

An Alpha Thetan / Pi Kappa Alphan You Ought to Know

## ROBERT ALEXANDER ANDERSON '16

Logan M. Cheek '60

Robert Alexander Anderson, ME '16 was an American composer who wrote many popular Hawaiian songs within the Hapa haole genre including:

- "Lovely Hula Hands" (1940) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y61Ct0RBXbs&feature=related>,
- "I'll Weave a Lei of Stars for You"  
< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0hFgya8TXGM&feature=related>>
- "Mele Kalikimaka" (1949), the best known Hawaiian Christmas song < [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FV\\_BGqgbxdc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FV_BGqgbxdc)>

Better still, here are three interesting YouTube videos of Alex singing:

- Hawaiian Christmas song. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6FvMXys3Ffw> shortly before his death.
- Here's Alex performing with Andy Cummings, on Hawaiian TV:  
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LskTB9nW-mM>>
- "Lovely Hula Hands" <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKFnWgWED5E>>

Anderson was born in Honolulu, Hawaii on June 6, 1894. He attended Punahou School where he wrote the school's football song in his junior year and the school song in his senior year. At Cornell, he studied electrical and mechanical engineering was initiated into Alpha Theta in 1913, and was a member of the Cornell University Glee Club. Despite lacking formal training as a composer, he wrote many songs as a Cornell student, including "When Twilight Falls on Blue Cayuga". This song is transcribed in "R. Alex Anderson's Famous Songs of Hawaii". In 1927, he wrote his first hit song, "Haole Hula". Another well-known song of his was "Punahou" (1966).

His exploits during World War I involved flying combat missions in France. After being shot down and taken as a prisoner of war by the Germans, Anderson conceived of a daring and ultimately successful escape. This was later turned into a movie, "Dawn Patrol" starring Errol Flynn, David Niven and Basil Rathbone.



Although he had a very active business career, he turned his love of songwriting into a very successful avocation. While Anderson never studied theory or harmony and played a piano mostly by ear, many of his over 100 island songs have become standards. He usually composed away from an instrument, although he sometimes used a piano or ukulele to work out a melody. In 1939, as a result of a chance remark, Anderson was inspired to write his most popular song, "Lovely Hula Hands". After watching a hula dancer at a party, he heard someone say, "Aren't her hands lovely?" After it was performed by Harry Owens and his band on a Honolulu radio station, it became an instant hit. It has been recorded by dozens of artists, including Bing Crosby and Alfred Apaka. Later, in 1949, he wrote "Mele Kalikimaka" the best known Hawaiian Christmas song. It was pressed on "the other side" of Bing Crosby's "White Christmas", still the best played song of all time.

<<http://mauiwowiblog.wordpress.com/tag/robert-alexander-anderson/>>

His life was biographed with a CD by Scott S. C. Stone in "From a Joyful Heart: The Life and Music of R. Alexander Anderson" (Honolulu: Island Heritage Publishing, 2001). I have a copy on order for the house files.

Alex died in May 29, 1995, a week short of his 101<sup>st</sup> birthday. He is buried in the O'ahu Cemetery in Honolulu.



In 1998 he was inducted into the Hawaiian Music Hall of Fame, with the following citation:

### **R. Alex Anderson**

#### *The Composer Who Charmed Hawai'i and the World*

Very few Hawaiian composers can claim as many "popular standards" translated into as many different languages as R. Alex Anderson. If you hear a familiar Hawaiian tune with English words chances are very good that Robert Alexander Anderson is the composer. In fact, during the Christmas holiday just past, you were probably among the thousands around the world who sang "Mele Kalikimaka" at least once.

R. Alex Anderson was born in Honolulu in 1894, and from high school on to his passing in 1995, composed nearly 200 songs. He was considered the "most Hawaiian" of the hapa haole composers. No Island composer had a longer career writing English lyric songs.

"Andy", as he was called by close friends, or "Alex" by those who simply felt close to him because of his music, wrote songs based on traditional Hawaiian themes telling of flowers, scenes, islands, seas, people, events and customs. His ear for the Hawaiian music's special sound and rhythm was exceptional, and he was regarded as a successor to Charles E. King in maintaining the melodic and lyrical qualities which are Hawai'i's musical identity

A prominent businessman by vocation, and a WWI veteran, Alex Anderson had no formal music training and spoke no Hawaiian, yet his compositions still give rise to dreams of Hawai'i as "paradise" for people all over the world. He called himself "a composer who writes without knowing the rules", and "wrote" most his lyrics "in my head". In addition to being a natural composer, he was also an original one who never consciously borrowed a tune.

His first composition, "Haole Hula", written in 1927, was a hit, and remained his personal favorite. Among the most familiar of his compositions are "Lovely Hula Hands", "Lei of Stars", "Coconut Island". He wrote "Cockeyed Mayor of Kaunakakai", in the 1930's for a party to fete movie star Warner Baxter. "White Ginger Blossoms" was written at the suggestion of film star Mary Pickford, and "I Will Remember You", while a student at Cornell University, homesick for his Island home.

His most famous song, "Mele Kalikimaka", Hawai'i's Christmas song, went around the world on the back of Bing Crosby's recording of "White Christmas". Crosby, Andy Anderson's frequent visitor and golf partner, liked the tune so much when Andy played it for him that he surprised Anderson with the recording.

According to Pam Anderson, his daughter, the family still receives revenues every year from such favorites as "Mele Kalikimaka" and "Lovely Hula Hands" from all over the world: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Great Britain, Greece, Japan, Ireland.

Perhaps the best description of R. Alex Anderson's love for making music and for his homeland is found in two lines from "Haole Hula": "I love to dance and sing of the charms of Hawai'i, and from a joyful heart bring aloha to you."

On this theme, R. Alex Anderson's life is described and photographed in a new book by Scott Stone, "From a Joyful Heart" by Island Heritage. With the book is a CD of twelve of R. Alex Anderson's best known songs - (again, hopefully) as sung and recorded by Andy himself, who had a fine voice and through his lifetime sang with quartets and groups around Honolulu.