

GUEST: JIMMY BORGES: THE BALLAD CONTINUES

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The first singer that I really liked was a singer by the name of Mel Torme. And what I really liked about him is that he was a perfect technician. Technically, his sound was perfect. His placement was perfect, his intonation was perfect. He was the first one I emulated. When I started really enjoying music and listening to more singers and all of that, I realized that Frank Sinatra had something that none of the other singers had.

Torme, Sinatra; Jimmy Borges idolized and emulated these great crooners. But he didn't stop there. He took the classic tunes and made them his own, as they like to say. He wrote his own story. Next, we'll continue the Long Story Short of Jimmy Borges; his connection to Sinatra, how he courted the love of his life, and how liver cancer brought him even closer to his fans.

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

Aloha. I'm Leslie Wilcox. The truly accomplished singers, the ones we connect with, know how to tell a story through song. They hold us in the palm of their hands, evoking our emotions, taking us on a journey. Jimmy Borges has been taking us on that journey for more than fifty years, with enthusiasm, love for life, and a gracious style that was influenced by his idols.

[SINGING]

When did you meet Frank Sinatra? What did you know of him firsthand?

First of all, I went to Las Vegas. Shirley MacLaine saw me singing in San Francisco, and she told her husband that I was the guy that would fit in with his show. And I went to Las Vegas, and I did, I fit in, and I stayed there. At that time, Shirley MacLaine was part of the ... Rat Pack was just forming. That was Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Joey Bishop, Shirley MacLaine, and few other fringe guys. So, my opening night in Las Vegas—this is an adjunct to the story. There was a show called Holiday In Japan, and I went there to replace the star of the show, which was James Shigeta, another local guy. And so, I went there, I come out for my first song, and there in the very front is Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis, Dean Martin, Joey Bishop, Shirley MacLaine. And I'm going [GASPING].

And they all had martini glasses.

And they're sitting over there, they says, Okay, here's the kid, let's check him out. You know. And uh, I was so nervous. I was so nervous, my mouth was so dry that my lips stuck. Like that. [CHUCKLE] And so now, I was able to sing, I sang okay. And then Shirley MacLaine ask them, Well, what do you think of him? They said, Kid sings okay, sings good. He says, One of the things I noticed, though is, he's really got a nice smile. [CHUCKLE]

[CHUCKLE] A big smile.

That wasn't a smile. [CHUCKLE] So that was my first meeting and introduction with Jim. In the show, there was this gorgeous, gorgeous girl who was the only one outside of the people that worked that weren't in the show that spoke English, from Japan. And so, she became my buddy. And I did want to—I kinda liked her, but she wasn't that interested in me. She was dating Frank Sinatra at the time. And it was really very, very funny. There are so many funny stories about her. Her name was Shizu, Shizuko, and she became my wife eventually.

Certainly not when she was dating Frank Sinatra.

Not when she was dating Frank Sinatra, but eventually, she became my wife. She felt that there was something in this young man that deserved more of her time. But she introduced me to Frank Sinatra. I was really nervous when I first met him, because I looked in his eyes, the deep blue eyes, and this was my hero. This was the person who taught me how to sing, who taught me how to sing a phrase and to tell a story. This was the most important man, this was my Einstein. So he meant more to me than just being a star. He was my *raison d'être*, he was my reason to be. This is why I sing. And so, meeting him ... and she says, Oh, Jimmy-san, this is Frank. By that time, when she introduced me to him, we were already married. So eventually, my wife and I divorced, my first wife and I divorced. But we're dear, dear friends.

When you're just a guy from Hawaii, you can choose to take a backseat to the world, or you can dive in and take your chances with the big boys. Jimmy Borges always dived right in.

I understand you're the only singer ever offered free access to Frank Sinatra's archives of recordings. Is that right?

