

GUEST: KEOLA BEAMER

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He's a writer, composer, Hawaiian slack key guitar master and, along with his brother, was a key player in the Hawaiian cultural renaissance of the 1970s. Today, Keola Beamer is collaborating with musical artists from around the world to combine sounds and textures, effectively creating a whole new musical genre. And Keola Beamer is also a cancer survivor – something which he hasn't spoken of publicly, until now, on *Long Story Short*.

Aloha no kakou; I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. When Aunt Nona Beamer passed away in April of 2007, Hawaii lost a cultural icon a teacher, a composer, a hula expert, a champion of Hawaiian values. Today, Aunt Nona's elder son, Keola, continues composing and performing traditional-Hawaiian and contemporary music and the Beamer family tradition of storytelling.

Well, being a part of the Beamer family was just a wonderful experience growing up, with my grandparents and my mom. We were raised on the Big Island, primarily, at my grandfather's ranch in Waimea. So it's very beautiful up there, very remote, no electricity, beautiful, cold, clean water that came down from the mountain.

No electricity; so how—

Yeah.

How'd you do your meals?

Kerosene. Yeah; kerosene refrigerator, kerosene lamps. And when I smell that kerosene smell once in a while. It really takes me back to those days when we were growing up. Used to be number six in the bath tub line.

[chuckle]

Who else was using the—

Well, my cousins. And so we were all kinda raised together up there. My mom was a single mom. So she raised my brother and myself pretty much on her own, and with the help of my grandparents. So a lot of beautiful memories. I wrote some music about those days and growing up, the beauty of Mauna Kea, the mountain so alive, so present in our lives every day. Beautiful, haunting memories.

I haven't heard very much about your dad.

Yeah.

Did you know him?

Not really; he left before my brother Kapono was born. And my brother and I are about a year apart, so we didn't really know him very well. And years later, we met him, and he seemed like a nice man and everything, but we didn't have much in common, 'cause so many—you know, so much time had passed. I think I was thirty-six when I met him for the first time.

Did you feel abandoned?

No, I wouldn't say abandoned. There was so much love and support from our family that we really didn't know that's not the way it was supposed to be. You know, we just had so much love and aloha from our grandparents and mother.

You had a father figure in the form of your grandfather.

Pretty much; yeah. He was a wonderful man, and taught us how to ride horses, and you know, rope and—pretty outdoor lifestyle up on the ranch.

What's your first recollection of music in the home?

We were pretty much surrounded by it all the time. This was a family that was very versed in the hula, primarily, so you know, many hula recitals, and so there was a lot of music. And it was in the context of living itself. Like now, maybe we'll go hear some music somewhere, or people will go, Let's go hear some music. With us, it was there, you know. So you'd wake up in the morning, Sunday morning, hear the rustling of papers, somebody reading the paper, and the ukulele, then the music begins. And lot of family parties. You know, Auntie so-and-so always had this kind of interesting hula, and Uncle did this. And

Now, I know a number of girls in your family dance hula; I think all of the girls in your family dance hula.

Right; right, yeah.

What about the boys?

We were the problem children in our family. [chuckle] For some reason, the women were the carriers of the

culture, dating back many, many years and many generations. My great-grandmother, Helen Desha Beamer, had to teach hula in secret, because you know, it was frowned on back in her day.

And she was also a prolific songwriter.

Oh, beautiful composer, wonderful artist. Sometimes I feel my own work doesn't even come close to touching the hem of her skirt. She was amazing.

Did you work with her on any music?

No; because she died when I was about a year old. So I didn't have that chance.

But you grew up hearing her music because it was kept alive in the family.

Yes; and still is. Yeah. She's revered in our family.

How much did your mom influence you in music?

Quite a bit. And I'm amazed at how often over the years we were more than just mother and son; we were collaborators and best friends. And kupuna and haumana, and so I'd often consult her on the smallest detail of a song. You know, sometimes it's kauna, the double meaning of things. So it's not surface as it first might appear. So you need that kind of undercurrent of knowledge in culture in order to really interpret the work and understand that. We believe, as the Beamer ohana, that you really should try to follow the intent of the composer. You know, what does the song real—what is the composer trying to do, what is the composer trying to say. And by following that intent, you are often led in some very interesting and beautiful directions.

Which frees you to change the music?

Frees you to interpret it in a pono way, with a heart that feels like you're doing the right thing with it.

Keola Beamer has shown that he understands intention, composition and culture. He's written and arranged traditional and contemporary songs, published a book of short stories and begun exploring and creating a new, collaborative, musical genre. In the late 1970s, Keola collaborated with his brother, Kapono Beamer, writing and recording music on the leading edge of what became known as the Hawaiian cultural renaissance.

