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Music Committee



Musical Notes

Big Island Celebrates 52 Years Of Gathafests

A Brief History By Ethel Miyashiro

In 1974, Sadao Aoki of Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin, in an attempt to engage all the Dharma School members throughout Hawai'i island in celebrating the dharma in a different way, conceptualized and executed the idea of a Gatha Fest.

The first Gatha Fest was held in Kona. Initially formatted as a competition, the Hawai'i Island United Hongwanji BWA provided prizes for the winners. Back then, along with the singing of musical arrangements of various gathas, some Dharma Schools performed skits to go along with the music.

In 1976, Gatha Fest was held at the Hilo High School Auditorium to accommodate the large number of participants and attendees. As the years went by, the competitive aspect of the event was eliminated. Sometime close to 2010 or soon thereafter, due to the declining dharma school enrollment throughout the island, members of the Hawai'i Island Lay Association leadership agreed to include all Kyodan sangha members to participate in this event. Temples throughout the Big Island have taken turns in serving as host to this yearly event except in 2021 and 2022 during the Covid19 pandemic.

- Reference: 2024 Gathafest Program (Hilo Betsuin)

(Gathafest History continued on page 3)

Music Editorial

By Francis Okano
Music Chair

GATHA RECORDINGS

When congregational singing is robust and spirited, no one questions why, what, or how we sing. It just feels fulfilling that the congregation expresses itself in song as part of temple service. When congregational singing begins to sound anemic, however, we come to question everything under the sun. Why aren't we singing? Are the gathas unfamiliar? Are we afraid of embarrassing ourselves by singing wrong notes or off-key? Does the organ (or instrumental) accompaniment, if there is one, sound unsure or hard to follow? Are we not in the mood to sing?

The reasons for weak singing are probably many – possibly all of the above. But let's say, for the sake of argument, that folks don't sing because they are largely unfamiliar with the songs. And let's assume the congregation would sing if they only knew the songs better. Then maybe one way to get folks to sing out more would be to have an individual or a group, who knows the songs well, lead the singing with the congregation. And I suppose such is – was and will be -- a purpose for choirs. But what do we do when few temples have choirs (as today) and many do not even have organists (as today)? The alternative, then, might be to have recorded singing lead congregational singing at services.

Thanks to generous funds from the Propagation Grant Committee of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, such an approach may well be realized. The 5th edition of Hawaii's ***Praises of the Buddha*** gatha book, published in late 2024, contains 38 gathas that were composed by members of Hawaii Kyodan over the years. Of a total of 152 gathas in the book, these 38 most recently composed gathas may be the most unfamiliar to many temple-goers. And recordings of these 38 are expected to be made available to all temples -- primarily for congregational use, but also for group and personal practice and for listening pleasure. Recordings of more gathas may follow if these renditions are received well.

Professional singer Laurie Rubin and keyboardist Jenny Taira, of Mililani Hongwanji, are busy recording these 38 gathas and editing the recordings for compatibility with singing with congregation. The recordings will undergo review and adjustments, as needed, before release. As recordings of the 38 gathas are ready for use, an announcement is anticipated in the Headquarter's *Hongwanji Update*.





(Gathafest History continued)

Memories of Gathafests

Stella Miyashiro - Puna

“At Puna Hongwanji Mission, the organist was Hatsume Tanaka, who was also the choir director. Puna had an adult choir and a youth choir that sang at the festival. The festival format was for each temple to sing a new required Gatha and a song of their choice. Miss Tanaka, being a piano instructor, wanted to expose the youth choir to a different music genre. That year, instead of a traditional Gatha, she chose a tune from a Broadway musical, “Oklahoma”. Being in the youth choir, it was a new experience for me to learn a song from a play. It was entitled, “June is Busting Out All Over”. There were four vocal parts that required good timing. It was challenging and everyone tried their best. I learned to appreciate choral singing from that experience. Until today, I can still remember lines from that tune performed at Gatha Fest.”

