

GUEST: PAULA FUGA
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Paula Fuga is not a household name yet. But this local girl, who showed up at the auditions for American Idol wearing a T-shirt reading 'Big Girls Rock' and who was named the Na Hoku Hanohano Most Promising Artist of the Year – is making a name for herself. Aloha no and welcome to Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Something you should know right off the top about this 28-year-old rising local star. She knows what it's like to be a child living in a tent, homeless, on a beach. And helping others is part of who she is. Paula's last name is spelled f-u-g-a and it's pronounced 'funga.'

Let's talk about this wonderful honor you've received. You won the Na Hoku Hanohano Most Promising Artist of the Year.

Well, I think it's such an honor, and I was up for three awards. And that is the award that I wanted the most, because it says that, you know, 'Hey, congratulations! We recognize you. We also know that there's more in store for you.' And it's such a wonderful honor. And I've always imagined myself being a part of the Hokus and, you know, a part of the Hawaii Academy of Recording Artists.

You know, there's such a buzz about you – that you're the new face of Hawaiian music. And one of the best musicians in Hawaii, Matt Catingub, the conductor of the Honolulu Symphony Pops – what he said about you was tremendous. He said your voice is unforgettable and it's sweet and soulful. Would you agree with that assessment?

Well, I mean, you know I try to be humble. So I don't really like to talk like, you know, too much about myself, like in a good way. I mean, it's typically Hawaiian to not talk, you know, not sing your own praises. But you know, I'm just very blessed. You know, I know I have something special, a gift that I was given.

Well now, when did you know you had this gift? How old were you when you figured out, I've got — my voice will rock?

I was probably about four.

Really? But you always thought you had something that would take you forward?

Yeah. I think I really knew for sure what I would be when I was about nine years old. Someone asked me, 'Paula, what do you want to be when you grow up?' And it was an adult that wasn't very supportive of, you know, like wasn't very positive. So I stopped for a moment, and I looked away, and I looked up and I saw myself on a stage in front of a huge audience that I couldn't number. And I was holding a microphone and there was this whitish-blue light shining on me. And I knew in my heart it was to be a singer, you know. But I turned and I said, 'A teacher.' Just to kinda protect the dream.

And yet, how many young women and young men have said, I'm gonna be a star one day, I'm gonna have a powerful voice, and I'm gonna have my own album. And it, of course, it hasn't come to be. But here you are.

Yeah. Well, it took a lot of time. I was in high school and I entered different contests, like Brown Bags to Stardom and Keiki Stars, which is the children's version of Hawaii Stars. And you know I just always knew what I wanted to do. I didn't quite know how to go about pursuing that dream. But I would do just little things. Like in high school, I took ukulele lessons from Roy Sakuma. And it wasn't to be this fantastic ukulele player; it was just so that I'd have an instrument to play while I tried to write songs or so I could sing, sing along to it. And you know, just little steps here and there. Called the radio station and I asked, I said, you know, 'How do you get voice lessons or something?' And you know, like I listened to the radio stations a lot. And I would call up and enter all these contests and what not, and just pay attention to the music scene in Hawaii.

And yet, much of the time, your childhood was not the typical suburban neighborhood childhood. You were living on the beach for part of your life, and in foster homes for another part.

Yeah. I lived on the beach a couple of times, and I was in foster care. But I think the fortunate thing for me is that my foster parents were my grandparents. And so I was really lucky that I got to be placed with family. And that's when I really started getting active in different programs, is when I lived with them in foster care. And you know, I just feel really blessed for, you know, the things that did come my way.

When you were living on Waimanalo Beach, what was it like? Did you feel deprived? Did you think, you know, 'How come I can't live in a house like the other kids?' or 'How come I don't have the newest things?' Anything like that?

No, not really, because before I lived on the beach, I was living with aunts and my grandparents. But we just missed — my sister and I, we just missed my mom so much that we didn't care about living in a house. It didn't seem like, you know, a burden or anything to live on the beach because you come home, and it's like, there's the ocean, you know. You get to go swimming and play with all these kids. Like I didn't think there was anything wrong. Only when we were teased about it; that's about it.

Paula remembers raking pinecones away from the tent so her family wouldn't step on their sharp edges – part of childhood spent homeless – now singled out as the Most Promising Artist of the Year by the Hawaii Academy of Recording Artists. Stay with us for more with local girl Paula Fuga.

Welcome back to Long Story Short. We're talking with Paula Fuga, who is the Hoku Award winning most promising artist of the year. Now, you've talked about being homeless and going through different housing situations. Usually, that's enough to take away a kid's confidence. But you thought — you always thought you had a gift that you would take to the world and be successful with.

Yeah; you know, when I think as an — when I was in my intermediate years, I started to realize what was going on, like in my life and in, you know, comparison to the world, you know. And I started to realize that you know, the life that I was experiencing at that point wasn't the life that I had to have forever. You know what I'm saying? I knew that I would grow up one day, and I knew that I'd be able to make my own choices. And I thought — this is really, truly what I thought. I thought, you know, 'Yeah, when I grow up and I have a family, I'm never gonna let this happen to my kids.' You know what I'm saying? And that was kind of the thing that made me choose to do right, you know. I chose not to drink and party in high school, or you know, things like that. Just a little choice.

