

**GUEST: KU'UIPO KUMUKAHI**

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My mother always said this: When you do something, you put a lot of love into what you do. And when you give, you give it freely. You don't expect anything to come back. Mama always said that. And my dad always said, especially with the music, he would say: You, you go, go make them happy. Those very simple words lasted 'til today.

**Ku'uipo Kumukahi has been making people happy with her music since she was a teenager. But her motivation goes beyond just entertaining. She believes in preserving history through *mele*, songs that document places long gone that continue to live on through her singing. Ku'uipo Kumukahi, 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. Ku'uipo Kumukahi has received multiple Na Hoku Hanohano Awards that recognize and honor her achievements in perpetuating Hawaiian music. Her love of Hawaiian culture started at a young age, growing up on land that her family has lived on for generations.**

There was just the three of us, 'cause I'm the only child. And because it was just the three of us, my friends were my dogs. So, we always had dogs around the place. And there was always something to do; never bored. We played in the yard, threw the ball, eat the guavas that were there, and running in the sugarcane field and chopping the sugarcane, and sucking down that sugarcane. Go down to the river. Lot of times, they'd come home wet, because they were chasing frogs, and I'd go with them. And sometimes, friends would come, and so we'd go together, and we would be able to go look for *opae*, river *opae* and sometimes that *hihiwai*. That's what people on Molokai --  
**Oh, the snails?**

Well, yeah, the freshwater *opihi*. But we call it in Hilo, *wi*. And *wi* is the Hawaiian name for famine. So, I'm not sure that that's the stuff that they were eating back then when there was really no food available. But, the rivers were filled with *opae* and this *wi*. And so, we'd go down there and we'd go get, and come home.

**Are there still opae in the mountain stream over there?**

Well, no, not really. There was an issue of prawns being put in the river for some aquaculture, I think, which kinda wiped out all the opae and the wi.

**But when you were a kid, I mean, everybody wanted to go get opae in the streams, and there were opae to catch. But not anymore.**

Not anymore.

**People just don't grow up with that knowledge anymore.**

And you don't see it at *luau's* anymore. Back in the day, in the *luau* you had the opae, and you had the *aki* which is the liver, and all these other things that you don't usually find today. And I miss them. But I don't know if kids know how to eat that anymore. But that was fun. That was the pastime, and it was better to do that than go to school. [CHUCKLE]

**And did you get lonely? I mean, you had your dogs, you had your parents, but did you feel isolated?**

Not really. I always had yearning to go home, even if I was at school and I had my friends at school. We all did at school, but there was always time to go home. I wanted to go home; I was never forced to go home. I just want to go home.

**Are you still a homebody?**

Yes. [CHUCKLE]

**You'd rather be home?**

I'd rather be home.

**You're an entertainer, and you would --**

I'd rather be home. Yeah. I mean, I love the entertainment, I love people, I love to see their faces. But there is that time that I just kinda retreat to home.

**What is it about home that you love spending time in? I mean, besides just the chance to relax and be around familiar things.**

When I go home to Hilo, it is pure grounding. There's so much *mana* there that the rest of the world doesn't exist. It's just home. The *kupuna* are buried there, we have a church on our property, family is there. Everything still remains the same. My parents are buried at home, my grandmother and great-grandfathers. Everybody's there. So, it's just that sense of [SIGH] grounding. And you just can spiritually regroup, and that's what makes it all worthwhile for me, and that's why I yearn to go home.

**Do you think that was a form of wealth?**

I think so. Because I used to tell my mom. I said: Mama, we're not rich like everybody else, we don't have a lot of money like everybody else. She says: No, we don't need, we have all of this; we're rich with what we have. So, it gave me a sense of bigger gratitude and appreciation for what we have, or what I have, as opposed to what I don't have.

**And so, when you think about the wealth you have and what you grew up with, what is the wealth?**

The the wealth is home, the land, to be amongst family, to understand the importance of caring for the land, caring for family members, caring for yourself, because you have to remain healthy so you can care for everybody else. Just to be humble in that. And that in itself is a *kuleana*, it is a responsibility, but it's a good one. It's not a burden; it's just a privilege, it's an honor.

**And your father was a *manaleo*; he was a native Hawaiian speaker.**

M - hm. Never spoke to us in Hawaiian at home, but words here and there. And I used to ask my mom how come he wouldn't talk to us. And she said: Well, because they were taught that English was better, we should learn English.

