggression and repressive laws daily… native Hawaiians found themselves navigating segregation as well.

John Troutman: After their performances, they would all kind of end up in these boarding homes. And, this included mariachis, Chinese acrobats, and all of these other performers hanging out, playing music together, uh, having really good times together. Um, so they were kind of making the most of those conditions and learning from each other.

Haleema Shah: So, do we see any evidence that these Hawaiian guitarist, were influencing other musicians of color at these boarding houses at the time? Are there any signs of those, um, musical traditions kind of melding together?

John Troutman: Well, what can find are accounts from many, you know, early guitar players who are associated with the blues for example, where they recall their, um, earliest knowledge of kind of that slide guitar technique as the Hawaiian way of playing guitar. They refer to it specifically as the Hawaiian way of playing. So, in fact, um, in one interview, Son House who's considered kind of the patriarch of this kind of slide guitar blues style, as he recounted in 1965...

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: Son House was doing an interview in the 1960s with researchers eager to mythologize blues music as an exclusively African American artform.

[MUSIC]

John Troutman: So, they are really anxious to understand these traditions that they see rooted really in slavery, um, or, in West Africa more than anything else. So, there's this one interview with Son House where he's kind of, uh, being harassed by these, kind of, blues uh.. experts.

Haleema Shah: And, these blues experts were keen to understand where Son House learned to play his very distinct style of slide guitar.

John Troutman: At first he says, well, actually, guitars weren't really a big thing in the south when I was a kid. They didn't play guitars. They played the trombone, they played the cornet, these instruments that were associated really with marching music more than anything else. By the time that he was around, you know, 11 years old or so, the guitars began to kind of float around a little bit. Um...so, they keep asking him: So, where did that come from? Where was that first slide guitar that you heard? And, he said, “Oh, you mean the Hawaiian way of playing?” And, then he tells the story of the people that started demonstrating to him the Hawaiian style of playing music.

Haleema Shah: Other early blues stars like Robert Johnson and Blind Lemon Jefferson were known to hold the guitar flat in their lap and finger pick, like Joseph Kekuku did and Alan Akaka does today.

John Troutman: There are really specific instances where, uh, musicians of color in the south are calling this out as a Hawaiian style of playing.

Haleema Shah: A number of blues influences are traced back to West Africa. So, it's long been thought that the blues slide guitar evolved from the Diddley Bow -- an instrument of West African origin. But, Troutman thinks the blues slide guitar has its roots in the Pacific.

John Troutman: There are no accounts of that of the Diddley Bow, uh, technology existing in the written record until the 1930s. So, I think, the blue scholars really just kind of assumed a lot. I mean...and, it's...it's..that's understandable; because, in the 1960s, 1970s, there were two kinds of Southern music: there was black music and white music. Um...There was no kind of thought given to Hawaiians at the time.

Haleema Shah: Are you making a very radical case here right now?

John Troutman: Um, I..am...suggesting that..that the preponderance of evidence demonstrates that that the technology and that technique derive from Hawaii...and, not from West Africa in the south. And, that doesn't sit well with a number of blues scholars.

Haleema Shah: My mind is blown.

[LAUGHTER]
[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: Troutman says that he's not surprised that the story of Hawaiians having a profound influence on the sound of popular American music isn't commonly told. Because.. yeah, music holds important cultural data -- it helped Hawaiians and their culture survive colonization. It helped people heal. But… music is also a big business.

John Troutman: I grew up in Alabama; and, I think that, um, a lot of people...in the south now, and...and, people who think about southern music and...and....ask the question of what that is.. Um, typically imagine a very black and white world. In the sense that, a lot of the genres that seem to have developed in the south... such as country music being the kind of white hillbilly music; blues being black music of African Americans in Mississippi and Alabama and Louisiana. Um...and, in part, in large part, that's due to the fact that the music industry itself began categorizing music along racial lines in the 1920s.

Haleema Shah: Record companies marketed performers like oh, let's just pick two totally random names: Son House and Jimmie Rodgers. Those artists were recorded for their remarkable musical talent… but, also, their music fit into the black and white story that had already been established.

John Troutman: Um, the problem, however, is that when you really begin to dig into the music making itself that was taking place in the south in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, you hear influences that are all over the place. And, you also realize that there are people in many different communities in the south who are participating in that music making, including American Indians.. and in this case, native Hawaiians who were embedded in southern communities or touring through them... and, gathering together these kinds of music-making-moments; that really cast a wide cultural net across the traditions that they were kind of embodying and their performance.

Haleema Shah: What eventually happens to Kekuku?

John Troutman: Oh, well, let's see. Joseph Kekuku, uh, spends his 20s and 30s criss crossing the North American continent. He ends up living in Europe for a time. He moves to England, I think around 1916, if I remember correctly. Um...And, begins playing and cafes in Paris his name's kind of all over the newspapers in those locations.

