

LONGSTORYSHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Melveen Leed

LSS 1119 (27:16)

FIRST AIR DATE: 5/29/2018

We know what your nickname is.

The Tita?

Yeah; The Tita. Now, tita means ...

Sister.

Sister.

Yes.

Does it mean that, or fighter?

Both.

And both are true.

Yeah; both are true. Yeah. But you know what? In those days, you know, we didn't get—I know, I didn't, I never got into real big trouble. Yeah. And I fought for my rights. Yeah; we all did, yeah? But it made me more confident. You know what I mean? Because there were a lot of bullies in those days.

Melveen Leed has made good use of that confidence, entertaining audiences for over fifty-five years, from Waikīkī to Carnegie Hall, and around the world. Melveen Leed, next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Melveena Ku'uleipuanani Leed, better known as Melveen, is an icon in the local entertainment industry. As a young girl, her first performance venue was kanikapila night at her grandparents' home on Moloka'i. Since those childhood days, life has dealt Melveen Leed her share of highs and lows, but the one constant, the unwavering achievement, is a talent that moves easily across

musical genres, from Hawaiian to Jazz, to Gospel, to Country. She can sing and perform all of them, and at high level. Melveen Leed, the vocalist, musician, and composer, grew up in the 1940s and 50s, having the best of both worlds with her family on O'ahu, as well as with her grandparents on Moloka'i.

I was born here. My mom was very young; she was only seventeen years old, and she was a child herself, you know. And so, she couldn't really, you know, mother me as much as she should have, you know, because she had her career and her life to think about. And I don't blame her. So, my grandparents came and took me away, and raised me on Moloka'i.

What part of Moloka'i?

'Ualapu'e; it's the eastern part of Moloka'i, God's country. And so, every vacation or anything, my grandparents would put me on the plane. It was Cockett Airlines at that time, small little airline, rubber band airline, we call it. And they'd send me to my mom, to spend vacations with my siblings. I have my sisters and my brother who was children of my stepfather; yeah? And so, we spent time like that together on Easter and Christmas, and summer vacation, and all that. And then, she'd send me back to go to school on Moloka'i, at Kilohana School on the eastern part of Moloka'i. And I was brought up a real, real old-fashioned way, and I'm so glad I was. Washing our clothes in the streams, you know, growing up like that, growing our own vegetables and fishing, hunting, you know. And we knew how to work hard.

What did the family hunt for?

Well, my uncles and them, especially. I went on just a few, but I would never do that again. As I said, my grandfather used to say: You carry down what you shoot. Oh, shucks. You know, no, I'm not going carry the deer down by myself. Uh-uh. So, I wasn't interested in that. I was more interested in fishing. And my grandfather taught me how to make fishnets, from scratch. Yeah.

Did you try to throw them, too?

Oh, he taught me how to throw. And so, we had a needle to make the nets; that's called a hia. Okay? And then, we had the rectangular wood, and that was the size of the eye of the fishnet. And that was called the ha ha. See? So, my grandfather would teach us how to patch the nets, and he had a pocketknife that he used and we made the hole, and we patched the nets, you know. And so, things like that. My grandfather was a remarkable man, and he was the one that actually made an ukulele for me when I was only about three years old. And so, I played the ukulele and sang for all my grandparents' guests.

How did you learn; did you watch somebody else?

My grandfather; yeah, I just watched him. For some reason, I'd watch someone play an instrument, and I'd grab the instrument and I'll play it. You know?

From the beginning?

Yeah; by ear.

From an early age?

Yeah; early age.

Did your family teach you all kinds of songs? 'Cause you're good at all kinds of genres.

Well, my grandparents, you know, they had kanikapila nights, you know, and so, they'd have people come over, and they all played music, and I would watch and I'd grab the ukulele, and I'd play with them, you know, and everything, and learn all these beautiful songs. And Lena Machado used to come over to the house, and of course, you know, we had musicians friends that came over, and our family. You know, everybody knew how to play the ukulele and guitar. You know, my auntie could play slack key, and it was really nice. And so, I learned all this. And plus, my mom now, in Honolulu, she had those 78s. And so, I'd listen to all of the jazz music, so I was raised with jazz music; yeah? That old music, and I love it. And so, I'm so glad that I learned how to sing jazz; I learned by myself. And then, I was very fortunate, years later, to hang out with Sarah Vaughan and Carmen McRae. You know.

How did that happen?

