

GUEST: KEALI'I REICHEL

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Aloha kakou. And welcome to the premiere episode of Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. We hope that PBS Hawaii's newest television program entertains, informs and perhaps even inspires you through conversations with some of the most interesting people in our community. And through our website at pbs-hawaii.org, you're invited to take part in our program. Log on and see who some of our upcoming guests are. Suggest questions for them. And make suggestions for other people you'd like to see featured on Long Story Short. Your involvement in our programs – and support of our mission – will help us to make our community even more diverse, informed and perhaps even inspired. We're about to sit down with Keali'i Reichel – an icon in the Hawaiian music and culture scene. But in this conversation, we'll try to draw out the character behind the musician, chanter and kumu hula.

How do you define yourself? Songwriter? Kumu hula? Recording artist?

I'm Hawaiian. First, for me personally, first and foremost, I'm Hawaiian. And so I try to do things that connect myself to my ancestors, my kupuna; and find my way today through my music, through chant, through hula. I think that's first and foremost, and everything else just happens, I think.

I recall reading a while back that you were surprised when you had these hit songs because you never considered yourself a good singer.

No. And I think most singers don't think they can sing. I know I can hold a tune, but I'm not sure that I would go see me in concert [chuckle]. But no. I'm thankful for what we have and I'm thankful for the gifts that were bestowed upon us. And so we try to utilize them as best as we can without being too pushy about it, you know?

Are you a perfectionist?

Yes. We rehearse lots. We do a lot of practicing, making sure that songs are correct, the chords are correct, the language is correct, the ano or the feeling is correct, as much as possible. Because you know, people are – especially if they're coming to see you in concert or at a performance, you know – they're paying money to come see you. You know, you don't want to disappoint. And you want to make sure that people leave happy and worth their time to come and see you.

Are you tougher on yourself or other people?

Probably. Maybe little bit of both, depending. I think we try to pick and choose of those who are around us, who have the same kind of mindset. You know, where excellence is up here. We try to reach that. We're never gonna reach it, we're never gonna be perfect, but at least we have something to strive for, every single time.

You mentioned to me before we got started here that this situation is a little odd for you, because—

Mm hm.

-- as a kumu hula, you like to be in charge and in control; and this TV setting is not quite your way of doing things.

Yeah, it's a little um, different [chuckle], for lack of a better word. But you know, insofar as, you know, being a kumu hula, we are responsible for everything to do with the education of our students when it comes to the hula. And when you think about the hula, you know, there's so many different parts of our cultural fabric that's in the hula itself. You know, within the hula you have language, you have gesture, you have dance, you have mindset, poetry, you know. And within all of that, you have little sub-things like history and cultural aspects like different kinds of practices. You know, fishing, farming, kapa making. All – everything comes under that particular umbrella of – that we know of as hula. So it's not just dance. And so when you're a kumu hula, we believe that you are the singular source for your particular brand or thought process of – I shouldn't say brand – thought process of hula. And so you have to be strong. You have to make sure that your students um, follow everything to the letter as best as you can, because that's what our kupuna did. Yeah it's – how I teach is how I learned.

Not a democracy.

Absolutely none. Yeah, yeah. If we say jump, you ask how high. You know, that kind. But ...

And you feel comfortable with that, being the source of all the direction?

Yes, yes. Because I started with that. You know, this singing thing, as I like to call to it sometimes, 'cause sometimes it's – you know, it just happens, is – it actually came out of my hula training and out of my oli training and chant training. So yeah, that's always where I'm gonna go back to, no matter what. 'Cause I know that this 'career,' for lack of a better word, is – you know, it's fleeting. It can be. You know, these things don't last forever. But our culture is much more grounded than that. Yeah. And that is where I derive – we derive a lot of our strength and um inspiration.

When you say 'we,' is it the 'royal we' or 'halau we'?

Yeah, I know [chuckle].

Or your—

I get asked that a lot. You know, I don't like to use the word, 'I.' And so sometimes it's kinda weird when I say 'we' 'cause it sounds like the 'world we.' But it's an uncomfortable thing for me just to say. So *kalamai*, if it sounds weird.

[Chuckle] You know, I hear through the coconut wireless that you began life as a kid named Carlton.

Mm hm, yeah. That's my English name. Carlton Lewis Kealiinaniaimokuokalani Reichel.

How did you become Keali'i Reichel, much in demand recording artist and performer?

