

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: Nani Lim Yap

LSS 1209 (27:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 1/22/2019

I can remember when we were trying to do chants and mele. We would choose other places, and something would tell us: Why are you choosing to do an O'ahu mele, when there's so much right here? Not somebody came to us and told us; it was this feeling that you got, like, there's stories here that need to be told, so tell these stories first. And that's how we began going in that direction, telling those Kohala stories, singing those Kohala mele.

Nani Lim Yap, descended from the ali'i of Kohala, keeps the traditions and stories of her ancestors alive through mele, chant, and hula. A member of the remarkable Lim musical family, Nani Lim Yap says she'll always call Kohala home, no matter how far her travels take her. Nani Lim Yap, 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. Nanette Lim Yap, better known as Nani, was one of six children growing up in Pu'u Hue in Kohala, on the Big Island of Hawai'i, where her father was a cowboy at Parker Ranch. In their isolated mountain community, playing Hawaiian music was the family's primary source of entertainment. The musically gifted family was discovered by the rest of the world when Nani's mother, the late Maryann Lim, was asked to play at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel when it opened in 1965. Performances soon became a family affair, and the music group known as The Lim Family became a well-known, much-respected, and popular Hawaiian music group. Learning the songs at a young age came easily to Nani, she says, because it was not only through her parents that she learned Hawaiian language.

My father worked for the Parker Ranch. And they had these little stations, and little housing for the workers. And some workers would have their families, whole families. So, we were one of them, another family. Just two other families, other than us. And so, we were raised out there.

So, very remote.

Very remote. So remote that when we did move into town, streetlights bothered us.

Well, when you say town, do you mean Kohala town?

I mean Kohala town.

Because it was so far.

And the streetlights bothered you?

Yes; all of us. And we'd be up at night, like ...

'Cause starlight was all we knew, you know. But we grew up at Pu'u Hue. And very close; all of us were very close, me and my brothers and sisters.

Your parents would take you on long rides, and you had a Rambler station wagon. They don't even make Ramblers anymore.

No.

Not for many years.

No. So that story is all of us in that car. Like when it was time to go holoholo, oh, my gosh, we're gonna go someplace. And it was my father; he just loved to drive. My father, my mother, one child in the front, and all the rest of us just filling up the back seat. And we would go. We would have one 'ukulele. We fought over the 'ukulele like: Who's going to play the next song? So, if you make a mistake, you gotta pass that 'ukulele on.

This was as you're driving along.

As you're driving; yeah. So, goes like this, goes like this. But if you were the longest, then you were the winner.

So, very competitive kids.

From when we were young. And you know who won the 'ukulele; right?

Who?

Me.

Always?

Yeah. That's why I'm the 'ukulele player.

It's so interesting, 'cause none of you has had formal training in any of this.

Nope. Nope. Not in music.

You picked it up, and figured it out, and listened, and learned.

Yeah; my father taught us how to play all the basic keys. So, if you try to give me a sharp or a what, it's like: show me it.

You show me it, and you tell me it, and I'll get it.

And do you read music?

No; no. Even my brother, when we were growing up, I would take him to his piano lessons. So, he'd be playing along and playing along. And then he'd finish, and she'd say: All right, Elmer, now read the notes. 'Cause he'd be playing by ear, by what he heard.

Really?

Yeah.

And Elmer is Sonny?

Yeah.

Was music always a part of your life?

See, my father and his friends played, and my father and my mother sang to us. That's what they did. Yeah. So, my mom sang, and my father played, and that's how we knew that they had that. And my mom had a hula background, and she was our first teacher.

Were they singing in Hawaiian?

In Hawaiian.

And did you understand Hawaiian?

This is how we understood Hawaiian, is my grandparents. My grandfather and my grandmother spoke fluently. And they were our babysitters. So, when we were little, it was so easy to understand what they were talking to us about.

That's manaleo style, isn't it?

Exactly.

It's the real thing.

So, understanding them, even being around them and hearing them talk, we knew exactly what they were talking, 'cause from babies, we knew that. But however, my parents, my mom them didn't follow through. 'Cause it was at that time when it wasn't good to speak the language.