Marilyn Sato - Puna

“Gathafest was always an enjoyable February event. It was an opportunity for the Dharma School (back then called Sunday School) students to go on a field trip to the host temple. Years ago, student enrollment was plentiful. When Puna Hongwanji Mission hosted the event one year, we had to use the Shipman Gym across the temple to accommodate the number of participants, parents, grandparents, and friends. A lot of people came to support the children’s performance. Gathafest was a BIG deal!”

Anonymous - Puna

“I always looked forward to attending Gathafest. There is the anticipation of performing in front of fellow Buddhist travelers. There is a sense of camaraderie with our church members as we sing in unison. It’s inspiring to see the faces of the other church performers. They sing with joy. We get to see old friends and make new ones. We design new t-shirts when we host Gathafests. Gathafest provided opportunities for my children to participate in the singing as well as offering incense, candles, flowers and being an emcee. I

look forward to many more Gathafests as it’s one of the highlights of the year.”

Carol Tsunozumi - Puna

“I recall Hatsume saying, “Gathafest used to be a competition. Then it became non-competitive because the numbers of Dharma School kids were dropping.” We used to sing gathas, two numbers. One time we had Buddha dressed in a sheet, there was a big gong, and we sang a gatha about Buddha. Hatsume was creative!”



Picture circa 1990

L to R: Organist and Choir Director Hatsume Tanaka, Maitri Soga, ds student, Kip Yanaga, and Roddy Tsunozumi.

Ethel Miyashiro - Puna

“Being a recent transplant to the Big Island, my first experience with Gathafest was in 2011. At that time, the format for Gathafest included a short service followed by the honoring of Dharma School teachers for their dedication and years of service. I remember, honoring teachers with over 25 years of service, and feeling much appreciation and awe for all that they have done. Following the service, temples performed gathas and/or songs that conveyed a Buddhist message. Sangha members and supporting choir members joined the Dharma School students in the singing. Big Island ministers and YBA singers also performed, much to the delight of everyone.”

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(Gathafest History continued)

Gathafest has since moved from being a Dharma School event to a Kyodan event. And more recently, Gathafest welcomes all forms of music that embrace Buddhist life. Our focus has been to promote the Hongwanji's Five Year Theme and the yearly slogan, so songs and gathas convey appropriate messages. We have also sought to include other forms of music such as the playing of the violin by Megan Pascual of Hilo Betsuin, and affiliates such a Puna Taiko joining the Puna choir, and the Four Temples and Honoka'a bands with their musicians and singers. We are also always treated to special adaptations of modern tunes with a Buddhist twist by Kona and Honomu.

Since 2018 Puna has performed with sign language translation taught by Karen Mason.

A bountiful fellowship meal provided by the host temple completed the day's events. It was time for renewing of friendships and making new friendships.

Yes, Gathafest has evolved over the more than half a century but it's core principles that Sadao Aoki promoted have remained intact to bring together the Big Island temples and celebrate the Dharma through music.

As Karen Maedo of Hilo Betsuin, so accurately said, "Yes, temples are all about preserving traditions. In this case, the camaraderie and joy that come from Gathafest are to be preserved! Another example of the power of music..."

- Maya Kondo of Hilo Betsuin contributed to this article.



Puna doing sign language - 2018



Tracy Tsuha - Honomu 2024



Four Temples (Papaikou, Honomu, Honohina, Papa'aloa) - 2025



Megan Pascual - Hilo Betsuin 2024



Puna Taiko and Choir - 2025



Oahu District Music Notes

By Gail Taira

MILILANI HONGWANJI

ChoralFest 2025 was truly an amazing experience for all Oahu participants, and we are very grateful for the wonderful opportunity to learn and sing gathas that truly touched our hearts and brought the Dharma to life. I believe it energized our commitment to continue singing and sharing so many wonderful gathas with the Sangha.

The connections that were made at the 2025 ChoralFest resulted in an invitation to join with the Honpa Hongwanji Hawai'i Betsuin Choir to sing at the Hawai'i Buddhist Council Buddha Day Service, held at the Higashi Hongwanji. The combined choir, ably led by Choir Director Mari Murakami, sang *Bodhisattva's Vow* and *Jodo E no Uta II* and *Song of Bodhi Day II* in both Japanese and English.



