

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: BENNY RIETVELD

LSS 906 (LENGTH: 27:16)

FIRST AIR DATE: 10/13/15

Do you think music is more than just fun?

Totally; yeah. Music is powerful, music is magic. It allows us to do so many things invisibly. You can put it in the background, you can have it in the foreground, you can stop, start. You know, it's always there, and it helps you celebrate things, it helps you mourn. It drives people to battle, you get married and you can create babies with it. It transports you, it reminds you of things in your life, just hearing something. Like, oh, my god, you know.

M-hm.

It's an incredibly powerful force, and it can actually change people's lives, you know. And that's why I think musicians have a really big responsibility to just keep on point, keep being mindful, keep getting better, showing up. Because it's a really powerful thing.

Benny Rietveld, who still calls Hawaii home, is the bassist and music director for Santana, a band he first heard when he was a young boy growing up in Honolulu. He's been recording and touring with Santana since the 1990s, and he's also known locally as a member of Topaz, a jazz fusion band that he and his high school friends had in the 1970s. Benny Rietveld, 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. Benny Rietveld has recorded three albums with the iconic Latin rock band Santana, including Supernatural which became a worldwide sensation when it was released in 1999. Rietveld was born in Holland to parents of Dutch, French, and Indonesian ancestry. They moved their family to Hawaii when Benny was three. He grew up in Honolulu, where he started showing musical talent at a young age.

I took piano lessons when I was six.

Why did you take piano when you were six? Now, that's early. How did that happen?

Remember Gem Store on—well, I don't know ...

Kapalama?

Yeah; in Kapalama. Yeah. Well, we used to live in Kalihi, and so we'd go through there, and it was always the piano section, and I was always plinking on the piano, you know. And my mom thought, Oh, he's musical. You know how kids, you know, they hit a hammer, and it's like, Oh, he's gonna be a carpenter when he grows up.

But were you plunking better than most kids, do you think?

I don't think so. I just liked it. I liked the idea that you could press something, and it creates this cool sound. I think. That's how I remember it. And then, so we got like a little piano, upright piano, and she gave me lessons at Palama Settlement. And I think the first teacher was named Mrs. Leong. I think. But I didn't really like 'em. And I was like, Oh, really? You know, really like boring music, and River keep on rolling. You know. I just didn't get it. And then, when was ten, we still had the piano in the, you know, attracting dust. And then, the song Hey Jude came out from the Beatles, and it had that cool piano intro. I was like, wow, that's cool. I was like, wow. And then, oh, it's sort of like that instrument that's in our living room. So, I was like, huh. And it was really easy for me, and it was really fun. So, I thought, well, this is great, I'm gonna keep doing this. You know.

Then you learned other songs.

And then, I learned the entire Beatles catalog, practically.

By yourself, or with a teacher?

No, no; by myself. Yeah. You know, then I was hooked. And it was like, this is fun, I don't want to do anything else. And I was just on my way. And then, I met my cousin, the guitar player in Topaz, or calabash cousin, actually, Fred Schreuders. And he was slightly older than me, but he was already playing music. He was, you know, playing guitar, and his dad also played music. So, I was like, wow, cool. And we met, and we jammed, you know, tried to play songs together.

You were on the piano?

Yeah; and then, I branched out to drums, and then a little bit of bass. And then we started, you know, playing. Hey, let's do a band, you know. And so, yeah, we put together a band. So, when I was about twelve, I was playing in these dances at, you know, Star of the Sea.

And that was kind of the beginning of that. So, you know, I met the guitar player for Topaz way back then.

You were just picking it up as you went.

Yeah; yeah. 'Cause it was easy.

And you were playing for high school dances at age twelve, or middle school dances?

Yes; yeah. My parents were really worried. 'Cause there were some situations where sometimes we'd play a party, and and more like a high school kids' party. And so, there may have been some illicit drugs.

And it was nighttime.

And it was nighttime.

Driving.

Yeah. So, my parents, you know, lost a lot of hair.

And you gave them reason to.

A little bit. But, you know, I wasn't that wild.

And where were you on instruments? 'Cause right now, you're a confirmed bassist.

Yeah.

How did you pick the bass, or did the bass pick you?