Because I was working the SS Lurline. You know, the ship.

Yeah.

And they were the main stars in on there.

And what were you doing; you were singing too?

Downstairs; yes.

Oh, different—

Yeah.

Different floors.

Yeah. So, we hung out together. So, we went off the boat, and I took her all over, and you know, we hung out and I'd sit and watch her, and I learned a lot just by watching them.

That's a great opportunity.

They were so professional. Yeah.

You were in two households. You were in your grandparents'.

Yeah. And my mom.

Oh; and so, you'd go on the rubber band airline.

Yes; the rubber band airline to Honolulu.

Okay; now, where did your mom live?

Halawa Housing; you know, where the Aloha Stadium is?

Yes.

That's where we stayed.

Halawa Housing; bit of an urban tone there.

It was a very rugged district. It was; yeah. But we all took care of each other; we watched each other's backs, you know, all the children. You know, so they all knew me, 'cause I went on vacations, yeah, and stayed there. And then, I went to fourth grade. My mom decided she wants me to go to fourth grade to Halawa Intermediate, or whatever. And I got kicked out of the school because I got into a fight.

With whom?

With a girl. I went on detention. I'll never forget that big Peterson Field. We had to crush all the white chalk, and then we had to pour the chalk, 'cause it was a baseball field; yeah? So, we had to put the chalk in.

Now, what was the fight about?

I'm so embarrassed to say that. But yes, I was a naughty girl.

What was it about?

Oh, well, this girl was rocking her chair, and she kept bumping to me, and I was sitting in back of her. And she had long braids.

Uh-oh.

And she kept telling me to shut up. You know, kept telling me to shut up, and she kept banging me. So, I grabbed her hair, and went boom, right down, and I finished her off. And then, I got into big trouble. Oh, my god, I got called in. And then, a note was sent home to my mom, so my mom sent me right back to Molokai, which is what I wanted anyway. I wanted to be with my grandparents.

And you didn't really mind the disruption?

No.

When you went back to the school, did you worry about another run-in with her?

Oh, no; it didn't bother me. She was scared of me already. I don't even remember her name.

Well, what about a bigger bully; did you ever have to deal with that?

Yes, I have. Yeah, I have. But the problem is, I'm not afraid of anybody. You know what I mean? So, I got into trouble, yeah. But it's okay. You know, it's cool. Yeah.

I remember one story, when I was going to Radford. And this one girl got into a phone conversation with me, and she was from a bad district. I won't even say where. And so, she wanted to meet me in Foster Village, 'cause I went to Radford; yeah? So, I told my friends, I said: Hey, you folks coming with me, there's gonna be a big fight. And they said: Yeah, okay, okay, we'll come. Nobody showed up; only me. So, was waiting on the corner. I wore my sweater and, you know, put my hair in a ponytail, I made sure I was—

You were ready.

--all ready; oh, yeah.

Can't pull it; right?

So, I thought to myself: Yeah, okay. So, I waited and waited, and nobody showed up. Years later, I was performing at the Garden Bar, Hilton Hawaiian Village, and the waitress comes to me: Oh, Melveen. I was really skinny at that time, but before, I used to be hefty; yeah? And I used to lift weights and I took, you know, martial arts and stuff. But anyway. And so, she said: Oh, Melveen, there's a couple over there that wants to see you, and they want to say hello. And I said: Oh, okay. Was dark; yeah? So, I went up and I saw this massive woman in the dark, and her skinny little husband next to her. And I said: Yes? And she said: Eh, you remember me; my name is so-and-so.

I said: Let me see, the only name I know, I said, was long time ago. She said: Yeah, that was me. And she had tattoos on her arms. And I went: You? And I said: You know, I showed up that day. She said: Yeah, I know; we saw you. And she said: I told my friends, Anybody can show up by themselves, they must be good, they must be, so we took off. She said: We just left, we left you alone.

That's right; you kept the date and stayed there, even though you didn't—

Oh, yeah.

--have any backup.

Yeah; knowing I was gonna get beat up anyway. You know what I mean? But oh, that was something I never forgot. And we became good friends. You know, it was really nice. Like, whew. Oh, god.

You've had a chance to meet a lot of people again; right? You've met them at different stages of your life.

Oh, yeah.

You must have had some surprises about how people turned out.