The combined Hawai'i Betsuin Choir and the Mililani Choir at the Hawai'i Buddhist Council Bodhi Day Service

Mililani Hongwanji members who attended the Hawai'i Buddhist Council Bodhi Day Service



Many of the Mililani Choir members will again be joining the Betsuin Choir to participate in the HBC Buddha Day Service on April 5 at Honpa Hongwanji Hawai'i Betsuin. The combined choir will be singing, *In Bloom* and *Floral Festival*. The Mililani Choir continues to sing at every major service. We sang *Surely We Will Meet Again Someday* and *Shinran's Journey* for Ho-onko Service and *Because I Met You* and *Nembutsu* for Spring Ohigan Service.



Mililani Hongwanji Choir performing at Spring Ohigan service



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The Mililani (Ukulele) Jammers now regularly perform at our monthly memorial services. The Jammers have recently led the congregation in singing *Amazing Grace*, *Ondokusan*, *Song of Hope*, *Do the Good You Know*, and *Listen to Amida With Your Heart*, among other songs and gathas. We are very grateful for the musicians and singers that keep Mililani temple services fun and vibrant.



Mililani Jammers perform at the Spring Ohigan Service

AIEA HONGWANJI

On February 28, 2026, Aiea Hongwanji held their annual Shinnenkai and my family and I were fortunate to be invited to join in the New Year Celebration. We all enjoyed an excellent and delicious Japanese style dinner.

The evening's entertainment included an Aiea Hongwanji affiliate sanshin group, Afuso Ryu Choichi Kai USA, Reverend Jeffrey Soga of Waipahu Hongwanji singing enka, Chad "Chihiro" Okawa on the Fue (Japanese Flute) and in a duet with Rev. Soga, and the renowned Hyaku Sen Ki Kai Taiko and Alumni from the Pacific Buddhist Academy.



Rev. Jeffrey Soga singing at the Aiea Shinnenkai

The audience was entertained with some well known pieces including *Nada Sou Sou*, and *Kawa no Nagare no Youni*. Hyaku Sen Ki Kai Alumni Taiko's performance was riveting! Two pieces they performed were *Omiyage* and *Miyake Daiko*.

The musical entertainment was coordinated by Aiea member, Chad "Chihiro" Okawa, a recent graduate of PBA, and a current UH Manoa student. When I spoke with Chad after the event, I asked him about how he learned to play the flute so well, and he said that he is self taught. Another interesting fact about Chad is that as a PBA student, he composed taiko pieces for Hyaku Sen Ki Kai to perform. Kudos to Chad!



Chad "Chihiro" Okawa chaired the entertainment portion of the Aiea Hongwanji Shinnenkai on February 28. He also performed with the Hyaku Sen Ki Kai Taiko from PBA, and also played the Fue (Japanese flute).



Honolulu District Music Notes

By Wendie Yumori, Honolulu District Reporter

HONPA HONGWANJI HAWAI'I BETSUIN

Hawai'i Betsuin hosted the 64th Nu'uauu Valley Thanksgiving Interfaith service on November 25, 2025, and members of 14 faith communities filled the Main Hondo. Each faith community shared inspirational words or beautiful gifts of song.



First Unitarian Church Choir at Interfaith Service



Hawai'i Betsuin ministers rocked it at BWA Year End Party!

At the BWA Year End Party on December 6, 2025, Rev. Yuika Hasebe, Rev. Shingo Furusawa, Rev. Charlene Kihara, and Sensei Barbara Brennan moved to the groove of *Eight Steps to Harmony*, a cool song about the Eightfold Path created by Dave Atcheson using ChatGPT and Songer, an AI music creation tool.