Did it attract you at all?

Oh, yeah. There were kids that drank and, you know, smoked pakalolo and what not in school. And you know, I stayed away from that kinda thing and it's just — and then in college, you know, friends I knew some friends, and they started getting in to cocaine, and I would write these letters and telling my friend, Hey, you know, one day I want to grow old with you and I want to have our kids play, you know, at the park on a Sunday, or something like that. And how are you gonna do any of that if you're not here, you know; if you're like strung out on drugs and stuff like that. And I would tell them, 'Hey, you know, I know where this leads, and it doesn't lead to a beautiful place.' You know what I'm saying?

What was their reaction? Did they say, 'Okay, good point, Paula; point taken,' or ...

Well, I'm a crier, so they kind of just listen to me and console me. They were consoling me now, and I'm like serious about it. And I'd like to think that I helped them, you know. 'Cause now, like that friend in particular, he's not doing drugs, he's doing very well. He lives on the mainland, he's working and you know, had a good life now. And I hope that what I said had a part in his decision to stop, you know.

So your life as a child was an example to you in a negative fashion. You realized, 'That's not what I want; I want the opposite of that.' And you struck out for that.

Oh, definitely. I was very fortunate to have positive adult role models in my life; namely my grandparents, my aunties. They were positive role models to me, you know. Growing up and having cousins that, you know, they had high standards. And I lived on the beach, my mom did drugs, she cruised around with a lot of people who made poor choices, like stealing was acceptable. And I remember I was in the car with my grandma one day — one night, and we were at the old Gems in Kaneohe. And I guess there was — it was a rent-a-center or something like that. And we were sitting right outside of the window, and I'm looking at all these big screen TVs and couches, and what, stereo systems. And I remember I told my grandma, I said, 'Yup, if I had a truck and a brick, I could load up my truck with all this stuff and...' And my grandma turned around, she goes — she looks at me, she goes, 'What are you thinking about? Like, where is your mind? Like, that's stealing, that's wrong. What is — what's the matter with you?' You know. 'Don't you know any better?' And she scolded me. And I was like, 'Whoa. Like, wow.' I was just kinda thinking out loud, you know, and I realized at that moment, like wow; all of the things that were acceptable to me is not acceptable to the world. You know what I mean? It's like not a good thing to be a stealer. You know what I mean? And I had to learn that. But it's a trip, because you know, I feel so fortunate to have had those people in my life that set me straight, you know, and said, 'No, that's not okay, that's unacceptable.'

It must have been very hard, seeing your mom and other people you knew and cared about do things that weren't — you knew weren't right, but you still loved them.

Oh, yeah.

And it must have been kind of delicate for the other members of your family to say, 'Don't do that.' But you know, of course that's your family.

It was kind of a trip — that part was kind of hidden from the other side of my family. You know what I mean? And it's like things that were done without them knowing about it. My grandma didn't know that, you know, we were around people who like, they stole cars, you know, and we — I went joyriding in those cars. I was like twelve or thirteen years old, riding the back roads.

You were keeping the secret?

Yeah. Like we kept that a secret from the other side of our family. And there was a rule for a while, and I don't know why I listened, 'cause I'm real kolohe. But there was a rule that said I couldn't cross the highway to see my grandparents, because my mom was afraid that if we went over — 'cause we're not gonna lie, you know — and our grandparents ask us, 'Eh, what's going on at your house?' We'll tell 'em, you know. And so she was very adamant about us not going over. And to this day, I don't understand why I listened, you know. Like I shoulda went across the street, you know.

What if you hadn't had your grandma and these people who really cared about you and told you, 'That's not right?'

When you think — well 'cause there are other children in your position who may not have had those connections.

Ooh. If I never — I don't know where I would be, quite honestly.

You know, you say you stayed away from alcohol and drugs when you were in high school 'cause you saw where that path would lead you. But you know, it's a cliché; people who get successful in entertainment, they have all kinds of opportunities and temptations and pressures. Do you see yourself ever taking that turn?'

Never. I don't ever see myself taking that turn. And what happened was I had to learn to hate it. Hate it with a passion too, you know?

A passion that comes from a childhood filled with struggles – from an artist whose album is named for the passion fruit, Liliko'i: Paula Fuga, a fresh, new face on Hawaii's music scene, a long way from a tent and the pinecones scattered on Waimanalo Beach. She's already performed with Jack Johnson and is scheduled to perform with Sheryl Crow.

We're back on Long Story Short with Paula Fuga. And if you're not familiar with her name yet, I think you're gonna hear it in many years to come. Most promising artist, as chosen by the Na Hoku Hanohano judges. Wow. And you're also a composer.

Yes; I'm – well, kind of. I write songs.

Can you talk about maybe, one of the songs you've done and explain how it came about?

