

GUEST: SAM LOW: RAISING ISLANDS

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Nainoa has said that early on he's been hindered by a fear of failure. Do you know how he resolved that? Because he certainly succeeded.

Courage. He resolved it by being courageous, I think. It was Nainoa's job to be the first Hawaiian in perhaps a thousand years, after that devastating accident, devastating loss of Eddie Aikau, to take the canoe as navigator on the first voyage in a thousand years that a Hawaiian has navigated. So, naturally, he was fearful. He was fearful for his own ability, but he was fearful for his people. Because if he failed, that would have been, Oh, Hawaiians, yeah. I have the feeling that his father helped him understand that there's a deeper mission. That everything is based on helping your community, helping your people, and that your fear or your immediate reluctance is nowhere near as important as pushing through it to get that mission accomplished.

In researching his book, *Hawaiki Rising*, Sam Low spent hours interviewing his cousin, Nainoa Thompson, talking to him about the double-hulled canoe Hokulea, and what drove his dream to voyage in the wake of his ancestors. Sam Low, next on Long Story Short.

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Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Sam Low was born and raised in Connecticut. His Hawaiian father left the Big Island to attend prep school on the Continent, where he got married, never to return home again. Their son Sam inherited his father's love of the ocean and of boats, and grew up spending summers at the beach on Martha's Vineyard, where he still lives at the time of our conversation in 2014. Sam Low made his first trip to Hawaii as a young naval officer, and has been coming here ever since, connecting with his family that includes Nainoa Thompson. Sam's background as a documentary filmmaker, his ocean skills, and his family connections eventually led him to become a crewmember on Hokulea, where his role on the voyaging canoe was that of the documentarian. His job was to observe, and through that, he got to experience what life is like sailing on a canoe in the middle of the ocean, thousands of miles away from land.

My role on Hokulea has always been as a writer, as a documenter. Usually, on Hokulea, you're a crewmember, and so that's basic. You know, you stand your watch, and you do all that. But you have another role as well, which is, you could be a cook, you could be a watch captain, you could be a carpenter, or you could whatever. And my role

was as documenter. And so, that fit, you know, what I had been doing for so many years prior to that, going out and documenting, either filming or writing about, or doing a thesis at Harvard about a way of life that I wanted to bring back and I wanted to give you, wanted you to have this gift. I have seen this, I have been there. And now, I want you to have it. And that was a perfect blend of what the job was. As a documenter, the kuleana, or actually as any crewmember, the kuleana on Hokulea.

Isn't it interesting that all your interests sometimes come together and inform each other into one wonderful culmination?

Yeah. I probably never would have gotten on the canoe if it hadn't have been that I did have this skill of being able to write. And of course, it didn't hurt that Nainoa was my cousin, and I had a relationship with him. I was invited on the voyage to Rapa Nui. And that was actually my first trip on the canoe. The voyage to Rapa Nui was supposed to be the hardest voyage, because the prevailing winds are against you. And so, Nainoa had predicted that it would have to be tacking into the wind. So, this would be a zig-zag all the way. So, what was maybe, I think about seventeen hundred miles could easily become three thousand miles, if you had to tack. So, he chose a veteran crew. He had on board those folks like Tava Taupu, and Michael Tongg, and Snake Ah Hee, and Bruce Blankenfeld, and you know, Kalepa Baybayan. The best of the best. They set off. Now, I should say that this was the first voyage that I was actually invited to go on. But Nainoa wasn't quite sure about me. I had made one voyage on the escort boat, and that went fine. So, he just wasn't sure, and he put me on the escort boat and he said, You're gonna be on the escort boat for four or five days, we're gonna see how it goes, and if everything's going okay on the canoe, then we'll bring you over.

Why was Nainoa unsure about whether to have you on the Hokulea? 'Cause you're a waterman, you've been around water all your life in different kinds of craft.

Right; but you have to remember that on that voyage, there were the tested men, they were the best of the best. These men had probably voyaged thirty thousand, forty thousand miles. Not only that, they're surfers, and they're athletes.

And did Nainoa figure you could document it just as well from the escort boat?

I think he knew I couldn't do that. But I think he wanted to just be sure. I think he wanted to go out and to see, and if it was a slog, and it was what he expected it to be, the most severe test of endurance, then maybe I would have stayed on the escort boat. But it didn't turn out that way; it turned out to be easier. And so, I think that's why he invited me.

So, it had to do with physical conditions?

Physical training.

Not fit?