Well, yeah. This is the joke. Usually, the bass picks you. It's usually because you don't know anyone else who plays the bass. So, you're like, oh, you play the bass. So, what happened to me was, I was playing drums in this little dance band, and our bass player left. So, we didn't know any other musicians, but we knew one drummer. So, it was like, well, what do we do? You know, so we'll just get him, and you play bass. So, that's how it happened. But I kept playing guitar with Joe the Fiddler, because, you know, it worked better for chords and stuff, and I kept up on piano playing. You know, I just like always was interested in all of that stuff. But you know, I started getting kinda good on the bass, which is easy to do. Yeah; so that was that. It just happens like that, you know.

What schools did you go to?

I lived in town mostly, and I went to McKinley High School.

You had a band director who is legendary.

Yes, legendary; Henry Miyamura. He's like one of the big musical mentors of my life, and of Noel's life, and of Allen Won's life, too, the other guys from Topaz. He was ... amazing. He was like that Mr. Holland guy. I mean, just deeply, deeply committed to the real essence of music performance, which goes beyond, you know, the notes and stuff, but the actual conveyance of the emotion or of the story, or of the tragedy or comedy, or whatever. And to get a bunch of high school kids, half of them who weren't really gonna go into music anyway, or most of them, and get them to sound as good as he got those bands to sound was really a remarkable feat.

How do you think he did it?

I think he really loved music, and he loved people. He knew how important it was, you know, even if we didn't. You know, we were kids then. He knew.

While Benny Rietveld was busy playing music through high school, his parents were thinking about his future. They didn't consider music to be a suitable career path. But Benny was already doing what he loved, and it wasn't long before his talents took him from the local venues in Hawaii to a larger stage.

Did you decide consciously, I'm going to be a musician as a livelihood?

I don't think so. The only time it was a conscious thought was like as, you know, graduation from high school was imminent. Then my parents were like, So, you know, what are you gonna do? You're gonna go to trade school? You should go to trade school, because you know, you learn a trade and make a lot of money. I guess they didn't see me as the scholarly type, which I wasn't. And I said, Oh, I'm just gonna play music. I just assumed I was.

Were you already getting paid to play?

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Just like, well, I don't know. You know, I just thought I was gonna be a musician. And they went, What? No, you can't. And they were very upset for a little while, only because, you know, they just saw their child being an intravenous drug user and being in the gutter, and you know, whatever. So yeah, I totally get why they freaked out. But then after a while, they thought, Well, he seems to be doing okay, and he's playing, you know.

And you went to college right after that, here.

Not right after, but yeah, I did.

Oh; so you graduated from high school.

Graduated from high school. I was living on my own. I think for about a year, I was living on my own, then I got a scholarship for UH, through Mr. Miyamoto, who suggested I do that. So, he championed me as far as getting a scholarship.

And didn't graduate.

No.

Because?

'Cause I was also playing music, and then I got a road touring gig with The Crusaders. It was very short. But with all my other gigs in Hawaii, and then going off to the mainland for a little bit, just like I lost the whole momentum.

How did you make the transition from having lived almost all of your life in Hawaii, to the mainland, to the continent?

With scarves and heavy sweaters. Basically, that's how I made the transition. I went to San Francisco first.

And that was, I'm going to go try my luck in the San Francisco Bay Area?

Well, because I had a friend there already. And he said, You gotta come here, there's a lot of good music there. And there was, at the time. Lots of great musicians there.

You played with some biggies, fairly early on.

No. I mean, I don't know. Pete Escovedo, you know, I learned a lot from him. Ray Obiedo, you know, he used to play with Herbie Hancock and really good songwriter. And a lot of really great local San Francisco Bay Area musicians.

When was the first time you played with someone that you went, Whoa, I'm with so-and-so, I'm intimidated?

Well, sort of like Sheila E, because her producer was Prince. So, he'd be around, and I'm like, Whoa, you know, ooh. You know. That was my sort of introduction to the high end pop world.

And you went on tour with Sheila E, didn't you?

Yes, yes; for about two years.

How did you get along with Prince?

He was like kind of a mysterious background guy. So, he didn't talk much to us, but he seemed okay, you know. But he kinda kept more to Sheila and, you know, just sort of like that.

Now, did that tour lead to anything?