Haleema Shah: After traveling the world and playing his signature brand of Hawaiian music, Joseph Kekuku settled in New Jersey, where he died in 1932. He lived long enough to see the Hawaiian steel guitar -- his invention -- be adopted by thousands of musicians all around the world.

John Troutman: His technique, his style of playing, his ingenuity resulted in the total kind of sonic transformation of the music that would become known as country, and blues and rock and roll and all these other genres as well.

Haleema Shah: And, this music -- the sound of the steel guitar -- was the sound of resistance, and, helped Native Hawaiians safeguard their culture when it was being threatened. And, today? Joseph Kekuku's name isn't memorialized in the U.S. in a way that's comparable to his musical contributions… yes, we are talking about you, Country Music Hall of Fame. Although he is in the Steel Guitar Hall of Fame….But his sound...and, the sound of Hawaii still echo in American popular music. From the The Rolling Stones

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: To George Clinton's Funkadelic

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: And, of course, Miley Cyrus

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: … the steel guitar plays on.

[MUSIC]

Haleema Shah: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. This episode marks the end of season three, and also the end of my time with you as host. I've had so much fun sharing these fascinating, surprising, and at times...just plain weird...stories with you over the last season. Even though I'm saying goodbye to the Sidedoor team, the podcast isn't going anywhere. After a quick break, Sidedoor will be back in June for season four...with a new voice and more exciting stories.

Sidedoor is made possible by funding from 0the Secretary of the Smithsonian, as well as the Smithsonian National Board. And thanks to listeners like you – your generous support helps make all the amazing work you hear about at the Smithsonian possible.

This week's story was part of the Smithsonian Year of Music. If you want to learn more about the 365 Days of Music at the Smithsonian, go to music.si.edu.

We'd also like to give a special thanks to John Troutman at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History for helping us tell this story. If you'd like to learn more about the Hawaiian steel guitar and its history, check out Troutman's book "Kika Kila..How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed The Sound of Modern Music".

Our podcast team is Justin O'Neill, Jason Orfanon, Lizzie Peabody, Jess Sadeq, Greg Fisk, and Lara Koch. Extra support comes from John Barth and Genevieve Sponsler. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and other episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship at prx.org

For the last time, I'm your host Haleema Shah. Thanks for listening.

[MUSIC OUT]

<<EXTRA STUFF>>

***** JIMMIE RODGERS SECTION********

(09:21) So I have a metaphor here and I'd love if you would dive down this rabbit hole with me. I've been thinking about it this way. Let's say country music is a soup that's made in this cauldron and it has all of these ingredients. It has the steel guitar and the Harmonica, the Banjo yodeling. And a lot of other things. And all of these ingredients

> come from a lot of different musical traditions. And my question for you is that since Jimmy Rogers is seen as the grandfather of country music, but he didn't really play country music in the modern sense, is he the pot of ingredients before it was cooked or was he like the first chef? Like what is his role in this country music–soup metaphor? 10:04 I love thinking of Jimmie Rodgers and soup together. That's as weird as a Jimmie Rodgers lyric. (laughs) I think that he opened the door to thinking about taking these various ingredients and putting them together to make something new.

It's easy to see where some of these ingredients came from that Jimmie Rodgers pulled into the country music soup. There were a lot of new immigrants to the U.S. who would have known about yodeling.

> (18:46) we have a theory and the theory is that he was, in one of his travels, exposed to an Austrian choir in a church and that he heard the yodeling in that setting. And let's go back to your soup recipe, he put it into the mix and combined it, weirdly, with 12 bar blues and came up with this American concept of the Blue Yodel.

**** HAWAIIAN CULTURE SECTION ****
It's also worth noting that these wealthy business people and descendents of prominent missionaries eventually forced Hawaii's second-to-last monarch -- King

quickly identified Hawaiian culture as the primary thing that was holding the people together.

Music, hula and Hawaiian language were the bonds holding that society together.

So? The wealthy white Americans decided? Let's break Hawaiian culture. That way, we can control Hawaii,

Decades earlier, wealthy Americans began leasing large chunks of land from Hawaii's monarchy to create large sugar plantations. But… to make this business model work for the plantation owners, they needed cheap labor. And this is crucial: the Hawaiians were not slaves. They were free. So… when plantation owners tried to offer them exploitative wages: Hawaiians essentially said "Nah, I'm not going to do that."

In the mid-1800s, the missionaries also

And for the primarily American large business owning class -- the native Hawaiian population essentially looked like cheap labor. To break the

For native Hawaiians -- the 1880s and 90s are essentially two entire decades that will live in infamy forever.