**Didn't he not only grow up speaking Hawaiian, but it was exclusively Hawaiian for some of his childhood?**

Yes; up until age eleven. He lived out in the country. So, everything he knew was fishing or hunting, learned from the grandfolks. And so, by the time he came to school -- this was out in South Kona, Okoe, South Kona, and his mom was living in Punaluu, which is in Kau. And the school he went to was at Pahala. So, by the time this kid was coming in, he was already beyond kindergarten, and up until eleven years old, still speaking Hawaiian, but going to school. And my mom said all the kids would chase him, because it was such a novelty that this half - breed Hawaiian boy couldn't speak English. So from there, it had to change. So, I don't know what kinda teasing he went through, or any kind of negative repercussions he was getting, but it was full - on English immersion for him. So, that's how he was able to switch over. I'm just grateful that I was able to learn Hawaiian, speak to my dad a little bit, listen to him, and understand what he was saying. And I think that kind of got us to get closer.

**You talked about your mom wanting you to help people.**

Her name is Florence. So, I used to tell her: Gee, Ma, I think you're Florence Nightingale. Because she was a nurse, and she helped anybody that needed help. She was the nurse of the family, she was the helper of the family. It was just her way. And I learned that. Because when family needed help, I was the one tagging along. In fact, not even tagging along; I just had to go, because it was just she and I. Because my dad would be working out in Kona. And so, we would go together and whatever that took, if it was family who was sick, we'd take them to the hospital, take them to the doctor, and I was there. So, I understood all these things.

**Was that a job, job, or was that just a *kuleana*? Was it a *kuleana*?**

No, that's a family *kuleana*. She just took it upon herself.

**Didn't she also have a paid job?**

Oh, yeah; she was a nurse too, at Hilo Hospital. She really favored working with adults with mental illness. And she would bring me. And in fact, it started when she was at Leahi Hospital, here on Oahu. And the other nurses would be worried that this young girl in the presence of the adults with mental illness, wasn't my mom afraid? And my mother says: What for? They're just like us. My daughter shouldn't be any afraid of this, at all. And so, it just was a part of me

to be working with adults or be around adults with mental illness. And today, I work with adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It's kinda full circle again. So, that's Mama's teachings.

**Ku'uiipo Kumukahi's idyllic childhood was interrupted when her family moved to Honolulu for a year. That's when she started becoming interested in Hawaiian music.**

1969, we were here on Oahu because my father got transferred. He worked for the Department of Transportation. He got transferred to Oahu to help finish the H1 Freeway and start the H2.

**Oh, he was an inspector; road inspector?**

He was a road inspector. So, we moved here, and it was here when my mom went to work at Leahi Hospital. We all transferred here. I went to St. Patrick's.

**Where did you live?**

In Kaimuki, on Alohea Avenue. And it was funny, because my mom's family, we were all living next to each other. It was our house, my mom's sister and my mother's brother. And that's how things started up for me as far as music was concerned.

**So until then, you weren't playing music? You weren't exposed to music?**

I was. We had back in the day, those turntables, with the thirty - three records. I think my mother used to play this, album, The Halekulani Girls. And I used to just look at the picture, and all these ladies with the guitar and the bass.

**Haunani Kahalewai?**

No, this was Alice Fredlund, Linda Dela Cruz, and Sybil Bright. Sybil Andrews, Sybil Bright. So, Alice, Linda, and Sybil were these three women, and the picture was so nice of these women with their instruments. And I used to look at it and I used to think: What's it like to play these things? I've seen them, I've heard them, but I've never touched any of 'em. And so, when I came here, I had no friends 'cause all my buddies were back home, and I had to make new friends. There was one *ukulele* in the house, and my mother's youngest sister would come to the middle house on a Friday with all her gang from the newspaper, and they would ... drink and play music. And I was little kid there, watching and listening. And everybody kinda sang the same songs over and over. So, if it was this Friday and this lady was singing, next Friday it was that lady singing these same songs. And then, I realized that when we weren't with the friends gang, when we would go to Auntie's house somewhere else like for Thanksgiving, they knew the same songs. And I was thinking: Then maybe I'm supposed to know the same songs too. So, after hearing it over and over, then you kinda start mimicking these songs, then you start learning the songs. So, after a while, it was all these songs that were very common amongst everyone. And when I finally found that *ukulele* in the house, and I picked it up, I was trying to be like my aunt with her *ukulele*. And so, my mom saw that. And there were these music

songbooks that I think most families had in town, and they were kind of these cheap books, and they would have the words and the chords and the diagram. And so my mother said: Well, here; here, you can learn this.

**You could see how to place your fingers?**

How to put your fingers on the chord charts. And so, I would match it up and put my fingers on the *ukulele*. And I would see my auntie, and I would look at that, and I would go home and try to figure that out. And then, finally, my mother said: If you going play *ukulele*, you cannot only play, you have to sing. Don't be like your auntie, she only play sometimes. She doesn't sing too much.

