

GUEST: EDDIE AND MYRNA KAMAE

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MYRNA: And it's always interesting when you're around Eddie. You don't know what he's gonna want to do next, what project or what thing's gonna happen. So I found it really exciting.

Celebrated musician and filmmaker, Eddie Kamae, and producing partner and wife, Myrna; next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. Life partners in work and marriage for almost a half century, Eddie and Myrna Kamae have earned national acclaim for preserving on film some of Hawaii's unique cultural treasures. The Kamaes credit many individuals, whose gifts of knowledge and generous support have culminated in the establishment of their Hawaiian Legacy Foundation.**

[SINGING]

Eddie Kamae has distinguished himself as a singer, musician, composer, author, and film director. As a key figure in the Hawaiian cultural renaissance, Eddie was already famous for his virtuoso playing of the ukulele, when he joined forces in 1959 with the legendary singer and slack key guitar master, Gabby Pahinui, along with bassist Joe Marshall and steel guitarist David "Feet" Rogers, to form The Sons of Hawaii. Edward Leilani Kamae was born in Honolulu in 1927 to a family comprised of ten children. Eddie's musical path was influenced in part by his father, Samuel Hoapili Kamae. Eddie Kamae's mother, Alice Ululani Oponui, explained her kindness towards strangers, telling Eddie that, "All these things we do for each other, we feed them more than food; we're feeding the soul". It's a philosophy that has informed the work of Eddie and Myrna Kamae throughout the decades.

EDDIE: There was this boy sleeping in the park, and so my mother tell me, You go get him and bring him here. So I go there, I go—I woke him up. Mister, mister.

Yeah. Come, come, my mother wants to see you. So he picked up his things, and he came to the house.

How old was he?

EDDIE: In his teens. And so, he came to the house, and my mother said, “You don’t sleep there anymore, you sleep here”. Now, we all sleep in the living room, you know, so he’s going sleep next to us now. We get nine brothers now, you know. I go, “Oh, wow”. But that’s the way it was. He stayed with us all that time. As the years went by, one day the father came by. And the father wanted to take his son home, but he didn’t want to go. See, he wanted to stay with my mother because he felt my mother adopted him. He said he didn’t want to go, so the father don’t want to leave. So my father went out and told the father, Go, leave. So the father left, and that was the end of the father, and he stayed with me and brothers, and my mother at our place.

What was his name?

EDDIE: Peter; Peter Woo.

And what happened to him? What became of Peter Woo?

EDDIE: Well, I think he got married and settled down somewhere. See, my mother, she just loves people. No matter who they are.

Was your dad like that too?

EDDIE: My father was strictly a man that minds his own business.

But he would allow your mom to bring in—

EDDIE: Oh, yes.

—people to eat and share.

EDDIE: He won’t stop that. He was part Cherokee Indian. He just come and go. But he always told all of us, “What I want from you, you are to respect the elders, no matter who they are. If they’re hungry, you feed them”. And always, he said, “And you help them”. [SINGING]

How did you learn to play the ukulele?

EDDIE: Well, my brother Joe. My oldest brother was a bus driver, found a *ukulele* on the bus, brought it home. My brother Joe would tune the instrument and play, so I liked to listen to that sound that he was doing. Well, he put the instrument down, so I figured, I watched him while he was playing the chord progressions. And so, when he go to work, so I go get the *ukulele*, I sit next to the radio, I turn on the radio, whatever music is, I just strum away, just feel like I’m playing with the music. But I’m just enjoying myself. Those days, yeah. That’s what got me involved in music. See?

Do you think you were good, right from the beginning?

EDDIE: Well, I thought so, myself.

[CHUCKLE] And you were actually playing songs from the beginning?