You were supposed to go Western.

Yeah.

And succeed in that world.

It's so sad. Just one generation away, you know. And we've lost so much. But however, if a song played, you knew exactly what the song was talking about. Because it was just automatic; you just knew Hawaiian already.

So, you didn't just listen to the music; you could know what the songs were about.

Easily; easily. Even my mother was surprised. Like, we had this old radio, just this old radio, and you only could play it at certain times, 'cause you didn't want to break the radio, 'cause that was like your communication to the world. So, it was like, okay. And then, the songs would play, and we'd be like, we know it. And so, I'd tell my mom: I know exactly what this song is saying. She said: You do? I said: Yeah. And I'd tell her what it is. She said: That's amazing that you would know that. I said ...

That's what it says.

Yeah. And then, I'd um, gesture things to her. I said: Because I think this is what they're saying. She said: Oh ... oh, so ... you have that hula sense already. Yeah? So, just by knowing what that was, making interpretive movements, and then her being our first teacher, that gave me the—you know, it's not that gave me the know-how, but it's just automatic that everything came into play.

So, for you, it wasn't choreography and the movements of hula that came first; it was the story behind the music.

Definitely, definitely; story behind the music.

You've had your fascination with non-Hawaiian. You did Beatles, and Elvis, and Supremes; right?

Everything. I love Supremes. I love all that kinda music. I loved it, and I would sing it, too. We'd all sing it. And then, we just realized that Hawaiian was where it's at. Because it was always around us, always around us, Hawaiian music.

But one day, there will be dancers who are saying: I'm from the Nani Lim Yap, that's who gave birth to me. Even though you're saying: I didn't really do anything except pass it through.

I'm hoping. And they know; they know what my intention is for them, is that they continue. Any of the mele that I've taught them in their lifetime that they've been in hālau with me will remain the same.

Nani Lim Yap of Kohala, Hawai'i Island, was twelve years old when she started performing with her family at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel. Dancing hula or singing with her family, whether it was on a formal stage or at a baby luau, became a regular part of her life. Yet, she didn't necessarily see herself growing up and becoming a professional musician, or a kumu hula.

After high school, you moved to O'ahu.

Yeah.

To beauty school.

Yeah; I came to beauty school. That's what I wanted to be; I wanted to be a beautician, they said back then.

So, you didn't see being a musician or performer as a career, then?

No. No.

Even though you'd actually made money for it already in your teens.

Yes. I don't know; I wanted to do hair, I wanted to do hair from when I was younger. If somebody was available during the afternoon on a Saturday or Sunday, they were sitting down in this chair, I was gonna give them some kinda up-do or something. That was what I thought I knew, that's what I wanted to do. But then, when I came home and I had my first job at Mauna Kea, in the evening time my parents would say: Come over here and sing with us. And the first time, my father said: What's wrong with you? I

could not look at the crowd. I would sing backwards like this, or sideways. My father said: Is something wrong with you? I said: I can't look at them. He said: Stop it; stop it, stop it. Like, I would just try not to, I was afraid of the crowd. Isn't that crazy?

But you'd performed before.

No; I performed before as a dancer, but not as a singer.

I see; I see.

So, it's like, okay. Then I had to break that habit, break that habit. And then, the next time, my father would say: You guys gotta smile; you have to smile, you have to smile. And I was like: Okay, smile. This was when I'm singing, and I'm trying to. Because I don't know; I didn't think I was like, that great. So, I'd be like, I don't know if they like it, I'm not sure if they're gonna like it. And then after, you get your confidence up. And then, the more I played, the more money I made standing up and playing than standing up all day to do hair, and my feet would be sore. So, it was like, okay, that's just the easiest route to go, just play music.

I know you were a co-kumu hula with your elder sister Lei for many years. And now, all three of you; Lorna, Leialoha, and you have your own hālau.

Separate; yeah. Which is fine. I think we still all have the same mindset. We were raised in that kind of environment, you know.

Same mindset, but different visions?