**You were ten or eleven years old at this point?**

I'm ten; I'm ten. So, my mother says: Well, here, learn how to sing this song. I said: Mama, I don't know how this songs goes. So, she picks a song she knows, she starts singing it, and she says: Okay, now you match your fingers and how it sounds to what I'm singing. So, I started picking up on what things sounded like and being able to play.

**Wow. What a story.**

So for me, that's where that started. And then later on, my mother gave me this guitar. I looked at it and I said: I don't know how to do this, this has too many strings and my hands are too small. She said: Well, there's the book, and you can learn. [CHUCKLE]

**When the family returned to Hilo after spending a year in Honolulu, Ku'uiipo Kumukahi's mother made sure she kept up with her music practice.**

The first thing she told me after we settled in back home about maybe a month later, she says: All right, I'm taking you to the music store, and we're getting you an *ukulele*.

**Did she think you had talent, or did she think it was just a fun thing for a kid to do?**

No; I think she saw something. And it was because of her, really, that that's why I play music today.

**Was there a family tradition of music?**

We had some family members who did play, but not like some other families who come from a lineage of musicians or *kumu hula*. No; that wasn't in our family. Because my grandparents were ministers, so Hawaiian music or the secular music and the *hula* wasn't allowed in the church. When we had the family *luau*, the reunions, our family would sing. We'd sing and we'd start off with church songs. The church songs that everybody knows today. And that just became ingrained, and 'til today, I'm still singing those songs. And that's just how it has been for many musicians, that they've learned from family.

**So, you went back, and you were already pursuing music, but not as a career at that point.**

No.

**You probably weren't thinking career.**

Mama said: Music is not a career. [CHUCKLE] It's a hobby. [CHUCKLE] She would tell me, 'cause she saw how I was really loving to go that way and just getting involved. So I learned how to play the guitar. And then, back that up a little bit. I met up with some people who could play, and I was fifteen years old. I joined the canoe club. And my canoe buddies, some of 'em could play. So, we'd sit under the coconut tree and we'd play until the coach would yell out, Get in the canoe!

**[CHUCKLE]**

Oh, okay. Drop everything and run for the canoe. But from that kinda collaboration, then you kinda wonder: Wow, they know this, I know this and this. Well, let's make a group.

**Right.**

So, that's how you start collaborating. And then, other people know other songs, and you learn their songs and they learn yours, and you just exchange. And it just grew, and grew, and grew.

**Was it always traditional music, or did you do other types of music?**

Mostly traditional Hawaiian, as we knew traditional Hawaiian music. Yeah.

**That's interesting, because you could have gone another way. You could have gone contemporary rock, blues.**

But somehow, the people that I met up with, that really wasn't in their being. It was Hawaiian. Yes, they knew a few. And even myself. I mean, we knew stuff from a little bit outside of the Hawaiian music. But it always came right back to the foundation, and that was Hawaiian music. And it was always fun to do that. And then, when you really get to meet the people later on who actually made those songs popular, for example, Auntie Genoa Keawe making Alike very popular, it's like almost hit the ground. I'm actually meeting this lady. It's your idol you've come to meet and respect. So, to me, that was the biggest honor for me, to meet those people as well, and to know their music. And so, it just flourished even more for me. And so, after a while, after growing up, seventeen, eighteen years old, it was very hard to find a bass player in Hilo, so my mother went and she bought me a bass, and I learned the bass on my own. And now, I became the bass player of the group. And so, I could at least do three instruments, and that was fine. And I'm okay with that today. [CHUCKLE]

**Ku'uipo Kumukahi moved back to Honolulu in 1985, and has been playing Hawaiian music on Oahu ever since, both as a solo artist as well as with many notable musicians. Yet, she remembered her mother's warning that music was not a career.**

I had met O'Brien Eselu, and so when I moved here, he asked me to be a musician for his *halau*. And that's when I started learning. In fact, that's when I met Auntie Genoa and Karen Keawehawaii. And it was from that environment I

got to learn what was necessary for *hula*. And then, I performed at a bunch of Merrie Monarchs with him, and then started going off on my own, and then met various people in my lifetime like Chris Kamaka and Del Beazley, Brian Tolentino, Greg Sardinha, and we all started playing music together in the Waikiki circle. Then we were musicians for Karen Keawehawaii, and then that just grew, and grew, and grew. Then, we started recording. And after the recording for me, then as a group, we kinda went our separate ways, and I started doing solo performances, and 'til now with the Hawaiian Music Hall of Fame Serenaders. And it's just been a beautiful journey of Hawaiian music.

