

GUEST: MIHANA SOUZA
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Aloha no, and mahalo for joining me for this *Long Story Short* on PBS Hawaii; I'm Leslie Wilcox. Joining us next is a singer and musician who grew up in the great old tradition of Hawaiian music-making. Whether it's a dressy evening party or a lazy afternoon in the backyard, she always knows there's going to be music and her family will be singing, strumming, dancing, laughing. Let's sit down and talk with Mihana Souza next.

Mihana Souza was born into a family of gifted musicians. Her mother, Aunty Irmgard Farden Aluli, was a Hawaiian treasure who composed hundreds of songs, and recorded and performed with her family quartet: Puamana.

((Musical performance: Puamana))

Family and music are so important to Mihana Souza. She begins our conversation with a family chant.

[CHANT] That is our family chant of greeting, of welcome, and of aloha. And it says, Our welcome rises like the scent of a flower, gently touching you, friends, and all of us who gather, who have come from near and far, whether you're here in spirit, or you are here. From the very beginning, a very generous spirit blossomed here, and it reaches out to touch all of us, and to bring us close as we say aloha e. Thank you for having me; aloha e. Thank you for letting me come to share my family; aloha e. We are glad to be here to share aloha; aloha that is akahai, kindness; lokahi, unity; 'olu'olu, gracious sharing; ha'aha'a, humility; and finally, ahonui, patience and perseverance. And it is this aloha that we bring, this aloha that we share, and it is this aloha that we hope to become. Aloha e; aloha e; aloha e. And with that chant, my whole family [chuckle], from the beginning of time, come and join me. So I feel very, very happy to be here. Thank you.

So your mom is with you right now?

Yeah; and all of her sisters and brothers, my aunties and uncles. And every time I do that chant, I actually feel them. They're all happy. You know, and it's funny, because I know that they're in Heaven. But sometimes you wonder, this isn't Heaven, we're so happy to be here. This is a paradise. And I used to always think, if I died and woke up and I ended up in Kailua, I would think that I was in Heaven. So we're in a heavenly spot.

Do you say that —

So they are here.

I know you've lived a life where you've had to go through hardship, and you've had some tough things happen; but you still say we're so blessed and lucky to be here, and this is wonderful?

Indeed. No matter where you go, when you come back, to see the weather, to be with the people, and to know that this is really sort of a gentle land, and it is a paradise, and we are so lucky to be here. And whenever I come home, it's like, oh, it's true; this is paradise.

Speaking of home, "Puamana," would you tell us about that?

Puamana is our family home. And it was the home of my mother and her twelve brothers and sisters. And it was a home that she moved into when she was four, in what used to be a little plantation town of Lahaina. Her father was the luna at the Pioneer Mill. And they moved into this home that he built; it was on the seashore in Lahaina. They moved from Mala Wharf. And she always tells the story; it was a two-story home, and she actually will tell us how it was built. Anyway, they lived many, many happy years there. They were a Hawaiian-German family, raised very lovingly with a very good education, with lots of love, lots of discipline. Because, of course, it was in — 1911 is when my mother was born. And their father was part of a music group, and it was a lodge that he belonged to, so they heard men singing all the Hawaiian songs. And they sang in all the choirs, and they would go into the town and all the women would be dancing hula. So it was a very special time. And we were always with the cousins, and we were very close. And Puamana was their home; they named it Puamana, and it was after one of the young chiefs who come from Lahaina. My grandfather found his name on the stone wall, and that's how they named the home, Puamana, after this prince, they believe. But Puamana actually means flower power; so I really, really logged onto that one.

[chuckle]

Because I'm from the 60s, and flower power was really happening. So to hear that Pua is the flower, and mana is the spiritual strength. And my mother used to always liken it to their family. The parents being the — I guess the stamen, and the petals being all the children. And that made up their family. And then when I was about in my early 30s, my mother, who was sixty-five at the time, formed a family singing group called Puamana. And that was my mother, my sister Aima, my cousin Luana, and me. So then Puamana not only became our home, but became the name of our family musical group.

((Musical performance: Puamana))

How did you come to be the one who played the bass?