Yes, I am. But that came with chutzpah. That came with the Hawaiian chutzpah that I had. I said, I wanted to do a concert, and I wanted to do a tribute, not to Frank Sinatra, but to the music of Frank Sinatra. And I said, But the only way I can do that is getting his music, and I don't know him well enough to ask. So I asked Frank Valenti, who was here, from Milici Valenti. And I knew that Frank knew Frank Sinatra. I said, Can you call Mr. Sinatra for me and ask him if I can borrow some of his arrangements to do a symphony concert in honor of his music? Well, he did; he called. And about seven weeks later, I got a call back from the Sinatra office, Frank Sinatra office, which was at Warner Brothers Studios at that time. And the lady—I can't remember her name now, she calls; she says, Mr. Borges, Mr. Sinatra said that you can have access to his library,

anything you want. And when she was talking, I noticed there was a smile in her voice. So I said, There's something humorous about this that's happening right now, but I'm not aware of; maybe you can let me in on it. Is there something funny about this? She says, Well, Mr. Borges, the Boston Pops Orchestra conductor, and Quincy Jones, they both had wanted to talk to Mr. Frank Sinatra—Mr. Sinatra, that's what they all called him, Mr. Sinatra, about borrowing some of his music. And they were afraid to ask, and you, who we don't know, who we have no idea who you are, asked, and you got it. So you got the music, and they didn't, and we don't know you. [CHUCKLE] So we think that it's very, very funny, that Jimmy Borges from Hawaii got the music.

And how did it happen? Why did it happen?

He sent people to check me out.

You mean, really sent people?

Yeah. Well, yeah. So somebody came over to listen to me, and because if I was doing a Sinatra copy, I would not have gotten it. They wanted to know if I was a singer in my own—

He didn't want a copycat.

Right. Exactly. And okay, that was assessed, they liked my singing and the whole thing, and went back and reported to Mr. Sinatra. I mean, he took it all on his own to spend money like that to check me out before he allowed that. And then, when they told him, he says, Let the kid have what he wants.

Does that mean you went into his vault?

I went to Los Angeles, and I said, Dorothy—that's her name, Dorothy Ullman. She said, Just come to Warner Brothers Studios, and you'll have a parking, your pass will be there at the gate and all that, and they'll tell you where to go. So I drove up, I went to Los Angeles. I did my homework for like about five or six months to know what songs I wanted. Because he would do like Night and Day had about twelve different arrangements, so I had to know which one I wanted. So I drive in over there, and he said, Mr. Borges, right this way. And they sent me up. I had a parking spot that said, Jimmy Borges. Wow. I drove in, I said, This is pretty cool, I love that. Drove in and got in. I walk in and she says, Mr. Borges, happy to meet you, I'm Dorothy Ullman, this is so-and-so, and this is so-and-so, and you'll have to go to such-and-such a street near Vine, and there's a cottage there. That's where he keeps his arrangements. He has a whole cottage, just filled with arrangements, like two thousand arrangements. So I went there, and because Mr. Sinatra said to treat him good and give him what he wants, I was a king.

And no money changed hands?

None whatsoever. Not only money; I mean, he gave it to me to use, and they took care of the shipping. The shipping for those arrangements were like four or five hundred dollars one way.

Wow.

And he took care of the shipping back and forth. And all he asked, he said, These are for you alone. And I wound up with sixty-four arrangements.

To keep or copies of? What exactly did you get?

It was to be given back at the beginning. And then, I wanted to do it again, so I asked again, and he said, Okay, just keep the copies. And he wrote me a letter. He said, This will be strictly for you; as long as it's in your hands, it's okay. So I can use it. And so, I have my own set of copies because of that.

Spend any time with Jimmy Borges, and you see the man doing what he does best; connecting with people. Shake his hand, and he makes you feel like you're the only other person in the room. Much of that comes from Jimmy himself. His sense of grace is refreshingly old fashioned, and some of that comes from his wife, Vicki, who helped to nurture Jimmy's gentle side.

[SINGING]

You know, we've talked about your first wife. Let's talk about Vicki. 'Cause you said there were two important women in your life, most important women, and that's Vicki and your daughter Steffanie.