EDDIE: Yes. I just listened to the music. See, it was music by—well, I love Spanish music, yeah, because it was Xavier Cugat. His music. And I love one song that he plays all the time, and I followed him. So it was titled “Porque?” See? And I loved the song, so I just followed him. But the rhythm section is what I liked. See,

I just listen to the rhythm, and I just play the rhythm. The feeling of it, you know. So, then my father would take me to the jam session, Charley's Cab, right on King Street right across the Hawaiian Electric building. So they had this taxi stand there, so my father would take me over there on Fridays and Saturdays. That's where all the entertainers would come and sing, and play music. So I go over there and play my *ukulele*. And what I liked about the whole idea, people throw money on the stage, and the musicians pick it up and put it in my pocket. I liked that. [CHUCKLE]

Good incentive.

EDDIE: Oh, yes. So I just play, and my father just smile, he's happy. So then he takes me back the next day. Then I can see that in him, until one day he asked me, "You should play and sing Hawaiian music". And I told my father, "It's too simple". I wasn't interested. But he never asked me again, but it's the only thing he ever asked me. So when he passed away, that's how I got into Hawaiian music, listening to Gabby, sitting down and playing with him. That was it.

What about Hawaiian music is too simple?

EDDIE: Well, it was. What I heard was simple. Chord progression is just totally simple. So Gabby, I heard him play, I like. Gabby had that personality. Well, he was a great musician. Also, that I found that was interesting, he had a voice that would carry a tune, you know. But secondly, he can get funny at the same time. And thirdly, he can get naughty.

Naughty, meaning ...

EDDIE: Yeah. He just telling people, "Shut up". And I couldn't believe it. I said, "This is Hawaiian music; now what is this?" I didn't know that. But the people out there are laughing. And Gabby and go, "Oh, shut up", because they're demanding that he sing this song and that song, and he has his own forte. But that's the way he is. But if he see the old folks, or somebody that have money, that's who he's gonna sing for. The guy gonna buy him a drink. Marshall sings along with Gabby. You know, Marshall. And because he went to Kamehameha School, so he knew the language. So he would harmonize with Gabby. But there are times Gabby sings the wrong lyrics, and Marshall, he look at my steel player and me, he go, "What's wrong with that monkey?" So he calls Gabby monkey every time. And Gabby wink at us, and he go sing something that's not right. And Marshall turn to us, he said, "There goes that monkey again".

MYRNA: [CHUCKLE]

EDDIE: So they had this routine of kidding one another, you know. I said to myself, "By golly, this is interesting".

While performing Hawaiian music with the Sons of Hawaii, Eddie began his quest to find the sources of Hawaiian musical traditions. In that process, he sought the help of two key cultural resources; Pilahi Paki and Mary Kawena Pukui. Both women were generous with their encouragement, and with their knowledge.

MYRNA: Kawena Pukui was really central in Eddie's life for guidance. He'd always go to her. Even before I met Eddie in the early 60s, he had this strong bond with Kawena, and she would guide him. And he would come back and bring music he'd found with, maybe, one verse, and nobody knew the rest of it. And he could hand it to Kawena, and she would write the rest of the verses for him. She just had this incredible memory, and just loved to do things with Eddie that would then be remembered by everyone.

EDDIE: She always tells me, "It's out there".

Go find it?

EDDIE: Yes. "*Ho'omau, Eddie, ho'omau*". Continue on. So I just look at the music, and I look at the lyrics, I find no problem. So then, I can play it and sing it.

And you couldn't hear those songs anywhere else, you had to—

EDDIE: No.

—bring them back.

EDDIE: Yes; yes.

What's the difference between the old songs, and the songs that had become popular in their place?

EDDIE: There's no difference. The old people had their own way of presenting the music. But as time go by, change will come. Kawena told me that. She always tell me, "Just do it, it's important." So I had a chance to focus on what I want to do, and I just do it.

You know, Hawaiian composers then and now, there's a lot of double entendre, there are a lot of hidden meanings, layers.

EDDIE: Yes.

Can you always tell what the song is about?

EDDIE: Oh, if my *tutu*'s laugh at me, I know already.