You know, I, being a young mother, and trying to find a way to help with income, I started to make head leis and flower bouquets for friends who were getting married. And I remember I would strap my daughter onto my back, and we would go up, and we would pick all the laua'e in the mountains. Well, one time, it got too hard, and I went to my mother and I said, What do I have to do to sing? And she said, Well, go get yourself a bass. So I called my cousin Kekua, and he happened to have two basses; so he said, Come, I'm gonna give you this bass.

Did you know how to play a bass?

I didn't know how to play the bass.

[chuckle]

And I took the bass back to my mother that night. She taught me how to play that night, in forty-five minutes. And that next weekend, we started to sing; it was me, my older sister Neau, and my mother. And we haven't had a free weekend since. [chuckle] So, yay!

Now you, you're the alto. When did you know you were an alto?

I can remember when I was four; my mother would gather us in the kitchen — we used to live in Punchbowl, at my father's family home. They had a big, sprawling house right on Kamamalu Avenue, which is about three blocks up from Royal School by where the Pacific Club is.

M-hm.

And I remember the kitchen. My mother used to call my sister and I in, and she would teach us harmony from the time we were little. Because they would often have visitors come — my father was a lawyer. So they would have dinner, and we had to be the entertainment. So I was an alto from the time I was four.

Four.

'Cause my sister would sing high, and then I would sing alto. And then when I got to be in grade school, of course, we sang in all the Catholic choirs at church.

M-hm.

And then when I was in high school, I sang with Shigeru Hotoki, with the Kailua High School Madrigals. And I was a —

Oh, you went all over the world, I bet.

Yes; all over. I love Shigeru. And I was an alto. And in fact, I never really knew I could sing lead. I always was surrounded by these beautiful, high voices; Luana, my cousin, and Aima. Oh; these fantastic high voices. And I was always sad, because I couldn't ever sing high. And so I've taken lessons, like from Neva, because I always wanted to sing high. And I could never do it. And I didn't know that all you had to do to sing lead was to change the key, until I started to play the guitar. [chuckle] Which was about eight years ago, after my mother passed away. And so we felt that since my mother is in Heaven, I would play the guitar, and my sister would play bass. So I taught Aima how to play the bass, the same way my mother taught me, literally in forty-five minutes; it was really great.

[chuckle]

And then I started to play the guitar. And so now, we are a trio.

Now, I know Puamana has always sung harmoniously. Have things always been harmonious within the group?

Always. Always. Number one, we have the example of my mother.

Was she always right?

Always. [chuckle] And I'll tell you why she was right; because she always came from a place of humble kindness. She was always very, very thoughtful of who she was with. She was always very, very gracious. And she was always very kind.

Boy, that's a hard act to live up to, isn't it?

Yeah; it was really hard, except when you see it in action. Because when you see it in action, you realize that that is truly a wonderful way to live your life, to live a life of kindness. I mean, I always wanted it quickly, I wanted it now; until I saw the way my mother did it. She was just so nice. [chuckle] And she was never confrontational. But she was very gracious, and you could tell that she loved her homeland, and she loved the people here. She

loved what she was doing. And she was a historian in her own way. Because her music would be an account of what was going on in her time.

And what an amazing thing happened when you recorded a song she wrote in the 40s.

[chuckle] Just to tell you a little bit about that story. My mother has written over three hundred Hawaiian songs. And I remember as a young child growing up, there were always these parties. Boy, they really knew how to celebrate. They would have these parties all the time, great parties. The women would always come up in mu'umu'us, and they were those silky muus with the frills, you know, and they'd always have potluck. And always, I remember they would then gather in the back yard, and they would sing, and they would dance, and in the wee hours of the morning, then the men would come and sing. And my father always loved my mother's — he would call them her Haole songs, because they were songs that she would write in English. And she has about seven of them. And one of them was called *Rust On the Moon*. So always at the end of these parties, they would sing all of these old songs, and they were the Haole songs. And when I put out my first album with the help of my mother, I remember promising my father that if I ever put out any albums — that's really dating, 'cause I speak in terms of albums [chuckle] that I would bring to the public my mother's Haole songs, the ones that we loved so much. And one of them was *Rust On the Moon*. That was one of my favorites.