Oh, yes; of course. And you know, especially because I've been singing all over, and for everything, and doing a lot of charities, you know, and people that I haven't seen. But I remember ... my classmates, I remember their names, and I remember their faces. Yeah. And the kids that I grew up with, you know, I remember them. And they're amazed that I do, you know.

Some of them have changed a lot, so that is really surprising.

Oh, yeah. Oh, listen; there was one—I must tell you about this one. Okay; I was at a class reunion. Now, in high school, I wasn't that popular; yeah? I mean, I sang and everything, you know, but because my stepfather, he was quite strict with me; yeah? And it's understandably so, because they don't want me to get into trouble, you know. So, my mom and her husband, they were really strict. When I had to go and perform, you know, it didn't bother me to sing in school. And we used to go to different schools and perform. But the thing was, this one guy I had a crush on in high school, but he never knew I was alive. And we used to walk down the hallway, and the guys used to stand on each side of the hallway and look, and hey, and whistle at us, and we don't pay attention. We wanted them to pay attention, but we just walked. And then so, years later at the class reunion, I was standing with my friends and they said: Eh, there's so-and-so over there. And I said: Where? I looked, and I went: What? He was kinda bald, and he was big, he had a big belly. And I went: No; really? And they said: Yeah. I said: Follow me. We went there, and I knew that uh, he would call me; yeah? So he says: Eh, Melveen. And I said: Yes? And he says: You remember me? And we all had our little patches on with our high school picture on; yeah? And our little buttons, yeah, big buttons, you know. And I said: Um ... I already knew who he was. I said: No. I said: I'm sorry. And I looked at his. He said: Yes, you remember me, I was, I played football. And I looked at his picture, I went to his face, I went to look at his picture again, I looked at his face. I said: Oh, yes; what happened?

Oops. That's the last reunion he went to.

I said, that's the ultimate revenge, you know. I was terrible but, oh, we laughed, we all laughed and it was so funny.

So, your mom was seventeen, but along the way, she—

Yeah. My mom had a career. Because she was working. Oh, she had to work; she worked two jobs, you know.

Did she finish high school after having you?

No. But she went to Farrington for a while, and then they finally gave her, her diploma. Yeah; years later, yeah. So, it was nice. But anyway, so she had to work. She moved to Honolulu from Molokai. Because in those days, it was a disgrace to have a child when you're young. You know what I mean? And all your family's out there; you know that, yeah? But my mom held her head up high, and she went to work. I give her credit; she worked hard. Yeah. And then, she had all these children; yeah? And she still worked. Yeah; she worked until she retired. And even when she retired, she went back to work again, you know.

What did she do?

Well, she was a cashier hostess at the Hilton Hawaiian—well, it was the Hawaiian Village, Kaiser Hawaiian Village before. And so, she was a cashier hostess, and then she went to the front office cashier. And then, she went to the main office, accounting. And so, she was always working with figures; yeah? And she was good at that. And then, she finally retired from that. And then, she was working also at Leed's Shoe Store. Yeah.

She was very—

Yeah.

And to have a lot of children.

Yeah.

How many children?

She had five; yeah, with me, five. Yeah. But she had four from this man; yeah. And then with me, five; yeah. But she was a great dresser. I think that's why I like to dress up, you know, because my mom was like that. She never left the house not looking nice. She was a beautiful woman; very gorgeous.

Tell me, did you know your biological dad? Was he in your life?

I learned about him only when I was about fifteen years old. That's when I knew who my real father was. 'Cause it was kept a secret from me. Walter Chun Kee; that was my dad. He was from Maui. And then I found out I had siblings on Maui. So, I have one sister and three brothers. And so, one brother, we lost; that's Jimmy. So, I found that we have siblings, siblings there. And then, we found one more sister in Puerto Rico. My dad was busy. My mom never married my real father.

I see.

So, she married Palmer Leed. He was from Tacoma, Washington, and he was in the Navy. So, my mom married him. And I was named after his brother, and he had a high official position in the Navy, and they named me after him. His name was Melvin. So, my real name is Melvina. And my grandmother gave me my Hawaiian name of Ku'uleipuanani, and then they took the name Leed. So, that's how I got that name.

Did you find it confusing to have two different families, two different islands, or did it all seem normal?

It was normal to me. Yeah. I was looking forward to seeing my mom, and my sisters and my brother, yeah, every trip that I took, yeah? And I was lonesome for my grandparents and my uncles and aunties, you know. And so, I'd go back home, you know. It was like that, so I had the best of both worlds. Let's put it that way.