[CHUCKLE]

EDDIE: I know they know the other side of it, the translation, and I don't want to hear it. Yeah. But that's the way it is. Sometimes they all they just laugh. So when they do that, I stop singing. So I know they know what the meaning is about. See? That's Hawaiian music. Now you don't see a lot of the elderly people around to tell you that, see, but I love to listen, I love to talk with the elderly people. I like too when they say, "Come here", and they have a piece of paper. "You sing this song, because my papa would always sing this song to my mama". See? She say, "Sing this". So now, I gotta trace it, because I have all this research material and books that I kept before, so I can trace it and get it down, get the lyrics, and I know what it is, because she told me. And I wish that there were more like that. This is something personal with families.

Alongside her husband Eddie, Myrna Kamae has produced award winning albums of traditional Hawaiian music featuring the Sons of Hawaii, and ten cultural documentaries for their Hawaiian Legacy series. A native of Mapleton, Utah, Myrna Harmer was in Hawaii in 1965 to help a friend open a new restaurant on Maui. Eddie, coincidentally, was in town visiting his mother in the hospital,

and he was invited to a party at a friend's beach house. The gathering included Myrna, who was captivated by Eddie's music.

EDDIE: Well, Myrna just stared at me.

MYRNA: [CHUCKLE]

She liked you, huh? [CHUCKLE]

MYRNA: Well, I didn't move for two hours. I'd never really heard authentic Hawaiian music.

EDDIE: Yeah.

MYRNA: And here is Eddie, with his little Martin *ukulele*, and playing with Raymond Kane, that beautiful slack key guitar. And I just walked up to the door, and stood there. Because I did have a background of music; my family all were musical. But in Hawaii, I hadn't ever really heard the authentic sound. And it was astonishing to me, to hear this sound. And with the waves in the background. It was just beautiful. And it was Christmas Day.

EDDIE: Yeah.

MYRNA: And then, that evening, Eddie and his cousin came up to where I was working. I had gone to Maui, to Lahaina, to help them take over a restaurant called Pineapple Hill. And so, the person who was the manager said to Eddie, "Why don't you and your cousin come up, you know, to the restaurant".

Had you met? Had you just listened to the music, or had you met?

MYRNA: Well—

EDDIE: Not yet.

MYRNA: Not yet.

Okay.

MYRNA: I think I fell in love with the music first.

EDDIE: [CHUCKLE]

But you noticed her watching.

EDDIE: Well, no, but I look at everybody.

MYRNA: [CHUCKLE]

Oh, okay. So now, something happened this night. So how did it happen, and when did it happen?

MYRNA: Well, I remember that Eddie was standing back, in the back with he and his cousin, Hale Kaniho. And I wanted to go into town, and I had a trail bike that I usually would ride, but I thought, Gee, most of the times, things closed in Lahaina in those days really early. But I really wanted to go somewhere. So I just said, "I'm taking my trail bike, going into town; if anybody is going into town, I'll take a ride with you, but you gotta bring me back". And Eddie goes, "Oh, I'll take you". And so, I grabbed a bottle of Chianti wine out of the storeroom, and we went down, let his cousin off, and then we looked for a place. Anyway, they had a rock wall then, and Eddie was a lot different then. He had gabardine trousers, and—

EDDIE: [CHUCKLE]

MYRNA: —these silk shirts, and beautiful, beautiful clothes. And of course, I had, you know, cut-off Levi's and a sweatshirt, and that kind of thing. Anyway, so I said, "I'm gonna jump over the wall; will you follow me?" And he said, "Yes". And I thought, "Oh, yeah, sure". [CHUCKLE] So we climbed over the wall, and we opened the bottle of wine. And we were looking out, and my goodness, this gorgeous Maui Moon—

EDDIE: Yeah.

MYRNA: —is coming down into the ocean.

EDDIE: Sunset. It was totally round, orange, just slowly going down. And we just looked at that. That's the most interesting sunset I've ever seen.

MYRNA: Actually, it was the Moon going down.

EDDIE: Oh, whatever it is.

