

GUEST: KAWIKA KAHIAPO

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We're in the garage again. We're looking at each other, and all the other, our families, our friends, everyone's like, "Wait a minute, have you guys ever rehearsed--no?" You guys sound like a band.

Next, meet a slack-key guitar artist, a singer/composer, and a kahu in a small Windward Oahu church. He loves life in these islands... and, he enjoys giving slack-key tips to his friend, recording artist Jack Johnson. He is the heart of "Kaukahi"; he is Kawika Kahiapo.

That's "Kaukahi" singing their huge hit from 2007, "Life in These Islands". Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to another edition of "Long Story Short". There's more music to come later in the show, but now meet Kawika Kahiapo, the leader of the group, a man who learned some of his slack-key skills from the late great Gabby Pahinui. Kawika has a passion for his music and for protecting our island lifestyle.

I love your song, "Life in These Islands" which you wrote, and in that song you say, "From Kalalau to Naalehu, there's a certain way we do what we do. Day by day, at work or play, in these islands..."

Wow. You should come sing the song with us some day.

Too bad I'm tone deaf. But you say, uh you refer to grandma's favorite hula, brother strumming his old guitar, um, papa laughing with the keiki. Now, what I don't know, is that nostalgia? Is that life as you'd like it in the future, or is that really your life in these islands?

The idea hopefully inspires people to think that if this is a place that you come to and want to be a part of this place that there's an understanding of how we do what we do, here in these islands, and that's, that covers everything from social, economical, um, environmental. So knowing, you know, when you go down to the beach pick up your trash, um emphasis on farming, ag, youth, all of that, just sustaining our unique way of life because it's so simple but yet so profound and I think that's what will carry us into the future.

Did you sit down to write that song, or did it come to you as you were in your car?

Part of it came when I was in the car. I was on the way to a gig I was a strolling musician at a, at a hotel, and uh, one day it started, and the melodies are coming to me and I'm, I dig out I think an old menu from a restaurant or something. I just start chicken scratch on that thing and uh, that started the process. I went and did my gig. And um, went home that night and, finished the song.

In 2007, "Life in These Islands" received a Hoku Award as the Song of the Year; you win as Ki Ho'alu Slack-Key Artist of the Year; "Kaukahi" is named Group of the Year...and your son Dalen receives a Hoku Award as well.

My son did the graphics and he won the graphics...of the year, so that was that was a good year for us. And uh, I think it was a good opportunity for the message of the song to get on a, a more high profile visibility level so being able to have dialogues or conversations like this to explain why is exactly why I wrote the song.

You know, you're fairly young and um and I run into a number of young people lately who, when you talk about you know eating crack seed, and uh, licking the bag after you eat seed mui, stuff like that, they're so nostalgic, they they miss that, they feel like those days are leaving us. And here you are saying yeah, it's still good. It's still happening.

Right. It's interesting you make that comment because that's been the process of uh this "Life in These Islands" kind of uh, journey. We sing the song and perform that, and some people actually dance the hula to that now, but um, it it really was intended to do that to be like a lens or a template so that people can say, not only say "I understand what you're saying" but "these are the experiences that I've had", you know.

They add more to them.

Oh, they totally add more to that and so uh, it sort of lends to the layers of all the ideas and scenarios that we play in our mind, and uh, so again, the diversity of all the cultures like um, the foods we eat at a potluck, right? So so diverse and, even the Hawaiian plate, Hawaiian plate, we talk about fusion into the culture, yeah? The long rice came from China, the salmon came from the Pacific Northwest, so, Hawaiian culture as we know it today, historically and chronologically I guess as time goes on I think that's stuff that continues to add to the beauty of what life in these islands is all about.

Well, the examples you give in the song sound like they come from your life. So your Dad laughed with the keiki through the night?

Yeah. My Dad, my grandparents, we had music all the time. I was inspired by music. First for my Dad you know started playing ukulele when I was eight and---

Was your Dad a professional musician?

No, he wasn't he could have been. But he spent his time, most of his time working two jobs.

What jobs?