I don't know. I don't think you start off anything in your life with that kind of thing in mind. Maybe some people might, but I know that we didn't. You know, oftentimes for us – and I can only speak for myself, you know. We work at bettering our chant, our hula, learning about our language, you know? And as you move along on this particular path, and you affect others and you teach, and you learn yourself it's a give-and-take process, every once in a while you look up and you see what has happened. And some people go, 'Ah yeah, yeah. Good for you.' And you know, that kinda thing? You get all these accolades and stuff. But you know, we just put our head back down, and go back to work. So I don't know how we got here. All I know is that we're here, and we do what we can while we're here in this...

There was some adversity in your background. You went to prison.

Um, almost. Not quite; almost. We – I used to hang out with a group of people that – we were very competitive. And it's probably part of my personality where, you know, I always have to strive, yeah, to be the best at what you do. And so long story short, uh, I was convicted of grand theft. Yeah, when I was in my mid-twenties, I think.

What did you do?

Um, took some money from the company that I was working for. And uh...

Why did you do it?

Uh, why? Let's see. In our little group, it started off small. It started off with, you know, taking a pencil, and then a pen, and then something – it just escalated. And so it was a little competition between all of us. And I had to be better. And so mine was the biggest one.

Grand theft.

Yeah [chuckle]. Gr—

That means, what, two hundred fifty dollars or more, right?

Oh yeah. I guess so; I don't know. But you know, I was convicted. And the interesting thing was, you know, at the time, I was living with my grandmother. And I was kinda known on Maui as a kumu hula and – or at least an advocate of cultural, Hawaiian cultural things. And I received a phone call from my – at my grandmother's house from the investigating uh detective. And he said, 'I'd like to come and – you know, I'd like for you to come and talk to us in Lahaina. I'm like, 'Okay.' So we went to Lahaina, and...

You weren't scared, like, oh-oh?

I kinda knew. I kinda knew. And so I got there and immediately was arrested. And so I sat down with him and he was – he knew my family, he knew that I was living with my grandmother. He didn't want my grandmother to see this at all. And so we sat down and he – after I signed all the papers that I had to, he said, 'Okay, you can go home, and we will contact you.' I was very lucky. A few months later I had to go to court and the judge at the time was again familiar with my work as a kumu hula. And so was the prosecutor. And they were very, very staunch supporters of what I was doing, even though they had to you know, uh, punish me for what I had done. And so they felt that it would be better if I stayed out of prison and worked towards bettering myself culturally than actually going to prison. So that was a huge turning point for me.

Was that community service in lieu of prison time?

Yeah, yeah. And I had to pay all the money back. You know. And I speak freely about it, because if I can provide one example of what you can do, how you can change your life. And it was because of the things that I was doing within the Hawaiian community that prevented me from going to prison. I had to, in my mind, turn around and pay back. And from — it was from that point forward that it became even more imperative for me to strive for, you know, cultural excellence as much as I could. So that as a huge turning point for me.

Overcoming adversity. That seems to be a prerequisite for success in the music industry. And Keali'i Reichel undoubtedly has found success – as a composer, performer and teacher. We'll ask him what he thinks about being Hawaiian, being creative, and being a celebrity... next.

Do you think your life would have been different if you didn't get caught?

Maybe. Uh, I think so. You know, if I hadn't gotten caught, I probably would have done more. Who knows? I really don't know. But I think, again in retrospect, you get to – you know, if you're lucky enough, you get to look back on that path that you took, and all the paths that you could have taken. And so yeah, I think I did the right thing at the right – or the wrong thing at the right time.

You know, you say you are first and foremost in your life a Hawaiian.

Mm hm.

So traditional Hawaiian roots very important; but you live and you succeed in a contemporary society. How do you bridge the two worlds?

I don't know. I think – you know, again, it's like of those things. You don't work at bridging the two worlds; you just work at survival and being as comfortable in your own skin and in your culture, as possible. And I think that's it, really – you know, I

enjoy electricity, I enjoy my TV. But I also enjoy waking up and doing ceremony, doing protocol, reliving and reviving, and re-articulating Hawaiian things either through chant or hula or whatever the case might be. I think it's being comfortable in your own skin and just doing it.

You express your creativity through music, through—

Mm hm.

-- the hula. Do you do art, do you do creative writing as well?

Oh, I wish I could draw [chuckle]. But I can't.

You could do your own album covers if you drew.

M-m-m ...