Yeah. Vicki and my daughter Steffanie. Of course, I'm going back to my first wife too, she really belongs in that category. Vicki came along in my life after my first wife left me. And for good reason. And I won't get into the reason, but things weren't going well. And when she left, it was very hard on me. And at that time I just started dating everybody, and the whole thing, and that really didn't work for me, and I was kinda lost. Even my daughter saw that. But nobody could really tell me much; I had to find my own way. And Vicki ... she came into Trapper's, and she was with somebody else. And I looked at her and said, Wow. I really liked what she looked like. I just—wow. And I was full of ploys. I always had a ploy to do something. I said, Hm, I have to meet her. So I went up to Vicki and the guy that she was with, who I had no idea who he was, and I pretended I knew him. And I talked strictly to him. I says, You know what, I've met you somewhere before, I don't know where, but you're really familiar. Where do you work?, and all that. I'm only talking to him. After about four minutes of this nonsense repartee, he says, Oh, by the way, this is my date, my girlfriend, this is Vicki. And then, I said, Oh, hello Vicki. [CHUCKLE] Like I had just noticed her, and she was the reason I was there. The minute he goes to the bathroom, I got onstage and I says, Look, if you ever come here and you're by yourself, I'll make sure that you're watched over, and you can be my guest and all that. So she did. She came back one time, and ...

She came alone to the nightclub?

She came alone. And what I liked about her, she's a very strong woman. She speaks her mind, and she never says anything she doesn't mean. Very, very honest, bottom line. And we had a relationship that was very stormy at the very beginning, because I'm a control freak, and she wouldn't allow me to control her. And I liked that about her, and I liked it and disliked it at the same time. But

I admired it, and I liked the character of the person, besides the beauty and whole other thing that was there, that was pure lust. That was the very beginning, but I started to like her, I really liked her as a person. And we've been together now almost thirty years. But the first five years before we got married, was a matter of just feeling each other out. But it was really good. Because I found out the strong woman. This is going back to my thing about women. I like strong women, and everything I've learned in my life, most of it came from women, and the strength, the gentility of it. She was gentle, she taught me how to be gentle, besides her strength, by introducing animals into my life, including birds and things. And it gave me something else to be concerned about. And she brought those kinda things. She saw that she softened up my life.

Cancer; the word that no one ever wants to hear, the word that changes your life forever, for good or for bad. Jimmy Borges always respects and appreciates his fans, but when he stepped into his battle with liver cancer, he found that the love from his fans went way beyond his music.

How long has it been since your operation, your successful operation?

My successful operation was July 18th of this year. And I'm a miracle. I really am a miracle for many, many reasons. My cancer was diagnosed in April, on April 21st. Three days later, I was singing with a big band, and I was cookin'. But from that moment on, my whole life was consumed with the fact that I have cancer. When they told me I had cancer, my first thought was one word. I didn't say it. But I said, Me? I had a perfect life going. My life was perfect, in every respect, and all of a sudden they tell me that I had cancer. It was surreal. I was scared, and then mad, and then you go through the process, when I had to tell my wife and my daughter. And they helped me through it. They would cry on the side, but they were strong for me, all the way through.

How did you know you had cancer?

I was coughing at home, and I had a low grade fever that accompanied it. Vicki told me, she says, You gotta go to the doctor and see, you might have walking pneumonia, take an x-ray. So I did. I took an x-ray, and the x-ray showed up ... well, my liver, I guess it's right below, it caught the lower part of the x-ray. They saw a spot. We see something there that we want to send you to a CAT scan. Sent me for a CAT scan the next day, and then immediately the next day after that was an MRI, and that's when they told me that half my liver was cancerous.

Grapefruit-sized growth.

Yeah, a large grapefruit-sized. They actually said small football, small football.

And you couldn't feel that?

No, not at all. It didn't show, and I felt great, other than my cough and my low grade fever. So I didn't feel badly about it. Then they put me through chemo, a thing called chemoembolization. And it's a one-time thing, and that's why I

kept my hair and all those things. But it goes right into the tumor. The dye goes in there, and the radiation, and then they pinch it off. It clogs up all the arteries and blood vessels, so that the cancer has nowhere to grow and go.

Often, when you hear liver cancer, you think, Oh, no, I mean, that's ... I mean, the chances are lower than most, right?

Two doctors didn't want to do the operation. One doctor other than that said I had a five percent survival rate. One doctor actually told my wife, who didn't tell me until two days after my operation that he said I would probably die on the operating table, because of the size and where it was. And my wife had to live with that, and still show a brave face for me. So she suffered more than—and my daughter, more than I did, because they had to live their lives normally in front of me, and yet cry behind my back. I just had me to worry about and think about. And yet, with me thinking about it, I says, I'm a seventy-six-year-old man, I've lived a great life. If I died right now, I got no complaints. God was really good to me. I have no complaints whatsoever. But, living was important for the people who love me. And then, I found out so much about the people who I've touched throughout my life.