Then I was playing around the Bay Area for a while, and then, I guess Miles Davis was looking for a bass player, and he kinda wanted that sort of Prince-influenced sound. Then we rehearsed, and I met Miles, and it was crazy. And I think I was too much in shock to be actually intimidated, tell you the truth. It was only until I think a year later, I was on the stage, and I was like, Holy crap, that's Miles Davis. You know, and then I had that moment. But I think, you know, your body blesses you with the gift of shock, so you're just, you know, immune.

And how was it? You know, you have to feel each other in music, you have to work together. How did that go?

It went fabulously. You know, he would, you know, give direction while we're playing, and sometimes before the shows we'd talk about let's do this part a little faster, or let's do this kinda rhythm and, you know. And we would keep trying, and so really, back then it was like a laboratory, you know. Because we would do the same song, and it would just evolve. It was like a petri dish. I mean, the songs would evolve so that if you hear the same song two years apart, they're almost radically different. You know, the tempo is like way slower or faster, and this part is really loud, you know. It was really, really interesting, and it just demanded that you focus a hundred percent on him and the music all the time. You know. That was the big deal.

You had to be really mindful.

Yeah; like mindful to an incredible degree, because if you weren't, then then he'd know, you know, and then those eyes would, you know, turn. You know, zzzz, laser, laser. So yeah, you really had to have presence of mind.

So, you had a real sense of what he wanted, who he wanted—

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

--how he wanted.

Yeah, yeah. And yet, there was that ... still, the challenge was to inject yourself in that, within that framework, you know.

And he expected you to.

Yeah; yeah, yeah, yeah. And so, that was really intimidating, 'cause I felt like I wasn't really mature enough as a musician to inject a lot of myself. I don't know, maybe I did. I don't know. That was another coming of age thing, because I had to, I think, almost completely relearn music. You know, really music and bass playing, and the ethos of what it means to be a bass player and what it means to be a musician.

Why?

Well, because I hadn't learned all these really basic fundamental things well enough, you know.

So, you were good enough to get in the band.

Yeah.

And once you were there, you had to up your game.

Yeah; yeah, yeah. It was like raw talent is one thing, but to really hone it is another thing.

After two and a half years playing with Miles Davis, Benny Rietveld moved on. Two months later, he met Carlos Santana.

Coincidentally, I did a recording session with Carlos Santana.

You sound so casual when you say that.

Well, no. I mean, because it just happened, you know. It was somebody else's session, and we met. And that was another intimidating moment, 'cause it was Carlos Santana, and I grew up looking at that album cover, you know, and all that stuff, listening to all those albums over and over again. And he said, Yeah, you know, I might need another bass player, and you know. Luckily, we lived both in the Bay Area, so I called him and I said, Yeah, I would love to play. Are you kidding? You know. So that's how that happened.

Aren't you the musical director as well now?

Yes. I don't know, I'm not really the musical director so much as like traffic cop. You know, 'cause I consider Carlos actually is the musical director, 'cause he's very hands-on and he has an uncanny ability to know what he wants. It's more about during the show itself, when he calls an audible, which he does every time, then I just help direct traffic. Okay, we're going here now, instead of, you know, how we rehearsed it.

How much of the year do you go on tours?

With Santana, it's roughly four to five months out of the year. But it's broken up. You do get burnt out, you know, no matter what you do. And it's always gotta be really, really high level, energy, fun. And the minute it's a little bit below that, then we're not doing it.

Do you ever get sick of being asked to play a song you love, but you've heard it and you've sung it ... Black Magic Woman, so many times before?

No; love it. It's great. I don't care about all the other times I've played it. It's like, oh, wow, this is the first time I'm playing it. You know. That's special, and we have to convey that to people every time. That's the hard part. That's the higher level stuff. Not playing the music; the notes are like whatever, you know. That's like hammering a nail; okay? But it's how to get into that thing, and it sounds so, fluffy and goofy, you know. But that is, to me, the higher level of music.

Did working with Santana when you started require a different sensibility than working with Miles Davis? Did you have to shift in any way?

Only superficially, actually, with the style of music, the genre, you know. Because it's more rock-oriented, Latin, which we hardly ever did in Miles' thing. But in essence, it was actually very similar, because they both demanded passion and fire, and presence of mind, like all the time. And not being afraid, you know. I think that's another thing. You cannot have any fear.