The time was right. You know, it was the renaissance of Hawaiian music, is the way it's referred to now, where kids, all of a sudden, they were proud to be Hawaiian. Me too, you know. Maybe before that, not so proud to be Hawaiian. But the music helped us remember that, you know, we had something to say, and it was important, and so groups like Country Comfort, and C&K, and in those days, Sunday Manoa, Olomana—you know, this music was fresh, and it was being created by our feelings, our relations to the world at that time, and it really struck a chord with the young people in Hawaii.

Before you and your younger brother, Kapono were performing at Territorial Tavern—

Yeah.

--I imagine you'd done music together informally most of your lives. What was your relationship like?

Did you try to boss him around, or was he the smart-alecky younger brother? What stereotype applies, if any?

[chuckle] Thank you for that question.

[chuckle]

Yeah; nothing like stereotypes.

[chuckle]

I don't know. I guess I was kind of the leader, I guess, being the older brother, and stuff. And you know, we did a lot of things. There was a lot of pressure. And you know, there's two types in the music business when it's difficult. Lack of success and tremendous success; and both those things are fraught with complication.

But for the most part, you know, we had a nice run, had a great time; enjoyed it.

And I'm sure you hear all the time, 'Gee, you have a wonderful solo career.' 'So, does your brother...' 'But I wish you folks would play together sometimes.'

Yeah. It's yeah, kinda like—the way I would put it is we never lost our love for each other. I mean, we are blood brothers and we love each other. But we lost our love of working together. And in this business in particular, you have to love it. Because then you just if you don't love it, it's work. You know, if you love it, it's not work. And the best music comes from love. We were just tired of the idea of working together. And personally, too, it seems, you don't have a lot in common, even though you love each other. We're different human beings, and that's okay. You know, that's fair. We don't all have to be alike in this world, so you know, we try to make space for that.

I'm sure you knew I would ask you about this. Do you get tired of it? Because I'm sure a lot of people ask you, or you know, they're thinking about it.

Yeah; I get tired of it. I mean, it's been a lot of years,

But I'm sure you relate to Cecilio and Kapono, in that sense.

Yeah; and Robert and Roland. But I've been in the business so long, where I know that these projects are like

stepping stones. You know, you do one, and then you work very hard, and you do another. But what is really interesting is the water that runs between the stones, the wonderful things that music brings into your life, the great places where you can go because of the music. Music brings people together, and makes beautiful experiences. So it's often not the business of music that's anything interesting to me; it's what happens between the business and music.

You know, you're such a wonderful musician, but you're also very good with words. And of course, you're a writer; you've done a book of short stories. What are some of the artistic expressions and ways you express yourself creatively?

I think for me, there's an interesting Hawaiian word; *kuana 'ike*. It means cultural paradigm, yeah? So I sort of view the world through a Hawaiian cultural paradigm. It was a gift from my ohana, right? So I may see things a little differently than somebody else with a different paradigm may see something. So I find it's a really interesting world view. I've been exploring Buddhism lately, because I've seen many parallels between Buddhism and our Hawaiian culture, and for instance, the idea of a Hawaiian sort of philosophical thought is that within each individual, there is a bowl of light, a beautiful bowl of light. And in Buddhism, that may be called Buddhist nature. There's a Buddhist nature in each human being, there's a bowl of light in each human being. And you can extinguish that light, or dim it by placing in the stones of aggression, anger, ignorance; and the light dims. And in Buddhism, that may be called, perhaps, bad karma, you know sometimes they call it the three poisons, anger, greed. The idea that Buddhism embraces other cultures, other religions even, and that we should have compassion for one another; we call that aloha. So I find that really sort of interesting common grounds between the two, and that's why I kinda want to learn more about it, and study it more. Because I find that an interesting way to view the world, and a very helpful way.

Would you say you are a Buddhist?

Yes. Yeah.

And that's just in the last couple of years?

Yeah. Like everything else, music brought that to me, where I played for the floating lantern festival two years ago, and as I sat there with the Buddhist priests, and I understand—you know, I began to understand their reverence for ancestors—same like ours, yeah, in the Hawaiian culture. And I realized, you know, what wonderful and interesting people they were. It wasn't like a gig at all. You know, I thought I was just gonna play a gig, but it wasn't. It was a very moving experience. And then this year, I floated a lantern for my own mother. I wasn't anticipating that would happen. But that's life, you know, so I lost my mom, and I put that lantern out in the ocean, and watched it disappear.

Here's a quote attributed to Buddha: "Thousands of candles can be lighted from a single candle, and the life of the candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared." When we invited Keola Beamer to join us for a conversation on *Long Story Short*, he said he wanted to speak publicly, for the first time, about his personal battle with prostate cancer. And he said he might be ready to speak openly, for the first time, about the passing of his mother, Auntie Nona Beamer.