The Honpa Hongwanji Choir (HHC) numbered 34 strong at the Hawai'i Buddhist Council's Bodhi Day Service at Higashi Hongwanji Mission of Hawai'i on December 7, 2025. Practice sessions at Hawai'i Betsuin brought together members of the Hawai'i Betsuin Choir, Mililani Choir, and singers from Jikoen and Moiliili. On December 7, the HHC sang two lovely preludes, *Bodhisattva's Vows* in four-part harmony and *Song of Bodhi Day II* (in English and Japanese) in two-part harmony.



Hawai'i Buddhist Council Bodhi Day Service

Honpa Hongwanji Choir
HBC Bodhi Day 2025, Higashi Hongwanji

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The rock band, *Siddhartha*, performed for the Hawai'i Betsuin sangha and Siddhartha's proud parents following the Nirvana Day service on February 15, 2026. Siddhartha members, Kalani H.S. friends who enjoy jamming together, played a five-piece set that included *Come As You Are* by Nirvana, *Dreams* by Fleetwood Mac, and *Twist and Shout* by the Beatles. There was spontaneous dancing -- what a Nirvana Day!



Rock band, *Siddhartha*



Siddhartha together with family and church members on Nirvana Day

JIKOEN HONGWANJI

Jikoен Hongwanji held its Shinnen Enkai New Year's luncheon on January 25, 2026 and, as always, there was a terrific line-up of entertainment. The Okinawan Lion Dance is traditionally performed at New Year's celebrations as it is believed to ward off evil spirits and bring good fortune and happiness to the community. The costumes and coordinated movements of the lions of Hawai'i Okinawa Creative Arts (HOCA) were impressive – the lions were definitely crowd pleasers!



Hawai'i Okinawa Creative Arts -- Lion Dance

The Kalihi Kokua Valley (KKV) after-school girls' club, which uses the Jikoен social hall for its program, delighted all with a Chuukese dance.



Kalihi Kokua Valley after-school girls' club – Chuukese dance



Jikoен Ohana -- traditional Okinawan dances

The Jikoен Ohana also entertained at the Shinnen Enkai. Keith Oshiro and the Moribe ladies, Ann, Kacie, and Marcie, vibrant and colorful, presented traditional Okinawan dances.

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The Hong family, who have been likened to the musical von Trapp family, performed with Suki on violin and Ren and dad, Justin, on piano.



Hong family on violin and piano

At the February 22 service, Pete Doktor led the singing of *Amazing Grace*, slightly modified to include lines such as “Amazing grace, How sweet the sound, That saved a bombu like me.”



Pete Doktor led singing at Jikoen service

MOILIILI HONGWANJI



Sangha Ohana -- *When We See the Golden Sun*

Moiliili Hongwanji's Shinnen Enkai New Year's celebration on February 15, 2026, featured a wonderful array of musical offerings. Ann Nakata, Lynn Nakata, and Betsy Nishioka danced to the Sangha Ohana's strumming and singing of *When We See the Golden Sun*. Leader, Wendy Nakanishi, has guided the Sangha Ohana performances for three years.



Moiliili's expanding music group -- playing and singing *Dreams*

A musical group at Moiliili, as yet unnamed, has been expanding as more people who play different instruments have become involved. This group played and sang *Dreams* by Eddie Kamae for the Shinnen Enkai. Of note were the talents of keyboard player, Eri Martin, and violinist, Erika Bar-David.

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The Sangha Singers, comprised of Moiliili's former ministers, former Bishop Thomas Okano, Rev. Shigenori Makino, and Rev. Tatsuo Muneto, plus Osamu Kawabata and Katsumi Yamamoto, presented *Hotaru no Hikari* (*Glow of Fireflies*), accompanied by Francis Okano. In Japan, all student graduates sing this song at the end of the school year.



Sangha Singers -- *Hotaru no Hikari*, accompanied by Francis Okano

Moiliili's Dharma School members offered the ballad, *What It Sounds Like*, from the pop culture movie phenomenon, *KPop Demon Hunters*. This song reflects what the character, Rumi, has learned about herself in confronting her inner demons. The final lines of the song: "Truth after all this time, our voices all combined – When darkness meets the light, this is what it sounds like."



Dharma School members --
What It Sounds Like
from *KPop Demon Hunters*

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