[Chuckle]

I – no, I don't do a lot of that. I – most of my creativity is – it really is channeled or funneled through the hula itself. I think that's imperative for a kumu hula to be creative. That's what we do – we create. We create um new avenues in which to plug back into our history. And to meld ourselves with our kupuna, and to make it viable for today. That's what kumu hula do. That's their creative process. And they will always be doing that. Every generation of kumu hula will bring their experiences of that particular time to the forefront, couple that with their training. And their training usually comes from –not always, but most of the time, comes from a long line of kumu hula. And so those particular gestures, those particular thought processes always break through to the modern world, through that that particular person, through that kumu hula. So yeah. For myself and for many other kumu hula, that's our creativity. And everything else just kind of gets – it's like shrapnel [chuckle] uh, for lack of better word. And so the singing thing is kinda like shrapnel, almost for me, because it was through the hula and through chant and that particular training that the singing kinda branched out of.

You know, as I listen to you, you don't seem caught up in the recording artist, celebrity part of it all. You really are into the hula and the halau part of it, aren't you?

Yeah. I'm actually uncomfortable with um, this kind, you know [chuckle]. But I – there's certain people, there's certain times that I think it's important. And this is one of them. And so we, you know, you're right. We're not comfortable. We're not caught up. And I think once you get caught up in it, it becomes a dangerous wave to ride. It becomes distractive. And I think that, you know, whatever success we've had with the singing career happened in a later time in my life. I think I was thirty-two when this happened. And so I already went through the evil twenties, you know? [Chuckle]

Mm hm.

I got a lot of that stuff out during that particular time. I think, on a personal level, had this success happened when I was twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, I think it would be different. And so I'm thankful for that.

And you don't seem to have trouble saying 'No, that's a great opportunity, but I don't want to do that.' I mean, I've heard a lot of people say, 'Oh, it's really hard to get Keali'i Reichel, he's tough to get.'

Right. Um, you can't say yes – we learned early on, after the first or second year of this, that you cannot say yes to everything. You have to build parameters around what it is that you're going to do.

Even though you're asked to do a lot of good things.

Right, yeah, there. And everything is good. That's the thing; everything is good. But once you start to spread yourself thin – um, I'm gonna quote something. It's – you feel like too little bit butter on a large piece of bread. You know? You get spread so thin that it doesn't taste good anymore. And so you want that butte. I like butter, yeah? So butter gotta be thick, and right on top that piece of bread. And so yeah. And so we've learned to build parameters to say no; and to say yes to the things that are important. Because otherwise, you become useless to the ones that you want to help if you're doing too many things. Especially in this community, in Hawaii. It's a small community, and you know, you only have so many venues to perform. And you can only perform so many times. You know, after a while, it becomes too much.

Your island is the first island I think of when I think of a lot of newcomers with new ways, and different expectations.

Um, like how you mean?

Transplants.

Okay. You're correct. Yeah; the demographic is changing on my island.

And the demographic changed probably for Maui, earlier than other islands.

Yeah. And actually, it's still different, very different.

Is it a good thing? Is it a bad thing? Can you work with this? [Chuckle]

Well, we have no choice. Yeah; that's the thing. It's difficult, because you see things changing right before your eyes. And very, very quickly on Maui. You know, a lot of you know, local people from the neighbor islands, you know, they criticize Honolulu, the city. Oh, it's the city – all the traffic and the freeways. But you know if you look at it, if you look at Oahu as a whole, you still have these old neighborhoods that have mom and pop stores. There's lots of them on this island. Um, mom and pop restaurants, where the waitresses are grouch, you know? And you get, you know, fat and gristle in your saimin. You know, that kinda stuff. And that is almost all gone on Maui. You know, because it's a different kind of movement. It's a different kind of... for lack of better word, maybe 'progress.' I'm not sure. It's difficult to see and difficult to be around sometimes. But you have no choice. You have to work with it and stand your ground when you have to. And some people don't like it. They think that it's either unwelcoming or it's even racist.

What does it mean to stand your ground?

Stand your ground, meaning, you know, that this is how we do things here. This is our mindset. You know, we – you know, I wouldn't presume to go anywhere else in the world and change how that community thinks. Yeah, 'cause that's not my job. You know, my job is to meld into the community. And there are, you know – and I'm sure it happens all over the world, and there are people that just can't meld – they just want to make it how they want to make it. And that happens yeah, kinda often on Maui. It's just different, yeah?

Sentiments that probably resonate throughout Maui and all of our diverse communities. Coming up... Keali'i Reichel tells us what he does to stay grounded and keep his focus.

One of our PBS Hawaii viewers has a question for you.

Uh oh.

[Chuckle]

Okay [chuckle].

When you need to recharge your creativity—

Mm hm.

--what do you do? Where do you go?

I stay home... and I work in the yard.

And where is home, and what is your yard like?