As we speak, it's been a few months.

Right.

And I know you go through different stages of grief. What are your thoughts now, six months after she passed?

Yeah. Well, it's very—I've not known grief like that in my life. I didn't know that that was possible to love somebody so much, and then they're gone. But the grief sort of reminds me a little bit of when I was a young man, surfing, and you'd sit out there on your surfboard, and everything would be okay, and then this set would come in these big, towering waves. And grief is like that; you're doing pretty good, and then the grief comes in, in waves, and you do your best and you deal with it. And then another set comes, and this continues for a while, you know. Because my mom was a revered Hawaiian cultural treasure, she touched many lives. And we as Beamers have to have the compassion for other people's grief too; not just our own.

Hard to take care of them, when you've gotta take care of yourself too.

Yeah. That's difficult. But we can do it. We have done it. My mom led a life that made a difference in the world; she made the world a better place. She touched thousands of lives and helped many, many students, and she left with dignity. How great, you know. I'd be so happy if that happened in my own life. I want to share a story with you that means quite a lot to me. The morning of her passage, Moana, my wife and I were in San Francisco. And I had this very powerful dream, and it was young woman, a beautiful young woman, vibrant, beautiful black hair. Just this unbelievable energy. And you also had the feeling with this woman in my dream, that she was a person to be reckoned with. You know. And I almost didn't recognize her, but it was my mom. And she had just come to say goodbye.

Did you recognize that at the time, that she was saying goodbye, or did you figure it out later?

Figured it out a little bit later. I almost didn't recognize her, because I was used to taking care of my kupuna mom, right, with the thin arms and the graying hair. But this woman was my mom, before my brother and I were born. And she was beautiful and vibrant; and the word that comes to mind is, joy. She was joyous. She had transcended the cocoon of old age.

M-hm. M-m. You know, speaking of passing. You had a health situation which probably caused you to think of the possibility of you passing.

Right.

And people don't realize that you had prostate cancer.

Yes; about five years ago, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. That was a difficult time in our lives. Yeah; you're just going along, everything seems fine, and having a great life, and all of a sudden, boom, you know. Sitting in the doctor's office, and you hear the word cancer, and it's about you. You know. In a way, we kind of have a saying, my friends and I; it's an old Pidgin saying called, NCH. No can handle. You know, so when you hear that, it's very close to NCH, you know.

M-hm.

You kind of—I found myself kind of disappearing and looking from a distance, down at the doctor and myself, and he's telling me this stuff. So in a, you know, in a very interesting way, this shapes your life to brush against your own mortality—helps you realize what is important, and what is not. You know. I found myself really appreciating things like sunlight, about—I found myself wanting to be with my wife, wanting to be with my friends. It wasn't about wanting to go the office and do some music, licensing or something. [chuckle] But it was more about being with the people you love, and the ocean, and the sun. And I think that, for people that you know, have this kind of challenge in their lives, I think it's important to try to stay positive. Because you know, this sort of idea of cancer places this matrix of fear over our lives. I think most cancer survivors and cancer patients know that fear. And we have to kind of rise above that, because you know, there's still life, and there's still joy, and there's still a future if you're, you know, lucky enough to catch it when it's—in the early stages of development, which was my case. Yeah. So I'm kinda fine now. In five years everything seems to be working properly, and happily enjoying my life. Medical technology is amazing.

Listening to you just now, I thought of something your mother said to me when we talked a few weeks before she passed away. She said that she'd just come out of a major health scare previously, and she said, There's nothing like going through that to just wipe away any pettiness—any small stuff in your life.

Yeah; yeah.

It's gone.

Yeah; exactly. You know, you've heard the—I've heard this before, that cancer is a blessing. I remember the first time I ever heard that; I said, What kind of BS is that? How can cancer possibly be a blessing? But in actuality, it was for my life. I know that sounds so strange, and so counterintuitive.

Well, what do you do now differently, that you didn't, or wouldn't have done then?

It just kind of cleared away the detritus of my life. You know, it made me realize, you know, it's so—I used to feel so guilty if I said no about playing a gig that I didn't really want to do. You know, I'd just feel so, oh person wants me; oh, guilt, guilt. But now, I just say, you know, I'm sorry. It's not what I want to do.

Life is short and—

Yeah.

--you've gotta focus.

Right. So I think I'll choose the things that I love now, and be a little bit more, you know, happy to do that,

Another saying associated with Buddha: "The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, nor to worry about the future, but to live the present moment wisely and earnestly." Speaking of quotes, I asked Keola about one I found that's attributed to him.

There's this wonderful quote; I have to ask you if it's true, because it just makes me laugh. You, after some experiences playing in hotels and having people expect the kinda music that you really didn't want to play, you said, Let's see. You encourage tourists to ask about slack key; there are festivals several times during the year, usually for free in public parks. Write on your guest comment card, I would like to hear some real Hawaiian slack key guitar in this hotel. Say no to tourist pabulum. If someone plays Sweet Leilani at the restaurant, blow chunks and eggs at the premises. Change the world. Did you say that?

[chuckle] I think so.

[chuckle]

You—don't—I don't. I'm sorry. I apologize for the humor of that. You know—

Don't apologize; it's funny.

It's basically a situation of kind of trying to create more knowledge about the Hawaiian culture, and about its music. For many years, people thought the Hawaiian slack key guitar and the steel guitar were the same thing. You know. So we'd, you know, when people said, What kind of guitar do you play? Oh, is that nrr-nrr one? No, it's not. You know, two different things.

And it's chicken and the egg. If Hawaiian musicians present this music, why shouldn't tourists think that that's what it is?

Right. Right; exactly. Yeah.

I know you've had arguments with others, say, in slack key—

Sure; sure.

--guitar, about how much innovation there should be. I mean—

Right.

--do you keep it pristine, just as it was, or do you add your own touch? What's the answer?

Well, that is an argument that has continued through the years; similarly, in blues or other forms of music. There are the traditionalists who really—I play the way I was taught, that's just the thumb, and the index finger, and that's it, that's it. I personally am old enough to have met Auntie Alice Namakelua; I was one of her students. And she thought that the next generation—Uncle Ray and Gabby, she thought those guys were radical. Those guys were putting in jazz chords and stuff. She goes, Tchah! That's not the way, you know.

So she thought Raymond Kane would be a radical. But do you consider him a radical? Aren't you the radical?

Yeah; I guess I would not consider Uncle Ray a radical. You know, he was kind of a traditionalist. But to her ears, yeah?

M-hm.

She had that definite pattern that she was taught by her brother, and that was what slack key should sound like. Didn't have all these kind of interesting chords that you know, came in later. And so I think that as artists and human beings, you know, I am not a museum piece; you know, life changes, and language changes, and tastes change. So we try to respect the music of our kupuna, and love it, and cherish it, and remember them. We remember them by their tunings, what they played. Without them, you know, these beautiful shoulders to stand upon, our way would have been much, much more difficult, you know. So we revere them, we appreciate them; Uncle Ray, Gabby, awesome people, beautiful musicians. By the same token, we have our own DNA and our own musical ideas, and we should be allowed to express them, yeah.

Are there things going on with Hawaiian slack key now, ki ho'alu, that you don't really appreciate?

I think there's been an over-commercialization of it to a certain extent. You know, because it has been successful. I don't really spend much time thinking about that kinda stuff, but prefer to go on my own path.

M-hm.

I think the idea is that artists can sort of transcend boundaries, yeah? We can hopefully, with language of music, this beautiful inclusive language of music, we can work together in creating a global village and make the world a better place. You know. Make it a more interesting place. Tear down some boundaries between human beings, you know. So the idea is that we can transcend these boundaries through music if we work hard at it, in collaboration, working with each other. I've learned a lot about collaboration over the years. I've done a number of projects that have been fascinating to me.

Eclectic.

Eclectic would be a very good word. I did a project—I think it was the year before last, in Amsterdam, with a Javanese gamelan orchestra. And those guys don't even have a Western scale. You know, so it was interesting to try to combine the elements that we have in Hawaiian music with the Indonesian elements, and then create a new piece, which is essentially a new sound, never existed before. Likewise, I've been blessed to work with musicians from Europe, from Asia, trying different ideas.

Do you find that people are open, or do they know what they like as soon as they hear it, or they don't like it? Do people give it a chance?

They do. Yeah; they do. This, you know, eclectic music that I've been involved with; very strange, very different, not your commercial path; but people—yeah, it's interesting. It's different, it's interesting.

And you learn a lot about other people's cultures as well.

Oh, absolutely. It's an interesting journey to try and collaborate, create something different that never existed before.

It'll be revealing to see (and hear) what comes of Keola Beamer's collaborations with musicians from other cultures just as it's revealing to hear him speak about joy and blessings juxtaposed with stories of grief coming in towering waves. Stories like these, that reveal character and life choices, have great

value and we so enjoy them bringing to you on this program. At PBS Hawaii, our mission is to inform, inspire and entertain; and we try to do that each week on *Long Story Short*. Mahalo to Keola Beamer for sharing with all of us. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

Do you think you'll see your mother again?

Yes; yes, I do. I feel pretty confident about that. And my grandparents, and ...

What are you gonna say when you see them?

Howzit?

[chuckle] Eh!

[chuckle]

[chuckle]