Is there a way to describe how they work musically, and how you work with them musically?

With both of those guys, it was about trying to ... articulate the in-articulable. That's the weird part about music, is that like underneath the hood, underneath all the technique and theory, and all the numbers, which are all useful, underneath it all, I like to say the last thing that music is about is music. You know. It's really about feeling and life. And it sounds so, you know ... fluffy. You know, like, Oh, it's feelings. You know. But all the major guys hardly ever talk about nuts and bolts of music, you know. The jazz guys, a little bit more, because it's more their realm, you know. But all those guys share the predilection for using aphorisms to describe music. It should sound like, you know, red wine streaming through. You know, something like that. And sometimes, it just sounds so bonkers, you know, to the uninitiated. But then, you realize it's just a personal lexicon and a cosmology. And actually, now that I've known Carlos for a while, it makes complete sense, you know. Now when he says something, you know, like really poetic, I'm actually kinda knowing what it means in dry, boring music terms. Sometimes Miles would say—an actual musical thing would be like, Give that part a little lift. Instead of, you know, doong, doong, doong, doong; maybe like doong, ka-doong, ka-doong, ka-doong, doong, ka-doong. You know, all these little things between. I think everyone knows that deep down inside, it's really silly to talk about

music, because it's the most abstract of all art forms, you know. But we try, anyway. We have to, sometimes. You know, we're trying to convey what we want, you know.

Although Benny Rietveld lives in L.A. when he isn't touring with Santana, he likes to come to the place he calls home: Hawaii. In 2014, he and some of his former bandmates from Topaz reunited for a show.

What brings you back to perform with your old high school buddies?

Love of music, and love of them. You know. We've kept in contact all this time.

And tell me what the names are. Who's your gang?

The gang is Noel Okimoto on drums, Allen Won on the saxophones, Fred Schreuders on guitar, and Carl Wakeland on keyboards.

That's a pretty amazing group from McKinley High School, isn't it?

Yeah. Well, me and Allen, and Noel are from McKinley. Carl is from Mililani. Fred ended up graduating from Kaiser High School. We got kind of popular because we were this bunch of high school kids that could play this kind of difficult and technical music known at the time as fusion. And we loved jazz and all that. So, there weren't many eighteen-year-olds playing that at the time in Hawaii. So you know, we got a kind of rep, and we were the little darlings there for a while, and we even played at La Mancha for two weeks. We disbanded 'cause we all had stuff, and we were doing our lives. And Noel stayed here, so he'd play. And his late dad, unfortunately, George Okimoto, would go to his gigs all the time. And George actually managed us back then, because he was the manager of Easy Music Center, you know, by McCully. And so he was like, You know, you kids really got something. And he got us equipment to use, you know, cool new gear. So he was like our manager, and really championed us. Cut to couple of years ago. We're at Gordon Biersch, I'm visiting, and I see Noel, and like you know, listening to him, Byron Yasui and all these great local guys. And there was Noel's dad, George Okimoto, and he goes, Eh, hurry up, you know, get a reunion. And it was like, actually very bittersweet because he actually made a joke. He was like, Eh, hurry up, before I die. And what I got from that was like, he wasn't really joking around. He was like, you know, everyone is about to move on here, and you guys should do something, 'cause it was really special. So, we did a show last year. It was really, really fun. So, this year again, earlier in the year, we recorded a CD. But you know, we all have these other crazy lives, and we're not gonna like, Yeah, let's have a band and tour together. That's not gonna happen.

Did you ever conceive, did you ever think in your young life, that you would be in your fifties, and it's a tour, it's concerts and crowds, and music, and vans?

I had no idea. Who really knows what their thing is, you know.

And how long do you see that going on?

Playing music, being involved in music for me will go on until either I die, or I find suddenly that I don't like it. You know. I don't really see the latter happening.

Benny Rietveld has not stopped having fun playing music since figuring out how to play Hey Jude on the piano at age ten. Along with his raw talent, his dedication to his craft, his ability to work with people, his fearlessness and his determination took him to a world stage. Mahalo to Benny Rietveld, a proud graduate of McKinley High School in Honolulu, and longtime bassist for Santana. And thank you, for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, hui hou.

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