

GUEST: JAKE SHIMABUKURO

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I guess I've always had this vision from the time I was a kid. I would watch rock bands, people like Van Halen, or guitar players like Yngwie Malmsteen. And you'd see these guys, they're playing their instruments, and they're like running all across the stage, and jumping into the audience, stage-diving, and just yelling and screaming. And I always thought to myself, Why can't an *ukulele* concert be like that?

From a young age, he has pushed the boundaries of this fine, four-stringed instrument. *Ukulele* master, Jake Shimabukuro, 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. In his relatively young career, Jake Shimabukuro has already redefined the *ukulele* as a musical instrument. His unique blend of traditional Hawaiian music, jazz, classical, funk, and rock has captivated audiences worldwide. He's performed on national television programs like Jimmy Kimmel Live, and Late Night with Conan O'Brien, and even for Queen Elizabeth II of England. His star burns brighter than ever with sold out concerts and a number one album. But how did the humble boy from Kaimuki become an international sensation?**

Well, tell me about your family.

Both my parents, they're really great people. I mean, they were excellent role models, I think, for both, my --

You described both of them as easygoing, carefree.

Yeah; very easygoing, very carefree. Especially my mom. My mom is very carefree. My parents, they divorced when I was quite young, so it was just my younger brother and myself.

I usually don't think of single moms with two kids as carefree.

Yeah; no. My mom, she's, I think, a very special person. 'Cause she had a very hard life growing up. She really did whatever she had to do. I mean, made every sacrifice she could, to make sure that my brother and I got the things that we needed or wanted, and ...

Did she work more than one job?

Yeah; she worked several jobs, and a lot of the work that she did was late at night. She'd work in the bars, too, for extra money. And so, sometimes, she wouldn't come home 'til after 2:00 a.m.

So, you'd come home from school, nobody would be home, and then she wouldn't be home until your were sleeping.

Yeah. So, it was just me and my brother. But she'd always have food for us waiting for us in the icebox. Whenever we would come home, we'd open up the fridge and we'd see like, *shoyu* chicken, or she'd make her curry or something.

And your brother, how much younger is he?

He's five years, five years younger.

Bruce is five years younger?

Yeah.

And I take it you were close. You had each other for company in the afternoons and evenings.

Yeah; we were best friends. But of course, growing up because I was the older brother, I always made sure that he ate, and would do his homework and go to sleep.

And he accepted that?

Yeah, we just did whatever we had to do to help each other out, because I think that's how our family always operated. It was like, we always just understood that we were a team and we all had to do our part.

Even when you're away, you're still a team.

Yeah; no, exactly.

What about your dad? How did the dynamic work when your parents split up, and you lived with your mom? How did that work out with your dad?

I think both my parents had a difficult time with it. But I think they both knew that it was for the best. And there were times when we'd stay with our mom, and then there were times when we'd stay with our dad, and it was always pleasant. It didn't matter who we were with. And the thing that I always respected about both of my parents is that, now looking back, is that they never, ever, even after the divorce, even when they were separated, they never said anything bad about the other person.

Jake Shimabukuro studied under several *ukulele* instructors over the years, but his very first teacher was his mom, Carol. At the age of four, he started playing traditional Hawaiian music with his mother's Kamaka *ukulele*, and later began lessons at Roy Sakuma *Ukulele* Studios. Jake says that playing the *ukulele* also helped him cope with his parents' divorce.

My first *ukulele* teacher after my mom was a girl named Tami Akiyama. She's now Tami Omuro. But she was an instructor for Roy Sakuma's *ukulele* school, and I think I studied with her for about five or six years. And she always made

music fun for me, and she made me want to go home and play, and practice. Not necessarily try to ... she wouldn't put any pressure on me, to learn something. But she always inspired me and encouraged me to just play all the time.

And you played for hours sometimes, right?

Yeah.

Just hours, and hours.

I loved it. I remember just coming home from school, I would rush home from school just so I could play my *ukulele*. My mom wouldn't let me take my *ukulele* to school, because she had a Kamaka, and back then, Kamakas were -- I mean, 'til this day, they're still -- I mean, it's ...

They're heirlooms.

Yeah; exactly. Right. I still have the one that my mom taught me on, the *ukulele* that she had when she was a teenager.

So, you were conscious you were parted from your *ukulele*, and you'd rush home.

Yeah, I'd rush home, and take it out, and I'd strum the three chords that I knew. The D7, G7, C chord.

During his high school years, Jake Shimabukuro described himself as a shy person, and not the outgoing performer that he is today. Instead of performing as a solo act, he would often seek out musical groups to perform with in the Annual Brown Bags to Stardom talent competition.

I didn't think that I'd have a future, playing the *ukulele*. So, early on, when I would perform and play with people, I would always accompany singers. I would find people who could sing, and I would play with them. So, even throughout my high school years, I always found other musicians and I would gravitate toward musicians that were amazing singers, or were songwriters, and I would learn from them. I would try to figure out how I can accompany them, or what I can do to contribute to the song.

And you liked the idea of ensemble and team. You didn't see yourself as a solo act.

Oh, yeah. I was deathly afraid to go up on stage by myself and just perform. Probably, it wasn't until maybe ... was it my junior? Wait. Sophomore. Okay; anyway, my junior year, I entered. And what I did was, I was gonna play a song, and I got so flustered, 'cause I was so nervous, and I just completely blanked out. And there I was, standing on stage, and everyone's just quiet and watching. And I'm like, Oh, what am I gonna do? So without thinking, I started just strumming, and I started singing *La Bamba*.

[CHUCKLE]

And everyone just started yelling and screaming, and laughing. Whatever, right? And I just started having fun with it.

And it was the idea of *La Bamba* being such an odd thing to play on an *ukulele*.

Yeah; exactly. Right? And they were like, What is he doing?

[CHUCKLE]

And all my friends were just like, What is he doing?

[CHUCKLE]

'Cause I'm a horrible singer. And I just started playing and singing. And then, Lanai Boy, 194 was sponsoring the Brown Bags to Stardom.

Okay; so he was the host radio guy.

So, Lanai Boy was hosting. And I remember, he was looking at me from the side, 'cause you only have three minutes to perform. And he was kinda looking at me and trying to give me the cue; Hey, you gotta cut. And I looked at him, and I was like, No, I'm just gonna keep playing.

[CHUCKLE]

And I kept playing. And then, he came up on stage with his microphone, and I'm still playing. 'Cause I think it was after minutes already, and he was just like, Okay, that's great, you know, give it up.

But the crowd was loving it.

And everyone was just laughing, dying laughing, because I didn't want to get off the stage. And I started playing, and I kept going, and kept going. And then, he started walking toward me, right? And then, I started kinda moving away from him. **[CHUCKLE]** And everyone was just dying. But he still remembers that, you know. Lanai Boy still remembers that, and that's probably the day I realized that I enjoy performing on stage for people.

There was that chemistry with the audience.

Yeah. **[CHUCKLE]**

And you just went with it.

I just went with it.

Jake Shimabukuro first gained popularity in 1998 as a member of the local band, Pure Heart. The trio was made up of Lopaka Colon on percussion, and Jon Yamasato on vocals and guitar. Their first of two albums won four Na Hoku Hanohano Awards and was named one of the top fifty Hawaiian albums of all time by Honolulu Magazine.

And we were just out of high school, so we were having a great time. I mean, we started out playing at coffee shops, and we would do birthday parties, graduation parties. We did a lot of graduation parties.

And why the name Pure Heart?

It was a name that Jon dad ... we were driving in the car one day, and we were just thinking of names, and I think we were throwing words around, and we thought, Oh, yeah, like, 'cause the music's from the heart. But we're so young and innocent, so we're pure. And then we thought, Oh, Pure Heart. And it just stuck.

And it was a different sound, wasn't it? Did you try for a different sound, or was that just reflecting who you all were?

No; well, I think we all had different influences. For me, and I think for Jon too, we were really into bands like Kapena and Peter Moon, and Kaaui Krater Boys, and guys like the Sons of Hawaii, going back, and Hui Ohana. Those were the people that we listened to a lot.

As a member of Pure Heart, Jake Shimabukuro's early recordings were mainly covers of previously recorded songs. After the breakup of Pure Heart and Jake's second band Colon, he branched out into a solo career and began to develop his identity.

A dear friend of mine, Tracey Terada, who later became my producer for a lot of my early recordings with a band called Pure Heart, and a band called Colon, and then my first three solo records, he is an amazing *ukulele* player, and he was my teacher for many years. I guess he was kind of the last formal instructor that I had. But I learned so much from him, just about the instrument, how to develop style in your playing. Not just about how to play, but how to develop your own voice, your own signature, your own method, and how to cultivate that and really build.

That's when you're also developing as a person, too. So, that must have been an interesting subject, developing your own identity.

You know the expression, music is the universal language. And I remember thinking to myself, I think that statement falls a little short. I mean, I used to tell people that I think that music is the language of the universe, and I think everyone is born with the ability to speak that language. Because music is really just the language of human emotion.

Outside of Hawaii, the *ukulele* is often regarded as a toy or a diminutive instrument. Many perceive the *ukulele* to be capable of playing only traditional Hawaiian music. When Jake Shimabukuro performs, he pushes the limits of what defines the *ukulele* by showing off a wide range of musical forms from jazz to funk, to classical music, folk, and rock. Jake receives standing ovations from audiences who are thrilled to hear his dynamic and unique style of music.

I saw you performing in Washington, DC to kind of a jaded group of entertainment executives, and they were told that this *ukulele* master from Hawaii was coming out. And I saw them kinda look at their watches like, Okay, and after that, we have lunch. And then, you came out, and you just killed, you killed them. And I think they were on their feet, clapping well before you were ready to finish. I mean, you just blew them away.

Oh, wow.

Do you like doing that? I mean, there was not a big buildup before you came on, and an *ukulele* is an unprepossessing looking instrument. Right? You must see that a lot.

Yeah; I always joke with people and I tell them, One of the best things about being a touring *ukulele* player is that audiences all over the world have such low expectations. And I think that I jokingly say that, but it is true. It's so true. When you see someone come out with an *ukulele*, you don't expect a lot of music to come out of that instrument. Especially when, there's no singing involved, there's no other backing instruments, it's just four strings and two octaves. And I think people's expectations of the kinda music that comes out of the *ukulele*, most people, especially outside of Hawaii, will think of Tiny Tim's Tiptoe Through the Tulips. But you don't expect to hear a lot of melody or pop tunes, or rock tunes.

You think you know what you're gonna hear.

Yeah.

But then, when you play, we don't know what we're gonna hear.

Which is kinda nice, because it has the same effect as going to a magic show, in a lot of ways. Right? You're there, and he comes out, and like, What's he gonna do? What? What's he doing? And then all of a sudden, all these birds come flying out of his jacket or something, right? [CHUCKLE] But I think that element of surprise is so powerful in any art form.

What are some of the ways you bring complexity and range to music using an *ukulele*?

The one thing that I think I do different from other *ukulele* players is, the energy that I like to play with. I guess I've always had this vision from the time I was a kid. I would watch rock bands, people like Van Halen, or guitar players like Yngwie Malmsteen. And you'd see these guys, they're playing their instruments, and they're like running all across the stage, and jumping into the audience, stage-diving, and just yelling and screaming. And I always thought to myself, Why can't an *ukulele* concert be like that? I mean, after an *ukulele* performance, I just want to be drenched, like I just wrestled a bear. So I try to incorporate -- it's basically like all these little things. You want to take a little bit of everything and really showcase it on the instrument. Dynamics, I think, is probably one of the most powerful aspects of music. And the *ukulele* has an extremely wide dynamic range.

For example?

Like for example, if you think of the trumpet. A trumpet is a pretty loud instrument, right, and people think, Oh, yeah, you know, you can play really, really loud. But if you think about it, on the trumpet, you can't play really soft. Before you can even get a tone, you need to play at a certain volume, right? So, if this is zero and this is ten, the trumpet's dynamic range may be from here to here. Right? But the *ukulele* can't play nearly as loud as a trumpet. But, you can play so much softer than a trumpet. I mean, like most string instruments, even a guitar, you can bring it down to nothing.

Jake Shimabukuro's blossoming solo career took him to Japan and across the U.S. mainland. A chance appearance on a small New York television show and

the rise of the Internet video service You Tube helped launch Jake's career to new heights.

There's a local television show in New York called Ukulele Disco, and they feature all these different *ukulele* players. So, since I was in town, I guess somehow, they knew of me, so they contacted me and they said, Hey, you want to be on our show? I said, Yeah, sure, right. So, he took me to Central Park, and I sat on this rock, and he just had a little handheld video camera. And he asked me a few questions, and I played a song. And it just so happened I was working on an arrangement of *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*, so I played that, and it aired on TV. And it's just a small local station in New York. And then, I came back home to Hawaii. So, this was about seven years ago. And about six or seven years ago, You Tube had just started out. So, I was back home in Hawaii and just minding my own business. A few months later, I get some emails and calls from friends, 'cause lot of my friends were on the mainland and they were going to school, and all that. So they called me up and they said, Hey, people have been sending me this video of you performing, you know, playing in Central Park. So I was like, What are you talking about? So they forwarded the email to me, and there was this link, and I clicked on, and there I was. I thought, Hey, that's the thing I did for that Ukulele Disco show. I was like, How did it get on this site? In a matter of weeks, millions, and millions, and millions of views. Millions, and millions, and millions of downloads, and I couldn't believe it. I started getting calls from other bands and artists, and venues, people saying like, Hey, we want you to come play at our venue, or we want you to come open for our band, or record with us on our next record. And it was just incredible. I mean, since that video hit, I've been able to collaborate with people like Yo-Yo Ma, Jimmy Buffett, Bela Fleck and the Flecktones, John Hiatt, Cyndi Lauper, Bette Midler. In fact, couple years ago, I went with Bette Midler to England, and we performed for Queen Elizabeth. I mean, it all just stemmed from this You Tube.

Even with all of his success and international popularity, Jake Shimabukuro remains humble and grounded. To Jake, his family is the most important part of his life. He remains close with both of his parents and his younger brother Bruce, who is also an accomplished *ukulele* performer and instructor. A few months before this conversation took place in 2013, Jake and his wife Kelly had their first child.

You got married and had a baby, but how did your relationship with your now wife start?

Oh, gosh. Yeah. I know; I can't believe I'm married, have a baby. It's awesome.

And a great career.

It's really incredible. I met my wife ... it was actually my stepsister Lisa who set me up on a blind date with her. We scheduled a ... I don't know if it was a lunch or a dinner. But right around that time she was in a residency program, 'cause she's an OBGYN. And the day that we were supposed to go out, I got sick. So, I called her and I had to cancel our plans. I said, Oh, yeah, you mind if we do this another time? So she said, Oh, yeah, sure, just call.

Did you reschedule on the spot?

Well we didn't set any date, but I basically just said that, Oh, yeah, maybe when I'm feeling better we can try to schedule something again. So she said, Okay. So [CHUCKLE] right around that time, I started touring, and I got really busy, and she was in the residency program. So, three years later --

Three years later.

I called her up out of the blue and I said, Oh, hey, it's Jake.

[CHUCKLE] I'm feeling better now.

Yeah. [CHUCKLE] I was wondering if you wanted to go out again. She was very sweet, and I think she kinda laughed about it. But she was like, Yeah, sure, sure, we can get together and you know, go out. And so, I took her out for Thai food, and we went a little place called Chiang Mai on King Street.

Kinda near where you grew up, right?

Yeah. And we had a three-hour dinner that night.

First sight attraction, or ...

Oh, yeah.

Or did it grow?

I mean, as soon as she walked through the door, I ... I mean, I don't know if she believes it or not, but I knew that this was the girl I want to marry.

Really?

Yeah. I knew from that first date. And now, we have healthy baby boy. He's about five months.

What's his name?

Chase. And he's just the greatest joy of our lives. I mean, he's just amazing, the cutest thing. But of course, every parent thinks that of their child, I'm sure.

What are you most grateful for in your life?

Oh ... the thing I'm most grateful for is just my family. And that extends to, of course, my parents, grandparents, and just my uncles and aunties. I've been very, very fortunate. I mean, every stage in my life, and even in my career, I've always, always had just good, solid people to guide me, and to help me and support me. And so, I'm most grateful for that.

***Ukulele* master Jake Shimabukuro continues to push the boundaries of music with his dexterous and dynamic performances. His unique talent has taken the four-stringed, two-octave instrument far beyond Hawaii's shores. When we spoke in 2013, Jake was on a break from a thirty-plus-city tour across Japan and the U.S. mainland. In 2012, he released a new album, Grand Ukulele, in which he teamed up with legendary producer Alan Parsons, best known for Pink**

Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon and the Beatles' Abbey Road. Jake says that teaming up with The Alan Parsons was an opportunity he just couldn't pass up. Mahalo to Jake Shimabukuro for sharing his story with us, and mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawaii and Long Story Short, 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.

It has the same effect as going to a magic show, in a lot of ways. Right? You're there, and he comes out, and like, What's he gonna do? What? What's he doing? And then all of a sudden, all these birds come flying out of his jacket or something, right? [CHUCKLE] But I think that element of surprise is so powerful in any art form.