Not fit. Not like those guys. No; uh-uh. Those guys, well, look at them. I mean, look at Tava. You know, look at Snake. All of those guys are watermen, all the time. You have to remember, New England, it's the winter, so I get to swim four or five months out of the year. I was not in the kind of shape that those guys were, so I think that's what his reservation might have been. So, I think on the fifth day, we got word that they wanted me to go over. And I'm like, Yes! And it was one of those rainy, kind of drizzly days, not a lot of wind, and I was rowed over by one of the crew on the escort boat. And Hokulea is up here, and I kind of crawled in. You crawl over the hulls, and then you crawl up over this canvas kind of space shield. And I remember crawling out and looking up, and there was Mike Tongg. His appearance is like this gentle, loving Buddha, you know. He has that kind of loving appearance. And the rain was just dripping down off his face, like this. And he was looking down at me with this beneficent smile. He didn't say a word; just ... Welcome, good to see you. And so, I just immediately felt at home with Mike's blessing. He's such a veteran on that canoe. But Nainoa had felt that we had to be prepared for the slog of wind. But as it turned out, fortuitously, at that time of year, down in the roaring forties ... I hope I'm right, but I think that we were probably up around twenty degrees south. And down around forty degrees south, there were a number of low pressure areas that were spinning storms up toward us, spinning wind up toward us. And so, they broke the trade winds, and they created following winds. So that Nainoa seeing that, set off basically in a storm, and sailed along with the wind coming from behind, spun up by these storms down in the roaring forties, until that storm went through, and then we were kind of the calm. And then the trades would fill in again, and we'd do a little tacking, and then another storm would come along. And we made the trip so much faster than what was predicted, that we got there a week before our welcoming party.

Nice when storms are your friends.

Yeah; yeah. So, it turned out to be a lot easier in terms of the crew, and in terms of the endurance than we thought it was gonna be. More difficult from the navigation point of view, because often you would have cloudy skies. In fact, on that voyage to Rapa Nui, two or three days before Nainoa found the island, we started to have cloudy skies, and he had no real sight of his guiding star. He was steering pretty much by swells, and he was navigating by dead reckoning. So for three days, he was navigating by instinct, trained instinct. And on the day that we sighted Rapa Nui, the winds shifted. He was going to do a zig, and instead of doing a zig, the wind shifted and kind of pushed us in the direction that he thought we wanted to go. And he said, We'll follow the wind; we'll just stay, we'll follow the wind. Hokulea knows where she wants to go.

Now, when you can't navigate by stars, does he sleep at all? I mean, because he's always watching current conditions.

Yeah; he is. Well, when you're not navigating by the stars, you're navigating pretty much by the swells and the wind. Of course, the wind was gyrating around and

changing, so he was using the swells to navigate. Normally, if he's alone on a voyage, then he will sleep in catnaps. He'll sleep for maybe twenty minutes, thirty minutes, and then jump up and be awake for, say, eight hours, and then lie down for twenty or thirty minutes, and jump up. And he'll do this for thirty days at a time. One of his great fears on that first voyage in 1980 was he wouldn't be able to stay awake. That's Mau's secret, not mine; I can't do that. But it was one of those first, as he calls them, the doors of perception had opened. One of those first doors that opened was that when they set sail out of Hilo and started on the voyage, after about fourteen hours, he decided he was really tired, he was gonna take a little nap. And he lay down, and he lay down for about fifteen or twenty minutes, and he jumped up and he was refreshed. And he said that was the first kind of sense that there is something in navigation, there is something in accepting the challenge and the risk that comes from another level, and that he was able to that, on that first voyage. And that's what he normally does. On this voyage, the Rapa Nui voyage, he had Kalepa Baybayan on board, he had Bruce Blankenfeld on board; he had trained navigators with him. So, he could sleep.

If you don't have enough sleep for enough time, I mean, I would think your judgment becomes impaired. So, I guess you have to have a limited goal in terms of time? How do you do that?

He does it for a month at a time.

Amazing.

I have no idea; I couldn't do it.

So, maybe because you have a goal and you're trained, and you're generally in good shape, you can manage your mind and your brain cells for that amount of time.

Yeah; it's a mystery to me, how he can do it. You know, it's always chicken skin if you're crew, and/or a documenter particularly, my job being to watch everybody, and to record. But you know, I've watched Nainoa pretty intently, and it's always that moment when he says, Post lookouts, land is near. And then, I would get to go ask him, Well, what's going on? He'd say, Well, I think Rapa Nui is there. And he put Max Yarawamai, who is Carolinian, who has great eyesight, he put him on watch. And about five hours later, there it was, Rapa Nui. And it was pretty much where he said it was. And Rapa Nui is tiny. And so, he found this island after seventeen hundred miles.

After sailing to Rapa Nui, Hokulea navigator Nainoa Thompson invited Sam Low aboard the canoe for the trip home. This second experience gave Sam even more insights into how Nainoa used nature and his intuition based on experience to guide him to exactly where he wanted to go.

