

**GUEST: SIG ZANE**

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**Designer and cultural practitioner, Sig Zane, 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. Hawaii clothing designer Sig Zane is known for his distinctive limited edition prints that combine contemporary graphic elements with Hawaiian cultural values. The Sig Zane Design store in downtown Hilo has been selling this iconic Hawaiian wear for more than twenty-five years. His designs reflect an intimate knowledge of the Hawaiian culture. It's knowledge that he acquired, and continues to glean, from his wife, Nalani Kanakaole. She and her sister, Pua Kanahale, are *kumu hula* of the renowned *Halau O Kekuhi*. Nalani and Pua are the daughters of the late Hawaiian culture expert, Edith Kanakaole, who was a key influence in her son-in-law's life. In contrast, Sig Zane's Chinese great-grandfather on his mother's side, and Chinese grandfather on his father's side, both immigrated to Hawaii to work on farms. Sig's father, Benjamin Zane, had an interest in the arts, and provided Sig and his three sisters with opportunities to travel and visit great museums.**

My father's father grew up in Kohala, but jumped ship to come to Oahu and moved to Haiku as soon as he could, refusing to speak English, just wanting to speak Hawaiian and Chinese, but a fisherman and a farmer.

**And then your father and mother; tell me about them.**

Father was an insurance man for, mm probably 'til the 70s, and then he started doing real estate. My mother mostly was a housewife, and she did go out and do some retail at one of the bigger retail stores, but most times at home. My father always entertained, so that was something that I think we all got from him, in the sense that he was so mm, friendly, always could make conversation. My mother was one of the best dressers. To me, she was the Jackie O, yeah, she ... totally perfect. So I think that they, in their unique way, really set the path for us.

**And your given first name is?**

Sigmund. [CHUCKLE]

**And why?**

[CHUCKLE] That's a long story. [CHUCKLE] My mother wanted to be a Catholic, and everyone in her family were basically atheist. They didn't believe in religion. But when the time came for her confirmation, there was nobody that would be her godparents. So, at the Lady of Peace Cathedral downtown, she walked up to this couple, and she said I'm gonna be confirmed, but I need godparents; will you be my godparents? And this German couple said, Sure. Well, his name was Sigmund.

**[CHUCKLE]**

And so, she promised him, If I have a son, I'm gonna name him Sigmund.

[CHUCKLE]

**Wow.**

Growing up with that name was a challenge. Still, today, everybody pronounces it totally wrong.

**For example?**

Zig Zag. [CHUCKLE]

**But Sig is a nice, snappy nickname.**

Yeah, especially with Sig Zane, it ...

**It works.**

It works. [CHUCKLE]

**It's a good design name.**

Yeah. [CHUCKLE]

**Much to the dismay of his parents, school was not a priority for Sig Zane. He instead threw himself into surfing and fishing. After graduating from Roosevelt High School in Honolulu in 1970, he left for Spain, where he lived for two years as a child, to rekindle fond memories from his youth. Within two months, he grew disillusioned, and returned home. In 1971, he tagged along with a friend to attend college in Hilo, and go fishing. It was here that he met an extraordinary family and began a lifelong love affair with the Big Island.**

So, running down to Hilo Bay we immediately caught. And this was just amazing. Day three in Hilo, and here we're catching *papio*. Yeah, I have to admit that I didn't go to much schooling. [CHUCKLE]

**You started at school, but you ...**

I went to the other school, school of *papio*. [CHUCKLE] But the *papio* really took me all around the island. I was not catching them regular style by bait, I was whipping. And so, using a lure, it meant that you had to traverse a lot of coastline. But that's how I got to see the island, and got to appreciate it, and really see places that I felt that, wow, probably the last person who walked here

was a Hawaiian. 'Cause we were way out in the sticks. And I think that that exposure really got me to love the island, the spirit of the island, that *mana* that kinda is not visible here. Got to go places in Kona that, the Emerald Seas, that very isolated bay, and then being rewarded with this *ulua* now, not just a *papio*, but *ulua*.