Sure. Um, let me think. I guess I can talk about this one song. I started to write it, and I didn't have any music to it, for instance. And I had this melody in my head, and so I started singing this the words, and it ended up being a song about love, and I found myself writing about that. And I was like, 'What? Man, I'm not even in love with anybody. How am I gonna write this song?' And so I thought to myself, 'Why don't I write this song, and imagine how it feels to be in love.' You know, I'll just imagine what it feels like. And so I wrote, and it's called *Sweet Reverie*. It's track number eleven on my album. And it's so wonderful. I got to perform it with the Honolulu Symphony in August. And it's just beautiful. And I imagined strings in the song, and so for the arrangement on my album, we hired some musicians and they came; a string quartet, and they played strings on my album. And it's just so beautiful, and it's you know. All these years later, I've fallen in love, and it's exactly how I thought I would feel.

It's exactly as you imagined it?

Yeah.

Wow! Who are you in love with?

I'm in love with this beautiful plumber. From the North Shore.

I've never heard of a plumber described as beautiful.

Well, you never met my boyfriend. Nah, just joking. But, yeah. And um, he's older than me, and he lives in Pupukea and he's a really good person and I feel really blessed to, you know, have found the one that I love and you know.

Do you feel like your life's an open book, or are there places you really want to protect inside?

There are certain places that I want to protect, just 'cause I'm not comfortable with talking about things like that yet. And I know that there will be a time and a place for certain things in my life to come out into the open, and I think that, you know, it'll happen in its own time for its own purposes. But you know, it's like sometimes things happen, and they're too hard to deal with. And for instance, for a long time, I've, as you mentioned, like I write my songs, my own songs, I would write about love, all love songs. And I think the reason I couldn't write about what happened in my life, you know, is because it was too close, still. You know what I mean? And too, too painful to talk about.

So you would write about what you wished would happen, rather than what had happened. Even though you think some of the things you've been through would — are the makings of wonderful songs that really touch people.

Yeah. And I think that when it — when I'm far enough removed from the situation in my life, in my heart, I think I'll be able to write about it. You know what I mean?

Yup; good point. Perspective.

Yeah.

You know, um, so many people who describe your voice say it's powerful. I mean, there's a core in you, and your voice is powerful. Where does the power come from?

It comes from my heart. Truly. I if I sing a song, say it's a cover, a song that I never wrote. I'll listen to the song, and I'll listen to the words, and the emotion that the song was written with, I can tap into that. And I think it comes from being empathetic too. I think that that's one of my greatest gifts, is having empathy. And I think that's something that the world lacks, a lot of, you know, consideration. 'Hey, imagine how you would feel if someone were to do this to you.' You know what I mean? And so when I sing, I try to use that, and I try to tap into the emotion that the song was written with. I'm still working on, you know, controlling my voice. I'm still working on learning how to use my voice to its maximum potential. Because I have a powerful voice, it takes a lot out of me when I sing. And so I'm trying to find that balance, you know, like to find the highs and the lows, and you know, try to project emotion in even the pronunciation of words in my songs.

How do you think your next album, whenever you're ready to do it, will differ from the first?

I think it's gonna be a lot more bluesy. Because I really like blues, and it's a natural progression in me, you know. I love like old soulful music, and I think that the songs that I'm writing right now are more bluesy, I guess you could say. And I just think that my next album is gonna be a lot deeper too. And I think that this first album's given me the courage to speak up a little more, you know, and not only sing of love. I mean, love is like the most beautiful thing. It's the thing that you know, joins people

together. And it's important, but there are other things that are important too. And so I kinda want to write more about those things, things that maybe I was ashamed or scared to sing about before, or write about. And I'm also writing a book right now. And my poems are a lot deeper than my songs. Just 'cause songs, you have to sing 'em, you know. But poems, you don't have to sing 'em. And you can write whatever you want, and be as raw as you — you can. And you don't have to worry about having to speak it. You can just write it in a — on a piece of paper, and that's good enough.

Well, we're looking forward to hearing you go deep in albums and poetry, and looking forward to hearing from you in the future in—in any way you choose to express yourself.

Thank you so much, Leslie, for having me on your show.

Thank you, Paula.

Good luck to you with all of your other interesting interviews.

Thank you so much —

Thank you.

- for sitting with us. Appreciate it.

Thank you so much.

The expressive Paula Fuga – 28 years old with a powerful voice and a powerful message. She's establishing a non-profit organization called the Liliko'i Foundation to benefit women who, like Paula, have had to struggle. Mahalo for joining me for another episode of *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.

My whole life, I've grown up hearing Fuga. So when I introduce, you know, myself, sometimes I say 'Fuga.' But it's really 'Funga.' And I just learned what it means.

What does it mean?

It means flower blossom.

Do you like that meaning?

Oh, yeah.

What's your grandma's name? Tell us. Give her credit.

My grandma's name is Judy Spencer.

From Waimanalo.

Yeah. That's her nickname. Her real name is Hiltrudis. That's my name. My middle name is Hiltrudis.

Oh, named after her.

And it means — it's derived from Judith, which comes from Judah — and Judah means praise. So my first name means little in Spanish. So it's Little Praise Flower Blossom.

Can I just call you Little?

You can call me Flower Blossom.