The second voyage I got to make was from Tahiti to Hawaii. And we'd been at sea for, I think, about twenty-four, twenty-five days. Had lots of storm on that particular voyage, lots of squalls. I'm going to say it was the twenty-fifth day, I forget exactly, Nainoa

turned the canoe downwind. We'd been headed into the wind all the time to get to the east of the Hawaiian Islands, and he turned downwind. So, we knew something was up. And steering downwind on Hokulea, the sails are on either side, wing-on-wing, 'cause the wind is directly from behind. And we were steering that way for a while. We couldn't see anything; there was this gentle mist wafting over the canoe. You could feel the sun, but you couldn't see it. Visibility ahead was maybe oh, I don't know, half a mile.

And during this time, do you say, Hey, Nainoa, what's going on? Or do people not talk about what's up?

Well, I got to be bratty, because I was the documenter. So, I didn't say anything for a while, but we went wing-on-wing, and then the wind changed slightly, and so one of the sails came over. So, now, we're sailing like this. We felt that. And around six o'clock, I saw Nainoa was just back there on the navigator's platform, just peering intently ahead. Again, this mist was coming over. We couldn't see anything; I couldn't see anything. So, being a documenter, I get to go back and say, you know, What's going on? He said, Well, Hilo is right there. After twenty-five hundred miles, twenty-five days, Hilo is right there? So, I said, How do you know? And he said, Well, do you remember when the sail, when we couldn't sail wing-on-wing? Well, that's because we got into that place where the winds are coming and being broken by Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea, and churning around the island. And so, that wind shift, that gentle wind shift told me that we've gotten into that zone where the winds are breaking. You know, these mountains are fourteen thousand feet high. And he said, Look ahead, you see that mist seems to stall, it seems to slow down. So, I looked. Yeah; okay. Keep going. I know I couldn't see it. And he said, If you look—the sun was starting to go down. If you look on either side, you can see it's kind of dark ahead of us, and it's a little bit lighter there.

You couldn't see it?

I couldn't see it. And so, I wrote it all dutifully down. And then we sailed on for a while, and then he tacked. And I said, Well, why'd you tack? He said, We're on the Hamakua Coast, and I don't want to get too close. Of course, none of us can see this. This is after twenty-five days. I don't want to get too close, and Hilo is right over there. And so, I said, Okay; write it down. And then, we all felt it. And we all went over to the rail, and the whole crew is standing there looking, and Nainoa said Hilo is there, and they know Hamakua must be there. And we waited for about fifteen minutes, and then fortuitously, that low cloud layer lifted; just lifted. And there it was, the twinkle of the coast, Hilo over here, the lighthouse. And at that moment, Nainoa just said, We're home.

Wow.

After twenty-five days. So, that's the chicken skin, that when you're navigating with someone like Nainoa or Kalepa Baybayan, or Bruce Blankenfeld, or Chad Paishon, or

Shorty Bertelmann, any of these great navigators who have dedicated their life to merging with the signs of the sea, and you have the privilege to be on a canoe after that much time, and to see land is there, exactly where they say it is.

What happens over the twenty-five days, say, of a voyage? Is there a lot of talk? Is there a lot of laughter? What do people do, day-by-day?

I think it depends a lot on the crew and on the chemistry of the crew. And I think it's all of that. But if I think back on it, I think more of a kind of ... quietness, actually. I don't think so much of laughter; there's that. I don't think so much of talk; there's that. I don't think so much of music, although there's that. I think of the quietness of being at sea, and the feeling of being out in an immense ocean, completely alone, and you don't see another ship, you don't see another person, you don't see land, and you get into kind of a rhythm of watch-standing, of being alert, and being relaxed, and being alert, and being relaxed, of the stars turning, and the moon and the sun. And there's a blending with that diurnal rhythm so that it's a meditation you get into. I think it's a mediational state. I think it's a very relaxed state. I think that even in storm aboard a vessel like Hokulea, which is so staunch and so seaworthy, and so sea kindly, that you're not afraid. You know that if you do everything right, if you follow the instructions of your captain, if you bring the sails down, if you stand your watch properly, you'll be fine. So that's not it. It's not anxiety, it's not fear; it's contemplation, it's meditation. And actually, I think for most of us, say after five or six days, you're just in the rhythm, and then when the canoe turns down and the navigator says, We're there, we're almost sort of like saying, Well, that's good, we can have a hamburger, we can have a beer, but you know, why don't we just keep going. 'Cause you're in this world. You're with your crew, you're with the weather, you're with the canoe, you're in this meditational almost Buddhist, Hawaiian meditational state, and you don't want it to stop.