**From the shore?**

Yeah. It was just amazing. [CHUCKLE] So I think that that was the first thing that got me there. But, I really have to give credit to the Kanakaole clan. Meeting up with Edith Kanakaole, my mother-in-law, I didn't know who she was. I just remember seeing this jovial *wahine*, and how she served the *poi*. We went to this little *paina*, and there she was, serving *poi*, and how she just did this, and with a big smile on her face, and I just went, Wow, what is this? But that night, I recall we were on the shoreline of Keaukaha, and she having her *halau*. Her daughters had just kinda taken over running the *halau*, and I remember before moving to Hilo, that oh, I think that I want to dance, I want to learn everything about *hula*. This was the renaissance in the early 70s, and I heard the first chant, and they were doing the *Pele*'s. And growing up in Oahu, you really weren't exposed to the fire clan, you were mostly exposed to *Kalakaua*'s, you were exposed to the *pahu* dancers, dances that were kind of slower. So listening to these fire dances, I went, Holy macaroni.

**Holy papio. [CHUCKLE]**

Unbelievable. I remember Nalani sitting off in the dark, and totally naïve to who she was, I just walked over and said, Okay, what is this, what's going on here? This is just unbelievable. And you know, when I think back how everyone was kind of afraid of my wife, and her demeanor, and her power, they never approach her. And here I was, totally naïve. Well, what's your name, what's this? [CHUCKLE] But that was the start of this love affair and really, the immersion in the Hawaiian culture of this depth in that foundation.

**And what did Nalani make of you?**

She probably thought, Oh, this crazy *Pake* guy from Honolulu. [CHUCKLE]

**And that was the beginning of a career in *hula* for you, as well, right?**

Exactly.

**You still dance?**

M-hm.

**And you run the *halau*, right? Or you are very much a part of the *halau* management.**

Yeah, I guess. I carry all the implements, I carry the *pahu* drum, I carry her *ukulele*. I help dress them, and I help do costumes. But, I still dance, mostly *auana* now, *kahiko* is a little challenge for the body. But yeah, very much in.

**The Kanakaole's are a strongly matriarchal family, aren't they? So it must be hard for guys, sometimes.**

[CHUCKLE] Damn hard.

**[CHUCKLE] So—**

Yeah.

**How does it work?**

We know who the boss is, and mostly because of that *kuleana*, just carrying that tradition. Right now, it's seven generations. And I realize my role, my function is really to take care of that *kuleana*, and take care of her, because of that responsibility that she has. And when I came to that point in my life all doors opened. It's just amazing where we've gone, what we are privy to. And really, it is just honoring that responsibility.

**And what did your parents make of your transition to very Hawaiian values and lifestyle?**

My father didn't say anything. I guess he probably could think of his father, and how he did things Hawaiian. But my mother was totally baffled. She came up to me and said, Well, why? Why? [CHUCKLE] Why? But I think now, she sees the value. It took her a long time. I remember when I said, Ma, you're going to have a grandson, and she said, I know, I know your sister is *hapai*. I said, No, you're going to have a grandson. And she said, What? And I think that was a change, that I could bring up a Zane. You know, 'cause there's no other Zane left. I have three sisters, so they all took their husband's name, and at least I could provide a Zane. But for her to embrace Nalani, who doesn't speak much, and who really lives in a very Hawaiian style way, to this day, is often challenging for my mother. But I think she sees the benefits.

**Well, tell me about the Hawaiian way in which she and you live.**

It took me a long time to learn that. [CHUCKLE] I, who come from the city, going to Hilo, I learned a lot. And I think that to this day, Nalani has taught me about the power of the word. If it is spoken, good or bad, it has consequence. And so, in just that small little rule of thumb, that has changed my life totally. Being cognizant of what we put out there, I think is what's the greatest gift I gained from learning things from Nalani. I think also, language. It isn't just the literal, but really, it's the figurative. The many, many, many layers of the meaning has helped me define design. It has helped me really put out something, I believe, that is applauding things, what the Hawaiians have done.