Um, he was a state worker for 35 years, and during the day, he did construction, uh construction work... like stuff, and so he would, around the clock, be gone through the night, throughout the day, come home for dinner and...but because he was a state worker you had the time off, vacations and stuff so, during the summer we would camp for like a 6 weeks at a time, down at the beach. Now they call it squatting.

Where did you live?

Kaneohe, born and raised in Kaneohe.

So, what beach did you go to?

Uh, anywhere from like Waimanalo to North Shore. Mostly to Kahana Bay, my aunties, my aunty lived up in the valley of Kahana, so we would camp on the beach, hike to the swimming holes, pick mountain apple, just, that's life in these islands, that's, that's classic stuff that we all, we all knew and grew up by, or um, before the influence of other electronic techno stuff came along you know.

So was standard camping gear your guitar or ukulele?

At some point it was actually, you know, before that it was just, you know, fishing pole, fishnet, but there were times that we went camping and, the guitar and ukulele was standard equipment.

Did you um, did you think you would become a professional musician, or did you have your sights set elsewhere?

Now, no I pretty much had my sights set since I was about 9 years old. I want to do this, you know.

Now did you want to be a star, or did you want to be a musician?

I wanted to just do it. I didn't I didn't know what the star thing meant. I didn't know what the uh performer's side of it was, all I knew was that uh, for instance when my Dad put a guitar in my lap, it was tuned to slack-key, so it's a complete open tuning. It's an alternative to you know kiho alu. But he stuck the guitar in my lap, and before I strummed it, he strummed it for me. And just the vibration of the guitar, it to me I describe it as a spiritual experience. And from then on I felt like, "Man, I want to do this so, I would just practice in my room for hours at a time... nine, ten, twelve years old, all the way to high school, and, had jam sessions in the garage with my uncles...all the time.

And there was a certain calabash uncle too?

At some point, when I was about a sophomore in high school, my uncles would bring Gabby Pahinui over to the house...

Wow...

And uh, man did I pick his brain.

And did you play with him?

I did play with him. Quite a few times, and he taught me some pretty profound lessons that are like just unbelievably um simple, you know? Once, one particular time, he talked about, a piece of advice that he gave me was, all music, whoever um was inspired to create or perform is

influenced by other outside influences, and so he said, you can take music from one genre, from another an another, and everyone knows his first love was jazz.

Wow. What else did he teach you?

Um, discipline? Uh, the importance of keeping your guitar in tune, and knowing that as a musician, uh, there's certain gaps to fill, and certain gaps to leave alone, you know. Nowadays I think a lot of the young people who want to do music or perform um have this sense that wow, I want to flash with my my ability or style. What he told me, he says, "Whether you're playing Twinkle Twinkle Little Star or some jazz piece, make it come from here (POINTS TO HEART), not just here (POINTS TO HEAD). Because I think technically and uh, I guess emotionally or even spiritually, people will know whether you're performing from your head or your heart.

Was he mentoring you, or were these things that came along just by the way?

It was both. There were times when it was just casual and, for all the parties that we played at, all the times that we we got together I knew one thing. My uncles was trying to, my uncles was trying to stick me in front of him, you know like a check this kid out you know and, and so there would be times when we'd be playing and so Gabby would say "Oh play something" and I I was already at the point where I would try to mimic some of his uh, guitar moves and uh, I think he noticed that, and that starting to figure out that uh, it got to a point where we were playing, he would sometimes just call out, "OK, Dave, take one you know I mean, I was just soaking it up, I was like a kid in a candy shop you know it was like, hangin' out with Gabby it was one of the most memorable things in my life.

So how would you say he influences you today?

For instance today, I'm performing with his son Martin Pahinui. And what I've purposely done is incorporated a lot of those phrases I guess, or guitar riffs, that I learned off of some of Gabby's albums. Now that I'm able to play with Martin, the songs that he sings and my ability to to do that, uh, Martin has a big smile on his face. And he says "I'm so happy to make music with you", because there's a there's a there's a awesome synergy and, so I guess what I'm doing is just perpetuating and being able to continue something that Gabby deposited into my life. And uh, yeah. Being able to do that is is an awesome thing.