Sam Low started working on a book about Hokulea after he returned home from the Rapa Nui voyage in the year 2000. At first, he didn't know what would be in the book, but it finally came together, and Hawaiki Rising was published in 2013. It tells the story of Hokulea, Nainoa Thompson, and the Hawaiian Renaissance.

There was a period of time, and I think it was uh, 2010. See, I'd been working on this book for ten years. I mean, I didn't really know that I'd been working on it for ten years. I was just recording, and I was writing articles. The first idea for a book would be a picture book, and then I went off and did my grandpa's book. And I got partway there, and then I came back onto this. But there was a time, I think it was 2010, when I did have a chance to interview Nainoa very extensively. I was living in the family compound, and the guest house is, you know, a hundred yards from his house. And I would sit and wait, and every time he came out, I'd say, Hey, Nainoa, how you doing? You know, and he'd say, Not today, Sam, not today. Okay, okay. And then, How you doing? Yeah; okay, come. And so, we'd sit and spend two or three hours with a tape recorder, and I think the exchange did help him bring together all his experiences. Well, it was certainly great for me, because I was able to get this raw material for Hawaiki Rising. But I think it also helped him bring together his own experiences and

correlate that, and put it together into kind of a set of values and a philosophy. It's his philosophy, but I think in being able to exchange with another person who he was fairly intimate with, that it did help him in that. And at that time, about three years ago, the concept of moololo became very important. And he expressed that; he said, You know, we stand on the shoulders of heroes, and it's very important that as we move forward around the world, that we look back, and that we celebrate and bring with us the spirit of those people who made all of this possible, and the lessons that we learned from them, from his father Myron Pinky Thompson, from Mau Piailug, from Wally Froiseth, from Ben Finney, from Herb Kane, from all of those who had built the canoe, who had the vision of the canoe, who had sailed the canoe, and that evolving vision, that gift that they gave to all of us who've sailed on the canoe. He wanted that to be celebrated, and part of that was the book, *Hawaiki Rising*. It is a celebration of those heroes whose shoulders we stand on today. He expresses in *Hawaiki Rising* very clearly how fearful he was of that time of his first voyage. You have to understand that everything depended on it, that the canoe had capsized, that they had lost Eddie Aikau, and that Hawaiians were on the cusp of being able to, through voyaging, and all the other arts as well, not just voyaging, but Hokulea was the symbol of the Renaissance. Through voyaging, to recapture this great pride of ancestry. And the canoe had capsized. There was a great deal of anxiety, which he expresses in the book. And he pushed through, and he discovered deeper reserves, I think, of courage and of a sense of connection to his ancestors that allowed him to enter a world of understanding and of comprehension that was deep and that was powerful.

You went back and talked to a number of the people we associate with Hokulea over the years. What did some of those conversations yield in terms of insight about the voyages?

Well, they were key. The book is made up of what I like to think of as a chorus of voices. See, I'm not in it. It's not my story. I'm the person that's behind the camera, if you like, or that's writing the story, singing the song, I hope. And I had this opportunity to interview dozens and dozens of crewmembers, and I wanted the book to be a chorus of voices. I wanted it to be told in the voices of the people that experienced it, not an impersonal narrator, a personal narrator. And I didn't know that that would work. It's like an oral history. And I've been very interested in oral histories, something told directly, authentically from the person who experienced it. So, the opportunity—and of course, I was very kind of shy and bashful. I mean, Tava Taupu, and Snake Ah Hee, and Herb Kane, and Nainoa and Pinky, and Marion Lyman-Merserau, and Dave Lyman. I mean, these are heroic figures to me. So, to have the honor that they would sit down and talk with me was terrific. And I didn't want that to end. You know, so writing the book, you have to eventually do that; right? But the great pleasure was to have those moments, those intimate moments with people on whose shoulders we all stand on, and to have them tell me their story. That in itself, was the process, is sometimes more important than the product.

Through the eyes and ears of Sam Low, we all get to experience what it's like to sail aboard Hokulea as she makes her way across vast oceans, guided by the stars and

other natural elements, to faraway destinations. Mahalo to Sam Low for sharing his stories with us, 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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Pinky evolved a philosophy that came out of voyaging. He said, You first have to have a vision, and you have to have a vision of an island over the horizon. And once you have that vision, then you have to formulate a plan to raise that island from the sea, Hawaiki rising. And then, you need to have discipline to train, to achieve that plan. And then, you need to have the courage to cast off the lines, and then you need to have the aloha to bind your crew together to find the island. So, those are values that were inherent in Pinky's view in voyaging, and also in the world, and also all cultures of the world. So, he brought this philosophy from the past, brought it to the present, and made it a possible future. And Hokulea is voyaging around the world with that philosophy in mind.