((Musical performance: Mihana Souza))

Mihana Souza recorded that favorite song of her mom's, *Rust on the Moon*, and made it the title song of her first album. It was named *Na Hoku Hanohano Jazz Album of the Year*, in 2003. Mihana's second release, *One Little Dream*, blends contemporary and world music, showcasing her diverse interests. Speaking of diversity, ever met anyone else named Mihana in Hawaii? I never have. So I asked her about her name.

My name really isn't Hawaiian. And I was always very upset, because as a young child, all my aunties would come and they'd say, You know, your name, something's wrong with your name. It just doesn't mean anything, so it's really not a good name for you. These are all my Hawaiian aunties, right? So when I was twenty-three or twenty-four, Auntie Napua — she was really something. [chuckle] And she'd say, You better come and get your name straightened out too. [chuckle] So I finally went to her; I went to class with her, and I was with her several times. And one day, I asked her if she could finish my name. Because I knew, from her telling me, that your name has to have a beginning. It's sort of like it's just a middle, and it's missing a beginning, and it's missing an end. And so therefore, she told me, Whatever you start, you're not gonna finish, and you're gonna have these great expectations, and you're just — I mean, it was sort of really, a bad thing. [chuckle] And I sat there; I said, Well, can you finish it for me? So within one or two months, I was with her one afternoon and we were having a class. She would teach Hawaiian. Sure enough, the lights went out on us, it got dark, this wind came through the room, and she bellowed out, Your name is Ka'imihananoeau. And she fell to the ground, and she cried, and we had to take into the room. And I felt very blessed, and she came and she says, You know, you're really lucky because your ancestors gave me a name for you, and that's how it comes. And it means, The one who searches for wisdom.

M-m; very nice.

Yeah.

Well, what about Mihana?

And so I was really, really happy, and I went along my merry way, and I really, really experienced an inner change. I mean, I really felt whole. And I went to my brother, who was going through some hardships at the time, and I said, Noah — he's my twin brother. You have to go get your name really, really finished, because I'll tell you; we've been sort of doing things half-okole around here. And it's because of our name. [chuckle] It's not really us. This is the 60s; it was a really, really turbulent and very, very interesting time for us. And we really embraced it to its fullest extent. So of course, he went and had his name changed too. And so I was very, very happy. Well, then my Auntie Peggy Kai, who is on my father's side, she was doing an in-depth study of the family. And she came to visit me. She said, [GASP] I have some good news for you. She said, Your name is Chinese; it's from your five aunties who were known as the Five Flowers from China, and they were all in Hilo, and it was Mee Han, Ah An, Ah Oy, Ah Lai and one more that I can't remember right now. And she said, And so your name isn't even Hawaiian, it's Chinese. [LAUGHTER]

And you didn't know that.

I was sitting there going, Now you tell me. She says, And it really has a good meaning; it means beautiful, gracious, refined. And it means, Trying to get better all the time. You know. And I went, Wow! So that I finally realized that it is Chinese derived; Mee Han. So I'm very happy.

[chuckle] Now —

And then, come to find out, that's not really my first name. My first name is really Irmgard.

[chuckle]

And then, come to find out, I really wasn't born June 21st, I was born June 22nd. I mean, then I was wondering why I was confused all these years.

[LAUGHTER]

So after I found this out, I just feel very blessed. I have Mee Han, Ka'imihano'eau, and Irmgard.

Are you making sure you pass along the knowledge as you go along?

Well, you know, when we were young, my mother would have classes, and all the cousins would come to learn her music. And I know that when my children were young, I would force them in the summertime to come; and it would be silly; Okay, we're gonna play the ukulele. I mean, it was silly, but it was my best way that I could pass on what I have. And now, I started this maybe four years ago, anytime anybody wants to learn Puamana, Wednesdays from four to five is time to teach Puamana. And I have a time set aside, and that's Wednesdays from five to six, where they learn the hula. And then all my children play music, and then anybody who wants us to come and sing for them, we carry on our singing and our sharing our music, as Puamana, and we're really, really glad to do that. First of all, we are able to sing and share traditional Hawaiian music, in the manner that it was given to us. In other words, when we started to sing with Mom, you dressed up, you had your leis on, you loved what you did. And it's three-part harmony, it's the Hawaiian harmony, and we loved doing that. That's one thing we really, really loved doing. It's our great pleasure for play for people. And, at the same time, know that we can help to support our families, because that's our way of making money. So to do that is really nice, because my daughter plays music with us, and my sons play music, and when we do gather, you can feel this great youthful zest and energy, which is really, really neat. And they, in turn, can feel the traditional sweetness that we bring. And so that is continuing. And I'm happy to say that that continues on throughout our whole family.