MYRNA: [CHUCKLE] Well, the short side of the story of how our families felt was, we decided that we wouldn't tell anybody, and just go get married. And then, we would tell them after. And that worked quite well. Except, a few people were upset, 'cause they wanted to have a party. [CHUCKLE]

But you were accepted, you were accepted.

EDDIE: Yes.

And in fact, you got rave reviews from Mary Kawena Pukui, right?

EDDIE: Yes.

Didn't she say something really good when she met you?

EDDIE: Kawena told me, she said, "I want to meet your wife". So when I brought Myrna, she and I discussed my subject what I was doing, and she noticed Myrna was down on the floor taking notes and writing, see? So then time to go, so Myrna bid her farewell first. So when I came around to bid her farewell, goodnight, and she told me, "Eddie, if you have any *pilikia* with your wife, you're wrong".

[CHUCKLE] You're wrong. [CHUCKLE]

EDDIE: I go, "Oh, no".

MYRNA: [CHUCKLE]

EDDIE: Yeah, now I know she knows, see?

What's the connection between you two? How do you make it work?

EDDIE: Well, Kawena told me, "Everything you'll be doing in your lifetime, your wife Myrna will be helping you". So when I got into every project, whether it's filmmaking, songs, whatever it is, she was always there to handle the situation, so I didn't have to worry about the work, the paperwork and all of that things, the business side. She handle that, so I don't have to worry.

And that was a role you wanted?

MYRNA: Well, I played that role, but I also got to do some of the other things that were fun. To go out on shoots, to write songs with Eddie. So, it was a lot of fun too. And it's always interesting when you're around Eddie. You don't know what he's gonna want to do next, what project or what thing's gonna happen. So I found it really exciting.

In 1970, Kawena Pukui encouraged Eddie and Myrna Kamae to visit the Big Island, to find the songwriter of Waipio Valley, Sam Lia Kalaiaina. He later became the subject of their first documentary film. One of the last Hawaiian poets to compose using flower images to represent hidden meanings in his songs, Sam Lia was already eighty-nine years old, and one of the few living cultural practitioners who bridged the 19th and 20th centuries.

EDDIE: And when I went up to the house, here was Sam Lia sitting down. It just seemed like he was waiting for me. I said, "My father is in Waipio too". See? And then he told me many stories. And one of the most interesting story I heard, when he said, "I was playing music with the boys". See? And I said, "What?" "I was playing music with the boys, then in come running, running in was Prince Kuhio. So we all about ready to stand up, but he sit down, so we couldn't stand up. So I look at him, and he just smiled. So we played music, entertain him". But he said, "I just write my thoughts down, what I saw, what he does, and what he's gonna do. So I just label it down." Yeah. So then ... and then he tell me, "Here, you sing this". So he had wrote a song for Prince Kuhio.

MYRNA: He did say to Eddie that he had been waiting for him.

EDDIE: Yes. Yes.

Did he mean, waiting for the right person to share with?

EDDIE: There's no more like him. He's so generous. If it's your birthday, he writes you a song. Those days, money is just not the thing. It was what you give.

[SINGING]

Luther Makekau was one of the most colorful and cantankerous characters profiled by the Kamaes. Luther was a chanter and singer, poet and philosopher. He was already into his ninth decade, when the Kamaes went in search of his story.

EDDIE: Here was a man, intelligent, but all he wants to do is just drink and have a ball. And Luther said, "I met a man in a bar". I said, "And what it was like?" He says, "Well, we're drinking. See? So, I'm drinking, he drinking. So then I told him I own acres and acres of land here on the Big Island.

MYRNA: Is that Luther told the guy?

EDDIE: Yeah.

MYRNA: Oh; okay.