Because they touched you back, while you were sick, right? They came to find you.

Oh. With [SIGH] ... with a vengeance. I got calls from the Netherlands, and from South Africa, and from New Zealand, and Australia, and Asia. And these people told me that my music had touched their lives. And I didn't know that what I did had made that much of an impact in their lives. That's what we all aspire to, is to touch another person's life in a positive way. And I had, and that's the first time I knew, first that I knew about it. It validated my choice of life and my existence. So now, I go back and I have my operation, and I'm declared clean. And now, I realize that this cancer is not a bad thing, relatively speaking. It's a gift, because it focused me on what I need to do for the rest of my life.

What's that?

First of all, God gave me this gift that I connect with people through my music. I have touched their lives in a positive way. So that in itself. But it also makes you realize that I have so much experience in what I do that very few people, really, in the world has gone through as long, and as varied a career as I have. I'm really nobody. They don't know who I am in Portland. They don't know me in Fresno. But I'm a journeyman singer who's been doing it for fifty-six years, and I've worked the small clubs, I've worked with the big bands, I've worked with symphony orchestras, and I've done it all. And there's so many lessons to be taught there. Not just about singing, but how to prepare yourself for your career, for your life, how to assess yourself as to who you are. And this needs to be taught, and I need to recycle my knowledge. I need to do that, it's a mandate that I have put upon myself.

Who will you teach?

Oh, anybody who wants to listen and any age, any group, but mostly young people. I want those young people so that I can cut out the steps to their journey to success. If it takes twenty steps, I want to cut it down to ten, or to five, so that they got somewhere to go. And that I can show them that there's hope. And if this seventy-six-year-old man can beat cancer, and be as vibrant as I am—I'm a very vibrant person. God gave me this. That's reality, and I attack life. If I can do it, then you at the age of sixteen or the age of twenty-four, or whatever, you definitely can do it. And if I can one person take the help, and do something with it, then that's successful. If I take more than that, that'd be fantastic. But that's my dream, and that's my focus. That, and my singing.

And the cancer is gone?

They told me that they got all the cancer, and they didn't see any other cancer in me. Because it was encased in my liver, it was in my right lobe, and the cancer was inside of it, it wasn't outside. So they looked all over, and they didn't find any other cancer. And when they took it out of my liver, it was complete.

There's a story going around the hospital that you sang going into the operating room.

Yeah. [CHUCKLE]

And then you sang as you were leaving the hospital.

Yeah, I did. I wanted to loosen everybody up and soften them up, and say, You know, it's okay. I was scared.

What did you sing?

They were rolling me in, and I got this thing around my head. They were rolling me into the operating room, and I'm singing [SINGS] We're off to see the wizard. [CHUCKLE] The wonderful Wizard of Oz, because, because, because, because, because, because of the wonderful things he does. Da-da-da-da, da-da. By that time, I'm sleeping.

What about on the way out of the hospital?

Oh, I was doing that thing from the John Travolta, that the Bee Gees sing. I was going, [SINGS] Staying alive, staying alive. [CHUCKLE] I was doing that. So it made everybody realize that life is a series, that this is part of life, this whole thing that I just went through is part of life, and it really is no big thing. That I faced it beat it. I won; I'm a winner. I won. And it's now what was once a curse, is now a gift. It is now a gift, because I'm alive and I'm able to take that, utilize that, and make something out of it, to prove and show to other people that you can have hope. I just called Jackie Young at the Cancer Society. I just want to start just going to hospitals and talking to young cancer patients and older ones, and show them, this is me, at thirty pounds, thirty pounds lighter. I said, Yeah, I looked this bad too, and this is me right now. And you know what? I'm seventy-six.

So in two and a half months, you've regained your weight, you've regained your health.

Yeah; and I'm stronger than ever. I'm stronger than ever.

In 2011, the spring in Jimmy Borges' step has not wavered. He can still fly to the Moon, and he still has the world on a string. For Long Story Short, and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou.*

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

[SINGING]