Yes. I guess our missions have changed, I think. You know, what is it that you really want to accomplish; yeah? For us, lineage is important; yeah? What are we passing on, what is the style that our kumu from Kohala taught us. 'Cause that's it. Somebody said: Is that your Kohala style? And I would say: I think so.

What is Kohala style?

See? Everybody would ask me that, and I said: I'm not sure. But some others, if you were on the outside looking, they would say that's distinctly different from Ka'ū. And I thought: Really? I never saw dances from Ka'ū.

So, you still can't quantify it, but people from all over see it as being different.

That's different, that's a Kohala style. And I was like, okay.

But you can't point to any one thing about it?

Nope; nope. Because it translates to us as being something that we've always done. And so, if you're wanting to perpetuate, I think future wise now, I think that's where hula is now, at the lineage state, at a place of lineage. Like, what are you passing on; yeah? So, my thought is: Do you mix both styles together, or do you carry this lineage through and make sure that your students now understand that you learned from this? And this would be part of your koi or your—

Are you allowed to combine your own mana with that, with someone else's?

See? I think you have to honor them.

Ah ...

If you took hula from them, I think you have to honor them and keep that as a separate entity that moves forward. When I look at hula, yeah, I look at just being a vessel. That hula moves through me. Yeah. Lineage comes from kūpuna. And then, the lineages that come from Kohala before that; it's all of this that goes through this. Yeah. I cannot claim I own that. I cannot claim that it's actually from me. It comes from a place, and it moves through me. It has to.

And do you change it, by virtue of its having moved through you?

Oh; so a lot of the mele that we've learned from them, those mele still remain. Mele that, like, from research and all those movements, all those things that we've shared with you, and what we've choreographed now; same style. The style remains the same. That's how you continue that.

Nani Lim Yap of Kohala, Hawai'i Island, has made a successful career as a member of The Lim Family, playing Hawaiian music with her brother Sonny and her sister Lorna at the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel and Mauna Lani Bay Hotel. She also has been successful as a kumu hula, entering hālau into the Merrie Monarch Festival that have been perennial winners. But even with all the success, surviving as a musician often means traveling outside the State.

The way to make money and to support your family the best, I take it, is if you fly away.

Yeah. Now; now, yeah. Because they want that music, they want to dance that hula. Yeah.

What does that say that it's not valued that much in Hawai'i, in our commerce centers? Waikiki, which used to adore the entertainment.

Yeah. Gotta bring that back. I'm not sure how.

But Japan and who else? Japan loves hula.

China, now.

China.

Yeah. Sweden, Taiwan.

And you've been to all these places?

I've been to Taiwan to teach, I've been to Japan to teach. People want me to come to China. And I'm like: China? Are you sure they're ready for us? I'd have to start, like, teaching them from the very beginning. No; that's what they want, they want it. And yes, that is the place to make the money.

You know, I'm surprised you don't have a fulltime family travel agent. Because I know we've talked to your husband a lot in arranging appointments with you and your family, and he's always booking flights, isn't he?

He's really good at it, that's why. There was a time when we ... I'm not sure. I think it was earlier in our hālau career, where we were booked by Hayden Holidays to go to the mainland, just like for about six years, we would do it. And he'd be the one; they'd book all the flights and everything for us, but he'd be the one. Like, all right everyone, this is the last day, get everything together. He gets everybody up, he gets everybody on the plane, he makes sure everybody is ... so everybody knows him as Ed, the tour director.

Because he did that so well.

How does it work as a family? I mean, I know there's a family business, but there are several family members involved. And you all play in different combinations, in different cities, at different times. I mean, so hard to keep track of you.

It is.

How does that work as a business?

Well ... there was a time, I think, when we stopped doing the job at Mauna Lani, that we all decided to do other things. So, my brother is a soloist. He's still there as a soloist, which was good for him. Yeah; it's good for him, 'cause then he can be expressive to his own type of thing. And then, we'd have the Atrium job, which would be a

combination of people. So, Lorna would do that, and then my husband Ed would do that, and then my daughter Asia would help them do that. And Asia learned how to play bass from her father, so that's her instrument right now. So, all the different combinations. If she can't go, then I would go down there and sing in that.