EDDIE: See, what he wanted to do was drink on the guy all day, so he gotta impress him. So he goes, "Let's go to my lawyer's office". And he walks, and the girls tell him, "He's in". So he goes over there, pound the door, and he works this thing out with the lawyer, see? He pound the door, he say, "Is my papers ready?" So the lawyer says, "Luther, it'll be ready in one week". Was the lawyer told me this story. He said, "Now I know what he going do, he's going beg and drink on the guy all day". And that's what he did. He impressed the guy that he owns acres and acres of lands, now he going back and drink on the guy. One

story the daughter told me. She said, "We went to his anniversary party". You know, Luther's. Top floor of the hotel there. And all of a sudden, the emcee says, "Will please Luther Makekau's children please stand". She said, "Eddie, I didn't know I had thirty-nine half brothers and half sisters". But that was Luther, see?

Different women, obviously.

EDDIE: Yeah; they all chased after him, see? That's the way he is. He doesn't bother, as long he got his bottle of booze, that's what he loves, see. Yeah.

And he was a musician too, right?

EDDIE: Oh, he sings. Yeah, play. He sang falsetto with Sam Lia.

He was just an all-around character, wasn't he?

EDDIE: Oh, yes. The old-timers by the theater, they tell me, "You know, Eddie, you know that guy, he tell us, Okay, you see that house over there? I want you guys to go over there, 'cause I gonna move, so I want you guys move all the furnitures out." [CHUCKLE] So while they were doing that, this other guy come by and says, "What are you fellows doing?" He said, "Well, Luther told me he's moving, so we're moving his things out". The guy said, "This is my house". And the guys that telling the story afterwards, they go, "That Luther, he almost got us into trouble". [CHUCKLE] But who would do that? [CHUCKLE] He tell them move thing out, that's not his house. Only Luther can think about that.

So it seems like you are always attracted to authenticity. You know, people being really who they are, in the place they are.

EDDIE: Yes. Well, that's what I found about Luther. He had a way of doing things, and everything is his way he's gonna do it. See? It's amazing. Even the lawyers tell me that. "Eddie, that guy is always thinking."

MYRNA: When Eddie first wanted to go out and do music, music research, we had saved twenty thousand dollars to put down on a new house. And he asked me if he could use that money to go out and do research, and I said yes. And it's always been that way. You spend a lot of your own money. And then, Eddie has some really good friends that, when he got into the filmmaking business, they helped him be able to do it. Herb Cornell and his wife Jeannie came to one of our documentaries, and asked Jeanette Paulson, who's head of the Hawaii International Film Festival those years, "You gotta help Myrna and Eddie, how can we do it?" A little bit later on, Herb, and Carol Fox, and Sam Cooke, and Kelvin Taketa, before he became the head of Hawaii Community Foundation, still at Nature Conservancy, they helped us do five films. And that was a major, major part of our work. And then, we actually formed a nonprofit called the Hawaiian Legacy Foundation, and we have a board of directors. People who love Eddie's music, who love the work, they love the authentic, cultural continuity that we try to establish in the work. You look at the people that helped us make the films, and that you have to have a really wonderful production crew, and we've had, most of them from the beginning, like Rodney Ohtani, and Dennis Mahaffay has been a consultant through the whole thing.

So you never bought that new house?

MYRNA: [CHUCKLE] No. We're still renting. [CHUCKLE]

Eddie and Myrna Kamae's documentary titled "Those Who Came Before", the musical journey of Eddie Kamae, honors Eddie's teachers, Mary Kawena Pukui, Pilahi Pahi, and Sam Lia, who inspired the Kamaes' efforts to preserve Hawaii's cultural heritage. The Kamaes, at the time of this taping in 2011, are hard at work in production on another documentary about the people of Kalaupapa called "Feeding the Soul". *Mahalo piha*, Eddie and Myrna Kamae, for sharing your long story short, and thank you, for watching and supporting PBS Hawaii. I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou kakou*.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit pbshawaii.org.

MYRNA: Eddie would take me to see Kawena Pukui. And the thing that she said to us that meant more than anything was, a lot of times along the way, you have some hard knocks. And when something specially hard happened, she would say, "You know, there's always room in your heart for forgiveness." And that's helped a lot through the years, to be able to let things go, and to be able to continue on with the work.