Melveen Leed started her professional singing career when she was invited to the stage to sing with the band at the Garden Bar of the old Hawaiian Village Hotel. She soon left her secretarial job and became a fulltime entertainer, singing, recording albums, producing music shows, and traveling the world. Yet, while Melveen's career was hitting high notes, her personal life often took a different direction.

You've been married several times.

Yes.

Do you have stepchildren and ...

Oh, yes. They're all like my children, still, you know. Yes.

Lots of family, all along the way.

Yes. And you know, it was a learning time for me, too. Because I had gone down to the bottom. I picked myself up, you know, every time and I said: I can do this. Yeah? And I'd start from scratch. I'd leave everything behind, and I'd start from scratch. I mean, everything; my clothes, everything behind. I just walked out and started from scratch.

Wow.

Yeah. It's not easy to do, but you gotta have that willpower. All you women out there, you can do it. You know, you have one life to live; you push your own buttons. That's what I say.

So, each time, you could have packed, you could have taken some things.

Yeah. But I'm not like that. Because they had children, so I didn't want to take anything away from them. And they could have my stuff. It doesn't matter; it didn't matter.

So then, what did you do when you walked away?

I just started from scratch again. I was still singing, working, making good money, you know, and I had to go on my own and find my own jobs; yeah?

What's the hardest thing you've been through up 'til now? And we're talking in March of 2018.

When I had to leave my daughter, and I had to move to Tahiti. That was the hardest thing I had to do in my whole life.

How old was she then?

She was just ... senior, high school. Junior or senior. And I had gone away to start a new life. And it was a big mistake in my life, of course. I realized that after, yeah, I'd gone there.

You were getting married.

Yeah; I was getting married, yeah, there. And she came for the wedding, and I could see her face; she was so sad through the whole time, you know. And I thought to myself: Okay, Melveen, you know, you gotta make this work. So, what happened was, when I moved to this island, this desolate island; it was an atoll, it was called Aratika. Because my ex-husband was the luna, the boss of that island. And it's a black pearl farm. He built a house for me on that island, and there was no running water, no electricity. So, I had to leave all my beautiful gowns and nice clothes, everything, my beautiful things back in Hawai'i and move there with only pareaus and shorts and tee-shirt. Which I didn't mind, because I grew up like that on Molokai. You know what I mean?

Yeah; I was thinking before, you were washing your clothes in the stream.

And they were all amazed. The Paumotu people there; they were amazed, even my ex-husband, that I could just adjust immediately. Then, when I started patching their nets and throwing my net and catching my fish, they were like: Where'd this woman come from; yeah? So, the Paumotu women would come up to me and say: How come you're doing this; us women never do that. And I said: Well, us Hawaiian women do back home.

I said: You do what you do, and if you don't want to watch, you just go away. So, I'm busy working.

Did you pull her braid?

No, no, no. No. And I caught my own fish. And then, I realized that I couldn't stay on the island with all these twenty-seven men, alone. It's dangerous, you know. So, he said: I'm gonna teach you how to free-dive, 'cause we gotta go out fishing. So, he had

a floater on the top, and a rope with knots every so many meters, and down to fifty feet where the big block of cement was on the bottom, sat on the bottom. And my graduation was to go down fifty feet and grab that sand, and bring it up to him, before I could go and fish. 'Cause I wanted to spearfish so badly. So, I went, and my last day he said: I'm gonna pull that up, and you can't go out fishing with us. I was determined. I went down; I didn't come back. And he says: Okay, pull it up. I said: No, wait; give me one more chance. He says: You Hawaiian girls can't do it. I said: Oh, yeah? Watch me. I went down, got the sand, came up, and I threw it in his face. And then, he had a special spear made for me, and he taught me how to spear fish. And we only caught what we ate. And so, it was really a wonderful whole year, though, that I learned and I lived there, because I loved the cleanliness. The water was so pristine, you know, and oh, the air was fresh, and it was wonderful. It brought back memories of Molokai.

You seem like a very hopeful and optimistic person, because you got married again.

Yeah.

And then, again.

Yes. I probably was looking for like, my grandfather's image. You know, 'cause he was a perfect father, grandfather, husband to my grandmother. You know, he was a great caretaker, and he was an inspiration. And I could sit and talk to him. He was a man of few words, but when he spoke, they were words of wisdom. You know, I look up to him. And I finally found that man, and that I'm married to now. Yeah. And he reminds me so much of my grandfather; very dignified, you know, and very caring, and puts me on a pedestal, puts me first like how my grandfather put my grandmother on a pedestal first. She always came first.