Let me interrupt our conversation with Kawika Kahiapo just long enough to remind you all that we'll see and hear "Life in These Islands" recorded live at the Outrigger Reef "Kani Ka Pila Grille" at the end of this program.

You know I know you always knew you had your sights set on music you say, but you became a carpenter.

You know you gotta eventually get a real job and feed your family so, this year, my wife of 30 years, um, and my five children, um, part of life in these islands is you know, the whole thing, you know? There's times of uh want, and there's times of prosperity, but I wouldn't trade any day or any moment for for anything and uh, but my involvement in being a carpenter, I went through the whole thing, Carpenters' Union, building homes, building high rises. Coming home all dirty.

You've reached a point in your life now though that you don't take any other jobs but music jobs.

Pretty much, yeah, I've given up the carpentry thing. I always say that I once in a while do a side job for somebody but, I'm building an addition on my house right now, but other than that I'm just doing the uh, the music thing and, I'm a kahu of a little church that we gather in Kaneohe at He'eia State Park. And most of my life now is, basically, community. And building community and being parts of different organizations, and community groups and agencies that bring some sort of assistance to some school or youth group, community group.

How formal is your church that meets at He'eia Kea State Park?

Very informal. In fact I think if you walked in at one of our gatherings, it would look more like a family gathering under the tree. Um, we meet at He'eia State Park and um, on a nice they we'd be under the tree, only when it rains we'll go inside. So it's a time of just sitting down and just um, kuka kuka talk story, I'm not much a talking head as we just try to try to facilitate as an ohana. What are our concerns, what are our triumphs, victories. Uh, each each individual is able to share what's going on in his or her life. And how they're giving back to community, so I think I try to translate all of that. The bottom line is um, what good is all of that, unless through our hands or through our actions we effect change in our community, so that's what it's all about.

That's a big responsibility to be kahu of even a small church, but from a young age you took responsibility. You got married young.

Yeah. Right outta high school um, so my wife and I were both 19 years old... when we got married and that was in 1979 so...

Did she go to Castle High School as well in Kaneohe?

No, actually, she was born and raised in Kaneohe. But she went to Roosevelt. Yeah, so, I met her at some party and we got acquainted and actually I think I won her heart by playing a song for her.

What song, do you remember?

Uh, "Ku'u Home O Kahaluu" actually. So I sat there playing the song and, she actually drew a little closer to me and, the rest is history I guess—

And now you have five children?

Five children.

But you come from a family of six children—

Six children, yeah, Kaneohe.

And did you expect, well did you want a large family?

I did, I did think at least at some time in my life when I was young, thinking I would like to have a family of 5 or 6 kids too. You know, I mean just, I mean all the stuff, I mean domestically when you think about it, being raised in a big family, there's all the stuff that goes on, the typical animosity and all of that and, sibling rivalries, but I think uh, but the beauty of being raised in a family of multiple siblings, you learn a whole lot of lessons about sharing, taking care of each other, learning when it was your turn to move into a different role or responsibility in the house or something else, like when you're old enough to cook rice, and um...

Did you have to wait for hand-me-downs?

All the time. All the time.

So it taught you about doing, doing with less too.

Doing with less and being content with what you had. My Mom and Dad worked hard to raise us, to put food on the table, but we never lacked in love and we never lacked in uh, fun times, and um, knowing that you know I mean. It's funny 'cause growing up in that situation, you don't think to yourself, "Uh oh, we're poor, we don't have money." You just live life making things work and being happy in every situation and being content you know.

I see you as content, even though, you know I'm sure you, you're striving as a performer, and you've got ambition and plans. But it seems like you're you're happy with what you have as well.

I try to keep that um, state of mind. And then again there's a good, there's there's good days and bad days. But I have to thank my parents for that really, just their influence on us to remember to be thankful for everything you have. And I guess it was all those times camping down at the beach

Your career has really taken a turn. For for many years, you were a very much in demand side-man, you were a studio musician. All of the top groups here locally wanted you, and you did a wonderful job on guitar. But now you've moved into a a solo and a top group format. How did that happen?