((Musical performance: Puamana))

You spoke about a youthful zest in your house. You've always had, for so long, decades, you've had a baby in your house; different babies.

Yeah.

More babies.

I have five children. And we had a child every five years. So for twenty-five years, we had a baby in the house. And this year, I finally graduated my last child from high school.

So?

-- It's like a whole 'nother life now. I'm very, very excited.

Well, how's your life going to change?

I think that now, rather than having great children, I have great adults. And we all share as adults; it's really, really wonderful. They are smart, and they're starting their own families, and they have a love for this place, and that I have, and we just get to join in the journey as adults. It's really quite lovely. And I sort of feel like I'm nineteen again, but this time, I have brains.

[chuckle]

And I sort of can — you know, my mother put out her first CD, she was eighty-five. And she was an example to me that you're never too old to do whatever you want to do. So I sort of want to really write good songs, really share wonderful music. And who knows? And my mother being the example to start a music group at sixty-five — I'm not even sixty-five yet.

You know, your —

You know?

Your first solo album got terrific reviews.

Oh; it's a lovely —

But I think a comment was made by one of your reviewers that, you know, she's got so much to give —

[chuckle]

-- but she probably hasn't decided which way it's gonna go.

Well, I was raised with good music. And I say good music, because it was great Hawaiian music. We had the aunts at the piano, and the uncles at the bass, and I was raised with great rock and roll; we had the Beatles. I was raised with really wonderful — I didn't know that there were different kinds of music; I just thought it was all good.

M-hm.

And I sang in the opera with Mr. Otoki, I sang madrigal. So I have a part in me that just loves music. So people come and they'll go, Boy, you can really sing jazz. And I'll sit there and I go, Well, I'm not really sure what it is, but I just know that I love it. One thing that I'm really excited about; I'm learning Hawaiian. Because people come

and they'll say, Well, why aren't you doing a Hawaiian album? And I'm sitting there going, Because I'm only dreaming in English. But I'm learning Hawaiian because I want to dream in Hawaiian. And I'm thinking, just for now, that I have many cousins who speak Hawaiian, and many good friends who speak Hawaiian. My mother's mentor, and one of her collaborators, was Mary Kawena Pukui. My mother didn't speak Hawaiian. So I feel, until I can speak Hawaiian, I can go to these people who really know the language and ask them to help me. And until then, I have these songs — I mean, I told my father that I would bring out all of Mommy's songs. She wrote twelve Haole songs that we just love, that the public hasn't heard, that are so beautiful. So the first was *Rust On the Moon*; the second was *One Little Dream of You*, and it was written for my father. When he was away at war, they were newlyweds; as a young bride missing him.

M-hm.

She wrote to him these words. And when he read them, he wrote the last two verses back to her. And it's so appropriate now, because so many of our loved ones are away. So that's the second album. And the third album will be called *Take My Heart With You*. I mean, because she has all these, so I have to do at least twelve albums.

[chuckle]

Or CDs. [chuckle] 'Cause I told my mom, as well as my dad, that I really want people to not only love her Hawaiian songs so much, but to know that there are these beautiful Haole songs that she's done. And I love, love, love sharing her music.

Irmgard Mihana Ka'imihananou'eau Souza loves music. She loves her family. And, lucky for us, she loves sharing stories. Mahalo piha to Mihana and to you for joining me for this *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. Until next time, a hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

My family, for instance, we gather. And as cousins, we always gathered. And because my mother always sang, and all her friends always sang, they always had kanikapila. And I remember, when I had my own family, I went to my mother and I said, You know, the one thing that I really, really hope is, I really hope that I can have friends like you. And one day, I was sitting in the back yard, you know, just playing my guitar. And about an hour later, my cousin joined me, and he'd brought his guitar. And they were just passing by. And by the end of the night, there were about twenty people there, and we were dancing and singing under the moonlight. And I called my mother up, and I said, [GASP] We're singing in the back yard —just like you used to do. And it just really, really pleased me.