Okay; you have to tell us how you met him, then.

My husband?

Yes.

Mike?

Mike.

We knew each other when I was fifteen years old. When we lived in Halawa Housing, when I was on my vacation, I was only fifteen, and his sister lived right next door to us. So, that's how we met. And then, we didn't see each other until years later. I was singing at Chai's, and he walked in with all of his siblings; yeah? And his family, and

they sat there. And he was well-dressed. He's always well-dressed. And so, we said hello, but nothing, you know. I said: Oh, hi. You know, he came, and I was setting everything up. He comes on stage, and he says hello to me, you know, and hugs me, and I said, oh, okay. So, after the show, I usually go and eat at a place; this cook always cooks for me in this small little bar. And so, I said: Oh; what are you gonna do? You know. No; I think he asked me what I was gonna do after the show. And I said: Hang out with you. I think that's what I said. Yeah?

So, that means you made the first move?

I think so. So, I said: Well, I'm gonna go eat; you know, you folks can come out, you know. So, I jumped in his car, and so we went to that place, and we sat together, and we laughed and everything. And then, we started emailing each other. We exchanged emails, and stuff. So, that's how it started. Yeah. Was really nice. And after a year, then he proposed to me on one knee.

Tell me; was Michael wary of you because there had been several husbands. Three others.

You know, I think because he's so mature, and he's a smart, very intelligent man, and he had a very good position—he's a retired quality assurance director for the nuclear subs for the Navy and federal government, and he had a very high, important position. So, he had a thousand people working under him. You know, he knows exactly what he wants, and he's very consistent. And not only that, he's very clean and he doesn't leave a stone unturned.

Even if your career had ended twenty-five years ago, you would have had an illustrious career.

Yeah; I did. Yeah. But you know what? Getting to where I am now, yeah, if it weren't for all those curves that I've had in my life, I would not be the person that I am today. Yeah. And what I love about now is that I have the love that I've always wanted, from my husband. You know? He truly deeply loves me, for me. And I love that. You know.

You feel like you didn't really have that before?

Not fully. Something was missing. But now, it's just all there. Everything in the puzzle is there; that last piece is there.

In her mid-70s, Melveen Leed confides she worries about losing her voice someday. Yet, at the time of our conversation in the Spring of 2018, the former Miss Molokai says as she's gotten older, her voice has actually become stronger. She says she's able to hit high and low notes that were never part of her register before. Mahalo to Melveen

Leed of Mililani, Central Oah'u for sharing part of your life story with us. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

For audio and written transcripts of all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit PBSHawaii.org. To download free podcasts of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, go to the Apple iTunes Store or visit PBSHawaii.org.

For all you Molokai people out there, this is for you. Yee-ha!

MOLOKA'I NUI A HINA

Ua like no a like
Me ku'u one hānau
Ke po'okela i ka piko o nā kuahiwi
Me Moloka`i nui a Hina
'Āina i ka wehiwehi
E ho'i no au e pili
E ka makani ē
E pā nei me ke aheahe
'Auhea ku'u pua kalaunu
E ka makani ē
E pā nei me ke aheahe
'Auhea ku'u pua kalaunu
Ua nani nā hono a Pi'ilani
I ke ku kilakila i ka 'ōpua
'O ku'u pua kukui aia i Lanikāula
'O ka hene wai 'olu lana mālie

Ua like no a like
Me ku'u one hānau
Ke po'okela i ka piko o nā kuahiwi
Me Moloka`i nui a Hina
'Āina i ka wehiwehi
E ho'i no au e pili
E ka makani ē
E pā nei me ke aheahe
'Auhea ku'u pua kalaunu
E ka makani ē
E pā nei me ke aheahe
'Auhea ku'u pua kalaunu

Ua nani nā hono a Pi'ilani
I ke ku kilakila i ka 'ōpua
'O ku'u pua kukui aia i Lanikāula

'O ka hene wai 'olu lana mālie

Ua like no a like
Me ku'u one hānau
Ke po'okela i ka piko o nā kuahiwi
Me Moloka`i nui a Hina
'Āina i ka wehiwehi
E ho'i no au e pili
E ho'i no au e pili

Woo-hoo!