I don't think you could describe how that happens. Um, you just do what you do and um, we were having this conversation the other day, we were on Kauai this past weekend and our boys were talking about um, the ability to perform...and play music, and and perform for for monetary compensation and all the fringe benefits that come with that but we all agreed, I think most musicians agree that we are in a place and uh, and are able to do what we do, what we do, because we love the craft you know. Like one who paints or does poetry or, or whatever performing arts anyone has, I think you gotta, you gotta have a a absolute love and

passion for what you're doing. When that's your motivation, when you perform, then the public I think, basically sets up the stepping stones where do you go and how successful you become and, so I'm, thankful for a lot of that and um, being able to play but I've really, even with all the nominations and whatever and awards come with it I'm in a lifelong commitment to say that uh, till I go to the grave I think I'll be, making and performing music, just to bring smile to people's faces, and inspire them in a way that will bring back a memory or, or some situation that will cause them to think, you know.

What brought your group together, the men of Kaukahi?

Um, one of the members, Dean Wilhelm, was a member of another group, and uh, he kind of laughs when he tells a story, he had been sort of stalking me for some period of time, actually about 3 or 5 years. Finally he got my number from someone, a mutual friend or ours.

Did you know his work already?

Uh, I did know about the group that he was performing in. So I knew who he was and didn't know him as a person yet. So we got acquainted, we started talking and then he came along one day and introduced um Walt, who's in our band, Walt Mits Keale, his Mom is a Keale. And we started, you know, fumbling around with some music. And so Dean was still performing with Barrett Awai in the group Paiea. And um, uh, just a series of events, started to unfold and Paiea eventually disbanded and I think Dean and Barrett had a talk one day and "why don't we have-get Walt and Kawika together and form a band so, Dean had a casual barbeque at his house one night? Invited us over. Let's just jam, you know, so uh it was my first time meeting Barrett at this barbeque. So after the food and the talking and everything we-s gathered in the garage and from from the first song we counted down, just ok what chord are you playing in? And from the first song, an hour and a half later, we just played song after song after song and, at the end of that hour and a half of, you know, garage jam—

You're in the garage again.

We're in the garage again. We're looking at each other, and all the other, our families, our friends, everyone's like, "Wait a minute, have you guys ever rehearsed, no?" You guys sound like a band. And it just, the synergy was there from from day 1.

You just knew at that point?

Yeah, we knew some things, we weren't sure then we were a band but then we started talking and then, it was like, there was a natural thing to do. The boys were in transition. So was I, you know Kaukahi I describe is a, is a sum of our parts? So me with the slack-key and Walt's ukulele, it's the combination of what brings it all together is what each guy brings to the group. We're still trying to work through some sharpening issues regarding

our vocal sharpness, our musical ability, and and synergy. But uh, we only hope to get better.

You're awfully good. Um, you've given lessons I think, ki ho 'alu, slack-key lessons to Jack Johnson?

Yeah, you know uh---

Multi-Platinum recording artist?

I was at a wedding for uh Pancho Sullivan, local surfer, he was getting married, him and his beautiful wife Haunani, uh, were getting married and at their reception, a bunch of us slack-key artists were performing. And uh, so I went up and I played my set, and prior to that, Jack Jack had come in and sort of introduced himself to everybody and we had a bunch of mutual friends too, but we never formally met...each other. And after I, I had played was proceeding to leave the gate, to get in my car and get out of here, and I felt a tap on my back and I turned around it was Jack, he was like, he came to me and said, "I've been learning slack-key from an old guy on the North Shore and uh, I hear a lot of slack-key all over the place but your slack-key is like something different." I get that a lot so um, we exchanged numbers, information um, decided to get together and hang out. And from then on, we started to grow in our relationship, and um, later that year he invited me to come and sing for his son's baby party and we started to play together and and uh, so this whole journey you know is like so amazing because I'm actually coming into a role of, just living out a dream of serving community, playing music, hangin' out with cool people, and uh, what a ride.

Mahalo to our extremely cool and talented guest, Kawika Kahiapo. and now stay with us and listen to "Kaukahi" and "Life in These Islands", right after this 20 second thank-you to Sony. For PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.