**So, you said your mom said music is not a career. But you've played a great deal. Is it not a career? I mean, you do have a day job.**

Of course, it is. Well, my mom's school is that you gotta work for the State and be a retired State employee and, have the benefits, and this and that. And I think as time went on, she knew that the world has changed, and it's not about just being the State retiree anymore, it's about what you pursue and what you love. And so, I think that's what she was trying to gear me towards.

**But you sound like you listened, because you got a regular job during the day, which is administrative and then, you're somehow managing to do night gigs.**

Yeah. It's part of that learning, but more importantly, I think it's because economically, it's very rough to be a musician in Hawaii.

**You couldn't have supported yourself with just that.**

Mm - mm; no. I know there are a few people who do, but realistically, if you want to live comfortably, I don't think it's economically wise to just be a complete musician, Hawaiian music musician. You probably have to be diversified because it just doesn't sustain you.

**Even though you've been the female vocalist twice, and you had a traditional Hawaiian album of the year, songwriting honors.**

Even so. I think keeping a day job, we always joke; in order to play gigs at night, we gotta have a day job.

**In addition to the satisfaction that Ku'uipo Kumukahi finds in sharing her artistic expressions through her music, she's also carrying out a personal mission; to preserve and perpetuate traditional Hawaiian songs.**

I'm real ferocious about Hawaiian music and how that needs to stay, and why is it important to be involved in making that stay here in Hawaii.

**And you've seen a time when traditional Hawaiian music has just dwindled, especially in Waikiki.**

Exactly. I say this to the audience all the time. Hawaiian music is just not entertainment. What we sing, we're the vehicles that convey this message, this documentation of a time long past. All these songs that are sung document something, some event, someone, some place of this time that's past. Like for example, songs like Maki Aailono [PHONETIC]; that doesn't exist anymore in

Waikiki. Where is Maki Aiono? Nobody knows. But the song documents this place.

**What does the song say?**

Well, it talks about this island that existed before the Ala Wai Canal was dredged. And so, it's down by where the Kapiolani Park, Honolulu Zoo is. And the back story is that it was a place where people would frequent, young couples would frequent. But, once the Ala Wai was dredged, all the water was pulled out of Waikiki, and so now, you had all this dry land, and then the resort came up, the island is gone. So, that's the kind of important documentation that still exists in these songs.

**What do you think's going to happen to Hawaiian music, traditional Hawaiian music?**

I think if we don't pay attention, I think we could lose it. I hope not. I hope this prediction is wrong.

**Even with the resurgence in the language?**

Even with resurgence in the language, because unless the media helps us out, television, radio, to really put forth traditional Hawaiian music, as well as contemporary. Because we need the younger people understanding how to write putting the music notations and making that palatable to the ear, 'cause that's what Hawaiian music really is. It's very healing. And without the help of media, I think we're gonna lose it. I mean, I think we are so displaced already, we are so scattered, Hawaiian music is something that binds us. That's part of the *malama*. You have land, you gotta take care of it through the generations, so that it can stay with the family. Not just because now you're tired of it. This stuff is really important for Hawaii. I cannot tell you enough. Like, Na Lani Eha; look at their music. Their music, as we discovered when we were doing the album Na Lani Eha in 2007, what other sovereign really wrote songs for their people?

**And there were four of them writing it.**

Exactly.

**And they were very good songs, too.**

And we're still singing 'em today, as long as you know. And if you don't, then somebody would listen, and they'd catch up and understand it. But these little pieces of information are huge impacts on who we are as a society, and the culture, and the tradition. Hawaiian music in Na Lani Eha's time, it was Hawaiian leadership to know how to write music. That's not present today.

**You performed at Iolani Palace, singing songs from Na Lani Eha. What was that like?**

I can still remember it so clearly. To first being asked; that was a very wow factor for me. I was in the Throne Room, and it was so magical. Everything was alive for me that night.

**That was a beautiful performance.**

Oh; just so beautiful.



**And so, Ku'uipo Kumukahi continues to do her part to keep Hawaiian music alive through her artistry and commitment to perpetuating traditional *mele*. Mahalo to Ku'uipo Kumukahi for sharing her deep passion for her culture. And Mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.**

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*Auhea 'o moani ke 'ala  
Hoapili o mi nei  
A he aha kau hana e paweo nei  
E ka makani Pu'ulena*

*Kuhi au a he pono keia  
Au e ho'apa'apa mai nei  
E wiki mai 'oe i pono kava  
I 'olu ho'i au ke hoa*