**After attending college in Hilo in the early 1970s, Sig Zane spent a year in Chicago as a flight attendant with American Airlines. Later, he moved back to Honolulu to work with his father in real estate. Sig would travel back and forth to Hilo, always with special gifts to court his future wife, Nalani Kanakaole.**

I wanted to make gifts for her that no one else had. And so, I learnt silk screening. And so, I started making these plant forms, because I knew that in *hula*, all these plants were important. So the *liko*, the very tips of the *ohia* plant were symbolic of new growth. And especially in a dancer, that means you are

projecting the very best, the very tops of the plants, the *maile* to bind, the *olapa*. You know, just like in the forest. So those became the first designs, because I wanted to gift her something that meant something.

**Did you know you had design and art talent?**

No.

**You didn't have any training.**

No.

**Just did it?**

Well, nature is the best teacher. How better can you do than nature? So I just copied nature. The designs came about because of my mother-in-law always saying, Share, share what you know. Because we need to teach our own, we need to teach our people, so that our children will have culture. I was invited to a party, and they said, You have to wear an *aloha* shirt. And I didn't have *aloha* shirts. I was basically a surfer, I wore all surf clothes. And I remember going to the store, and I told Nalani, Let's go, I have to get an *aloha* shirt. And we were kind of surprised, we didn't see any Hawaiian plants. They were all—

**No Hawaiian plants on aloha shirts. Isn't that amazing?**

And they were all called Hawaiian shirts, *aloha* shorts. And so I remember at that moment telling Nalani, we have to make real Hawaiian plants on *aloha* shirts, then they can be real Hawaiian shirts. And that started it. We started the line, and basically, that was it. But, along with that, we really wanted to share that story of why the *maile* is important, and why *maile* is good for weddings, and why people shouldn't wear the *puhala* tree, especially if they're going for a job or running for office. Yeah. [CHUCKLE]

**Okay; you gotta tell us all these things. And I know you explain this in your shop.**

Well, oftentimes, studying nature is the best way to define the meaning. And that's what the Hawaiians believe. You study how a plant grows. Like for example, the *maile*, how it entwines the trees; it kinda embraces its host. Same thing as the meaning of *maile*, is to bind, is to grow together. And for a wedding, what best metaphor for a design? *Koa*; *koa* is a real good example. Oftentimes, when people are applying for a job, we say, You should wear *koa*, just because *koa*, first of all, means fearlessness, yeah? But it also means warrior. But if you study how it grows in the forest, it becomes the mother of the forest. It is the one that hosts the community. Under a *koa* tree, the understory is beautiful, because it is a nurturing ground. So in that whole thing about a *koa*, it's not just fearlessness or strong, but really, it is to care for that community. So all those things, we try to share with every shirt that leaves us. We want to that story to go, so that that story is retold. The *ulu*, the breadfruit is very, very important to us. Not only that it feeds us and that it provides shade in our *Keaukaha* yard, and one of the most beautiful motifs graphically, but our *pahu* drums are made out of *ulu*, our *poi* boards are made out of *ulu*, the bowls that we use in ritual are made out of *ulu*. Certainly, it has its meaning of this plant of

provision, but *ulu* also means to inspire, to grow, not only in physical sense, but mostly in mental sense. So, I wore this today just because I feel that oftentimes, that *kuleana*, that responsibility to share what we know is very important, especially in today's world, when you put on your computer, you go searching on that internet. You're fed so many different things, but it's really important for our people to know, and have a good foundation. And so, I wear *ulu*, hoping that something we say today is inspiring to someone to search deeper into their own traditions.