Well, I live up in Piholo.

Which is upcountry Maui?

Upcountry. It's in the ahupua'a. It's namoku of Hamakua Poko. And it's about thirty-five hundred feet above sea level. So it's kinda cold. And you know, I do a lot of yard work. As much as I can while I'm home, anyway. You know, mow da lawn. You know, I get four dogs. We – I just planted, you know, forty ohia trees on the property. So you know, all those—and I have kalo and uala, and all of those kinds of things. So um, for me, if I'm getting just a little bit too bombarded with this kind of work lifestyle, it always feels good to go back and get your hands dirty. And I had to clean my fingernails before I came, because I didn't realize my fingernails were so dirty. Before I got here, I was like, 'Eh, brah! Clean your fingernails!' But yeah, that's where – that's how I recharge.

And where do you get the strength from to go on? I mean, 'cause we've talked about how people in the public eye tend to get criticism, or you get people pulling you on different sides. How do you find strength?

You find—I think there's a lot of different ways you can find that, and for everyone, it's different. I have a great family. I have really, a small – very, very, very small group of close-knit friends. You know, halau keeps you grounded because you are responsible for so many people that you can't be you know, flitting around too much. And you have to be grounded. Your students are direct reflection off of you. So you have to make sure that you are strong enough for them to be able to be grounded, because of you. Yeah. So that – there's a whole bunch of stuff. I don't think it's just one thing.

And now you're releasing a high definition DVD. Is that a new creative challenge for you?

A little bit. You know, when we do our – every year we have a show. We have three or four – three concerts on Maui. And we've been doing it for a few years. And it has become the venue in which not only to – for us to be – to sing. And for our fans or for those who like our music to come and watch us sing. But also it becomes an avenue for our halau to perform. And because that's part of the learning process, that's part of the cultural learning process – is learning how to get on a stage, learning to how to take your craft that you learn in your – in class and actually bring it to fruition in real time. Yeah. That's a huge part of learning for halau. And so these concerts become that avenue for us. And we do interesting stuff. We try to bring in as much modern technology into the concert itself 'cause I think that from a performance level, that you know, we can keep up with the Joneses anywhere else in the world if we utilize video, we utilize high def, we utilize different kinds of things that you normally wouldn't see, I think, in a local performance.

But not cellophane hula skirts.

Absolutely not [chuckle] 'cause – and you know, there's nothing wrong with that, if that's where you are at the moment and if that's what you're doing, that's fine, yeah. We haven't done that. That's not to say that we won't in the future. But right now, no.

So you're a traditionalist, but you can see yourself – you don't rule it out in the future doing wacky cellophane hula skirts?

I wouldn't rule it out. But I don't think so [chuckle].

I thought so.

[Chuckle]

You're just being generous, right? Don't want to criticize the next kumu hula.

No, no, no. Because everybody has a purpose. Everybody has a place in this huge fabric. Yeah, and you put one – you pull one thread out and everything unravels. Yeah. So there is value in everything that every kumu hula does. Whether you agree with that kumu hula or not, it's the entire whole that you have to take a look at.

What is next for you, do you think?

I don't know. And that's a good question, because I think I never knew. Even in my – in retrospect, you know, there are certain things that are definite. I know that halau is definite. I know that my family is definite. I know that where I come from is definite,

and the community that I associate myself with is there. I think that's it, really. And whatever you do – and I've been lucky in my life, and sometimes not you know, that – to take whatever comes your way and roll with it and try see what happens. You know, I'm known for being able to jump off the cliff and seeing where you going land. Or if you land. Sometimes you don't. And sometimes you fly, sometimes you crash. You know? And it's okay. But I don't think – I don't know what's next [chuckle].

Stay tuned, right?

Yeah, maybe. Yeah, I have no idea, I have no idea. And I think maybe if I was in my twenties, I'd be more definite. But you know, let's see; I'm forty-five. And I think that you know, I'm feeling real settled with a lot of different things, you know? I think it's time for the next group to start, you know, doing stuff. And I see it happening. I see it happening with a younger generation of Hawaiian musicians that are you know, speaking Hawaiian and singing and reviving old songs and writing new songs in the old fashion. You know? So yeah, it's wonderful to see. And I'm glad to have been a – to be a part of that, of course.

Constantly learning ... creating new challenges ... and reinventing himself. Perhaps that's what defines Keali'i Reichel. I hope you enjoyed getting to know this man who calls himself – first and foremost – a Hawaiian ... who has faced adversity and change, and remained true to his roots. Mahalo to Keali'i – and to you – for joining me for this Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou!