

GUEST: JIMMY BORGES: THE FIRST VERSE

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I always believed that my journey was gonna be successful. I wasn't afraid to fall down and get up, wipe myself off, and start all over again. There's a song like that. But I just felt that that was the norm. If you don't succeed at something right way, and you fall down, you get up. And if you keep doing that your whole life, you will be successful.

His body of work has seen enough success to encompass several lifetimes. He's an actor, singer, goodwill ambassador, and a gentleman. Jimmy Borges.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha; I'm Leslie Wilcox. When a song is recognized as being a standard, it's a song that's at the top of its game, one that maintains its popularity through generations, and is relevant whether it's being interpreted by Frank Sinatra or Lady Gaga. Our spotlight tonight shines on an artist who is a standard by any definition of the word. His career has spanned generations, his voice is classic yet unique, and his grace and professionalism are a model for anyone in any career. He is Jimmy Borges.

[SINGING]

So you started off life in Kalihi, but you didn't stay there.

No, I didn't. To me, Kalihi was the world. Because I played football on the streets, I climbed the mango tree in my backyard, and I would sit up there and eat the mangoes all day, and eat the waiwi's, and the sour sap, and the guavas.

What street did you live on in Kalihi?

Self Lane. It was right across from the Kalihi Fire Station. And I was a premature baby, so Mrs. Self, they named the street after her father, Captain Self, and she was my mother's midwife. So she delivered me. I was a preemie.

She delivered you at home?

At home. I was like about seven and a half to eight months. Not even eight months. And I remember my mother telling me that my first bed was a cigar

box. So she said I would fit in her hand, the palm of her hand. And I don't think they had incubators at that time. But I got very lucky; I survived.

And you have the lungs.

And I have the lungs. The singing lungs. [CHUCKLE]

Because preemies don't have developed lungs, right?

Exactly; yeah. Everything worked out fine. I had no idea, but my mother was very adamant that Jimmy's gonna live, Jimmy III was gonna live.

What were your parents like?

My mother was a typical Chinese-Hawaiian lady that stayed at home, and chatted with the neighbors. And my father was kinda like a rake. He was very handsome, and had a little thin mustache, and always drinking with the guys. You know, drinking the Primo beer, and hanging with the guys. He was sort of a guy type guy. And my mother was more a homemaker. So that was my basic background. Not too unique. But music was always in my life. My mother brought music, my father played the piano and the ukulele by ear. Everything was by ear. And so, I always had music around me. I always liked it. I didn't realize that I would move into that direction.

What kind of music was in your life? What did your father play?

My dad, strangely enough, was the Portuguese side of the family. He loved the Hawaiian things. He loved to sing the Hawaiian things and play it on the piano.

And your mom?

And my mother was a big band aficionado. And we got those records. We had those what they called Vee records from the military guys during World War II. I was six and a half when the war started, so I was already pretty aware of what's going on. But when all the GIs were here, my mother and her two aunties, young aunties, opened up a hotdog stand on King Street and Self Lane. And now, my mother was only seventeen when I was born. So at the age of about eight, my mother was only like about twenty-five. So she's pretty hot.

[CHUCKLE]

And she looked—really. And then my aunties looked pretty good. And so, they were selling these hotdogs. Well, the GIs were coming by in their trucks, and they could care less about the hotdogs, they wanted to see these three hot little, you know, local girls that were selling it. They would bring them gifts, and the gifts would be like what they called Vee records. And those were those big, big records that were made for the GIs. And on them were the big bands like Tony Dorsey, and Jimmy Dorsey, and Frank Sinatra, and all that. My mother would play it. And I got really involved listening to those big band sounds. That was my first inkling at that time that I realized that I liked that kind of music. The classic music of Cole Porter and George Gershwin, and all that. I didn't know these people's names, I just knew that music took more of a hold on me than the Hawaiian music. I liked the Hawaiian music, but I loved the big band music.

So we can thank the GI's of World War II for introducing Jimmy Borges to big band music. But isn't it intriguing to imagine Jimmy Borges singing Hawaiian music, or for that matter, playing professional football?

So you're listening to records at home, but you're also out on the streets playing ball.

Oh, yeah.

And you love sports.

Sports was my whole life. We would play tackle in the street, and that was part of—yeah.

Road rash.

Yeah. We got road rash. But that was part of the whole thing, you know, the guys. This was part of it. Eh, what?

[CHUCKLE]

You can play tackle, yeah? And so me and Gilbert, and I remember all the guys' names on Self Lane. They were my buddies. In fact, a few of them still contact me now through email. But, sports was my whole life. All I cared about was football. Because we really didn't have baseball back in that time.

Baseball wasn't a real—

And soccer, no way.

—big thing in Hawaii. And no soccer. And basketball was. They were secondary or tertiary sports. Football was the thing, because that was a real manly sport.

And you played tackle, you said?

No, I was a running back. But we played tackle football on the streets.

So you were fast.

I was fast. And I played high school ball at a hundred and sixty pounds. But the thing that got me by, and that I got my accolades from, was my speed and my moves. And that all came from my hero. One of my heroes was Herman Wedemeyer. He went to St. Louis, I went to St. Louis. And he was a great, great football player. And I tried to emulate his moves.

Was he a little older than you?

Twelve years.

Oh, twelve years.

Yeah, 'cause he was in the twelfth grade when I was in the first grade. But he was like one of my, wow, my heroes. I would go to every football game that St. Louis played. And I would watch him, and watch the way he ran, and the way he juke, and all this, and I learned from that. And when I played high school ball on the mainland, I was playing against some pretty big guys, and fast guys. But I learned. I was fast, and that was the secret to my success, and I got a football scholarship to go to college and all that. I wanted to continue on in sports, and then I realized that sports, it was a dead end and it wasn't that satisfying. I wanted to be ... growing up, I wanted to be someone. I wanted to be somebody.

Football's loss was music's gain. Jimmy's drive to be somebody gave him a focus that would determine the rest of his life. For Jimmy Borges, it wasn't about fame or celebrity; it was about living a worthwhile life.

[SINGING]

I wanted my existence to be important. I wanted to be important in some way or another, as long as I did something that was worthwhile in life. I wanted to do something worthwhile, not just to be sand on the beach. And I always had that drive. It wasn't an ego thing. It was a thing that, it was necessary. I always believed, from the time that I was young that if you're gonna be here do something important, I don't care what, whatever it happened to be. So if it was gonna be in sports, be the best, the best that you can be. If it was gonna be in anything, be the best that you can be. And so, that was always my thrust. And it helped me in good stead, because when I went to the mainland, I had to overcome things that I never realized existed, which was prejudice. I didn't realize that people might not like you because you were brown.

What did they think you were?

They had no idea.

[CHUCKLE] What'd you tell them?

When I was in Los Angeles, I was Mexican. When I was in Florida, I was Puerto Rican. When I was in upper New York State, my buddies were Italian, so they thought I was a funny looking Sicilian. I mean, Eh, what you doin', Jimmy?

[CHUCKLE]

And I'm walking around with my Italian buddies like that. So they looked at me, and I was exotic, right? I didn't realize, that became a plus in my career, jumping ahead to my career as a singer. Because it set me apart, what I thought was going to be a negative. Because whenever I auditioned when I was younger, you had to either be Black or White. They said, What does a Hawaiian know about jazz? I like it, and I just like it. So I had to audition. And it took longer for the buyer to pay attention to me.

Because they weren't looking for you.

No; because I didn't fit. And this was before Don Ho or anything. Hawaii, the only thing anybody ever knew—this was in the 50s—knew about Hawaii was Pearl Harbor, before Hawaii Five-O. Pearl Harbor or Diamond Head, or Harry Owens, which was an old, old show. But there was no other connection. So, if I auditioned and there were some Black guys there, and some White guys here, and this Hawaiian guy over here, I was given short-shrift many, many times.

You didn't fit in either category.

Yeah. And so, I had to work harder. And so, I learned at that age that equality was not guaranteed. [CHUCKLE] And that's okay.

And you didn't get discouraged. You just worked harder.

No, it made me mad. I says, Okay, I'll show you. That was mine.

How do you get mad in music for your advantage, without being bitter? How do you do that?

I never had time to be bitter. That never even occurred to me. My whole thing was always that, I'll show you. And where that started from? That started from going back to this prejudice thing. I had a girlfriend in school, and I was just so crazy about her.

Is this college?

No, this is high school.

High school. Okay.

High school. And I was just crazy about her, and she was so cute, so pretty. Her name was Virginia. And I was gonna marry her, and we were gonna have children, and that was gonna be my life. I'd spend the rest of my life with her. When we started talking about marriage—of course, this was like my junior year in school. You know kids are. The parents told her, she says, If you marry Jimmy, your children will be Brown. And I said, And?

[CHUCKLE]

So? It just never bothered me, but it bothered her, and because that wasn't fitting into the social mode that they were acclimated to. And then I realized that it affected my life. My thought, I got upset and it hurt me at first. And then not too long after, I decided, you're gonna be sorry. One day, you're gonna be sorry that you weren't my wife, or you're gonna be sorry that I wasn't in your life. And that just gave me more impetus to be something, to show. But strange things happen to give you, drive. And I used that.

It could easily have been taken a different way.

Oh, yeah.

But you used it for the positive.

I just used it. I says, I'm gonna be somebody, and you're gonna wish you were my friend.

Okay, now, did that ever happen? Did she ever regret?

Well, with those same people—there were other people like that. When the time did come, and they saw me and I was successful in San Francisco, and over here, it never occurred to me to be that way. I was more gracious to them than I probably was to anybody else, because it didn't matter.

You were beyond that. You're not an I-told-you-so guy.

No. It didn't matter. Because if it wasn't for them, maybe I might not have been here, maybe my drive might not have been as strong.

Okay; so you're at college, you've decided sports is not gonna happen for you because it's a dead end. So then, what happened?

There was a transition there. There was a girl that I was going with, and her name was Ann Richards. She's gone now. But she was at that time a very well known local singer. She had already started a singing career when she was like sixteen or so. So she was my girlfriend in college, and she heard me sing, when we were at home together or out on a date together. And she said, Why don't you come and sing in one of our college rallies? And at the college rallies, some

of the people that went to school there at San Francisco State was Johnny Mathis, Cal Tjader, Paul Desmond, all these great classical legendary artists. And that's the people I went to school with. So I sang at some college rallies with them, and they applauded. And I said, Hey ...

That feels good. [CHUCKLE]

I really like that. What it did, it took the place of scoring a touchdown. I liked that idea.

And it didn't hurt as much when things went bad.

I didn't have to 'cause I was one of those jocks that didn't want to wear the face mask. I said, That's only for sissies. Well, my face was always beat up, and I had road rash, on all my whole face, I had bruises and all that, all during football season. I didn't have to do this anymore. People applauded. Not only that the girls were there too. The same thing; I still had the girls.

Girls are a theme here so far.

I was very, very much into—I love women. I absolutely love women. In fact, some of my best friends are women. And the reason for that is that I learn a lot from women. I learned things from women that I would never learn from men.

For example?

Well, they're nurturers. Women are very strong. They're very strong in a very soft, gentle way, and I like that. Because that's kinda my nature. I'm a gentle person in my dealings with people, but I'm very strong also. And I like that about women. And I learned a lot about women, because of their nurturing aspect. And they're Mother Earth. Men aren't that way. Men are testosterone, and everything is banging heads and all that. That's okay. That's fine in its place. But that's not what life is all about.

For every Jimmy Borges who makes it, there are hundreds of singers who never do. Sometimes, the difference between success and failure is perseverance.

How did you get your first break, big break?

I created my own breaks many times. I would go to clubs. I would audition at any audition that I found out about. And if I didn't make it, I would say, Your loss. That was my mentality. That was a safeguard. I didn't want to get down. I would go to clubs and sit in. One club I went to, I went and sat in, and I thought about this then. I sent up a note saying, Hi, my name is Jimmy Borges, and I'm looking for a band to take with me to Las Vegas. And I never asked the singer, I just sent it up to them. And I know that the guys were gonna say, Hey, there's this guy out there that he's gonna go to Las Vegas, and he's looking for a band, let's call him up.

[CHUCKLE]

Of course, that's how I got up on stage and sang. Sometimes when I sang, they hired me. Most times, they didn't. But sometimes, they hired me. That's how I got some of my first jobs.

Was it hard to make a living in the beginning?

Very hard.

How'd you do it? How'd you get by?

I would take like a small little job. I would work for my uncle for about maybe two weeks. He was a butcher, and I would work on a Saturday for him for about two or three weeks, and then make enough money to go out so that I could buy drinks at a nightclub and audition. And that was basically the MO. Whatever money I had coming in, I would save for gas, 'cause I had to drive to all these clubs. I just went to any club that had live music.

This is while you were in college, or after college?

Before college, and after. During that period of time. I became a professional full-on at twenty, at the age of twenty. Because then, that's when I started working steady, I started getting jobs.

And did you ever finish college?

No, no, that was—

You were already on your way.

—strictly a cup of coffee in college. That was it. After football season, I left because football didn't do what I needed it to do for me, and singing did. Singing was coming into play.

So you could support yourself at age twenty with singing in San Francisco?

It didn't take that much anymore. I was living in Oakland, and I'd go across the San Francisco Bay Bridge for twenty-five cents. It was a quarter then. Now, it's like four dollars. And drinks, I could buy a drink for—I would nurse one drink and it would be, eighty-five cents. [CHUCKLE] Something like that.

Now, the night life scene has destroyed many a person, as far as gotten them down the wrong path, and really blocked their chances of success because of habits and people. Did you ever fall victim or fall prey to that?

No. And there were reasons. First of all, I didn't like what drinking did to me. But secondly it might be my Chinese blood that's in me. Whenever I drank anything, I would turn red. I would get red. And I never liked that. [CHUCKLE]. But I didn't like the feeling that it gave me. I didn't like—

Which is exactly why most people drink, 'cause they love the feeling.

They like the feeling. And I didn't like that. Part of it is, I guess I'm a control freak. In fact, I am. The truth is, I am. And being a control freak was necessary for me to follow my dream, to follow what I had to do, and to stay on course. I needed to be as focused as possible. And then once I got started in the business, I needed to have control over my musicians, to make sure that they did what they were supposed to do, and they supported me. Because the most important people in my life, in my professional life, are my musicians. I'm only as good as they make me. Otherwise, I'm better off singing a cappella. But I needed that to control them. They can drink and do whatever they want, but as long as they stayed within the concept of my music and what I wanted, that was fine.

What about peer pressure? People going, Eh, eh, come on Jimmy, we go drinking, we go do this, we go do that.

That was hard at certain points in my life to try to keep up with the Joneses. Because most of them had money, or more money than I did. Playing football, I never had my own football shoes. They were secondhand-me-downs from my friends in high school. I never had my own baseball cleats. I had to borrow suits to go to the prom. And it felt, wow, even if it was too large.

[CHUCKLE]

But it was a suit. That kinda thing. But it was no big deal. It really wasn't a big deal. I never thought of it as being—that I was ever in a position of being second or third class. It just was okay.

Secondhand football cleats, a borrowed suit, out of these humble beginnings—how often do we say that about some of Hawaii's most successful people, came a man who not only sings with elegance, he lives his life with grace.

Did you always have, or if not, when did you pick it up, this sense of style and grace that you have?

That's an interesting question. I enjoyed emulating, using that word again, people that I found to be important, I guess, because I wanted to be important. So, if I saw somebody who was a gentleman, but he would take off his clothes, and he'd have a cape underneath, I saw different things with different people. I saw the strength in gentle people. When I saw how people acted in their approach to life, I saw the gentility and the strength. And I would see this kind of thing in different people, whether it was in movies, or people that I saw in life, and that's how I tried to emulate. And I saw that they didn't have to yell and scream, that they could speak properly, and in complete sentences, and that it was much more powerful to be softer than it is to be louder, many times. And I learned this without having it taught to me. It just was like osmosis. Things happened, it just came into me. And that's the kind of person I became. In fact, that was part of my music when I first started singing, and I needed to be a little bit more aggressive, because I sang very gently, and I needed sometimes to attack more. And I had to learn that.

Who told you that, or did you just figure it out, I gotta be stronger on these certain songs?

Well, sometimes some people told me that I needed to pay more attention to the content of the song. I was told that by a bandleader. And when I started watching or paying attention to other singers that I saw, I saw that their use of dynamics. And I use dynamics a lot in my singing. I bring it down to a very soft, gentle spot, or sometimes I just whack 'em over the head. And there are times for both of those. Because I found out that there's power in gentility, in everything in life, not just music.

The truly gifted singers take their audiences on a journey, one that taps deep emotions and connects with each and every listener. For Jimmy Borges, that talent would serve him through generations of fans, and that connection would come back to reward him in the most challenging time of his life. On our next Long Story Short, we'll hear Jimmy talk about his battle with liver cancer, and how fans who were touched by his music came back to support him. For Long Story Short, and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. *A hui hou.*

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit pbshawaii.org.

A sad song can be a happy song, or a happy song can be a sad song.
Example. [SINGS] Happy days are here again, the skies above are blue again.
And then, you put that in a minor, and it becomes [SINGS], Happy days are here again ... the skies above are blue again, da-da-dee-da-da, and cheer again ... happy days ... are here again. Well, that's sad. But that's the same song, same words and all that, but it can be done. That's the power of music.