**Oh, that's a nice thought. You do other things in the shop. Tell us how your shop works.**

It's fun. You know, after twenty-five years, it's become my playground. One of the neat things that I love to do are the displays, especially the window displays. And I really consider myself lucky that I get to do anything in that window. The store is becoming a fun place where we also play with display. Just trying to tweak things, so that whoever comes in gets an experience visually, not only print wise, but how it's displayed. I like to do things that get people to think, Wow, I should have thought of that. I like that. Yeah, I use the store as a staging, as a place where we can each express ourselves.

**In his youth, Sig Zane aspired to a career in architecture. He and Nalani have shared an interest in the subject for many years. Sig sees the next step in his creative process as applying his designs to works of architecture.**

My wife and I talk about that, that we have thirty years of architecture behind us. Because as soon as I met her, we started cruising. There's not much to do in Hilo, yeah? So we would cruise around and go all through the neighborhoods, and we'd pick our favorite houses, and we'd discuss it. What characteristics we liked, what kind of roofline, what kind of nuances that set that house apart. I think that the design, or the sense of design that we can bring to architecture will define sense of place. And especially here, Honolulu especially is getting so modern, and trying to be like other people. But we have a sense of design that is so totally uniquely Hawaiian, that can convey a sophistication that I think needs to be done. And actually, there's been several discussions about that, that we can apply, especially like the *ohikapala*, the bamboo stamps, how we decorate *kapa*. Those have a meaning that is so deep that I think that intention of putting that kind of meaning into architecture allows Hawaii to stand right up there with everything else. For example, a lot of the Polynesian cultures still create bark cloth. They still make *kapa*, and they still decorate it in many different fashions. Some with a little *hala* brush, some with stencils. The Hawaiians had a chance to take it to another level with bamboo stamps, and still, no one else uses these bamboo stamps. It allowed them to refine that art of decoration. Thinking about those stamps that that artist created, it isn't just a

simple geometric, but it is a symbol. Like for example, the simplest one, the triangle can often mean a favored *puu* or hill. Like if the artist lived in Puowaina, Punchbowl, that may be part of that decoration for that *kapa*. Well, we use it often in *hula*, back in Hilo. We ask everyone to decorate their own costumes. We do not go out and solicit other designs, because we want that to be a story that belongs to that dancer. So oftentimes, we take chants, and the line of a chant talks about, say, maybe the canoe that mounts a certain wave that is in seek of the new home. So that symbol now becomes that line of that chant. So that meaning is transferred to that audience who is visualizing this now costume. So I think the same thing in taking that form, that artform into architecture, we now are developing our storyline in a grander sense. Something that really has meaning.

**But where does the Chinese come in? In business?**

Uh ... no. [CHUCKLE] I can make pretty good fried rice.

**[CHUCKLE]**

I can cook. Maybe that was the *Pake*. You know how the *Pake* always cooked for the Hawaiians. I think in my artform, because I still hand-cut everything, it comes easy. And so, I think that maybe my ancestors were paper cut artists. I also am a dragon, born in the year of the dragon, but also because my birth in November, I'm that scorpion dragon. So I think that that part of the Chinese is very strong.

**And what does that mean about you, scorpion dragon?**

Lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky.

**Lucky Sig Zane points to his son, Kuhao, as the keeper of the flame in the next generation of Sig Zane Designs. Already an established graphic designer, Kuhao has the passion to uphold his cultural traditions, and the technical savvy to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The entire family collaborated in June of 2011 on an exhibit named for the ID code for Hilo International Airport, reflecting this ohana's near constant time on the road. The show, titled ITO Travelwrights, was a ten-day art and design event in Waikiki. It included a pop-up boutique and an art exhibition of creations by each family member. Mahalo piha, Sig Zane, 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](http://pbshawaii.org).

The community of Hilo has been one of the best teachers I've ever had. I have become who I am because of the land, of the people. Really, the humility, the elements have really taught me a lot.