So, you can always find a family member who's very versatile to jump in.

Best to do that. Yeah; best to do that, is to keep your family together. Keep your family together. Then of course, my brother had his own Hawaiian group, too, with some of our local friends from Waimea and Kohala. They were so good. They played all the Eddie Kamae songs, 'cause that was what their group loved to do that. Yeah. And then, now he plays with a lot of other people. Which is fine, as long as we're not playing. You know, The Lim Family together.

But it all seems to work out, no matter what. You know, you're hired to do all kinds of gigs, and it seems like you can kind of manage so many things at once, I guess because you have so many people who can jump in last minute.

Yes. For our regular jobs, yes, people could take over for us. Well, well, Mauna Lani just closed, yeah, so that job, we don't have anymore. For me, I'm kinda happy, because it was from the beginning of time, when they first opened.

And they're doing renovations; right?

Yeah, renovations; yeah. It's gonna for a year and a half, I think, or almost two years. Something like that. Yeah; so you know, we just have just the Mauna Kea show, and that's all taken cared of.

Which means you can all travel more.

We can all travel more. So, if Lorna goes away, then we have another emcee that we bring in from O'ahu to do that. And then, yeah. And I've not gone back to that show for a while. Yeah. That is our show, though, but I've not gone there, 'cause they're good.

And what do you do instead?

I just hang out at home until somebody calls me to go to Japan. No.

I just figure out when to go. Like, at least every other month, I'm going to Japan. But if you met my students, they're like Hawaiians. They have so much aloha. You know. And a lot of aloha for the culture. Yeah.

You've been with them a long time?

Long time. Long time, they've been my students.

Why do you think Japan has embraced hula so closely?

Ooh; I think at first, it was, what they saw is what they liked. Yeah? And then ... gosh, I'm not sure. I just think they just love everything about our hula. The costumes, the flowers, the leis, the movements, you know, and some really want to graduate knowing, you know, hula as part of their lineage, you know. So, I think they're just moved by it.

And you know, Japan is very proud of its own lineage. They're very much into the past, as well. So, to be so interested in another culture's past, and to practice it.

Yeah. And then, when we go over there, they want us to go to their temples. Go to our temple, and could you do a blessing? What are you saying? What is a blessing? Maybe oli? I said: Ooh, okay. And then maybe do a dance. Now, when you come to that kind of thought like in their temples, yeah, they're wanting us to do their kind of culture, I had to stop and sit back, and think about. What is my purpose? What am I going to leave or change in that space, that is going to make a difference? Why are you wanting me to do this; yeah? So, everything would have purpose and intention.

Have you ever thought of staying there for an extended period?

I thought about it. I thought about living there. And then, I thought: No, I wouldn't like it. And here's the thing, is that if you live there, people will get your place, they'll rent it, they'll make sure it's there, they'll get you places to go and make a studio. It's amazing how much kōkua you can get from Japanese who want to ...

They'll take care of you because of what you do.

Who want to be able to learn hula. Like, it's almost amazing. Then I said: No, I don't think so.

They have so much hunger for it.

Yeah; it's amazing.

I see in your career, you know, you've done very natural things. I mean, you know, you've learned to research. I mean, everything seems like, okay, that's a good opportunity, I'll take it, I'll move into that. But going to Japan doesn't seem like a natural ... you know. But it is, in terms of how the world has become. Because Hawai'i doesn't put that kind of premium on the hula.

That's true. I was thirty-five years old, I think, was my first time to Japan. And oh, my god, we loved it. My mother went, too. Was the first time in snow; fell on the ground. My mother ran outside and she said: Oh, my god, it's snow. And we were like, so cold. My mother was still out there, taking pictures of her in the snow. Well, we're just not used to, to those kinds of things; yeah? But that was our first time we ever went, was way up in Fukushima. And we went for three weeks, four weeks. That was hard. Was hard, 'cause we wanted to go back home so bad.

And yet you love the place, too.

And—yeah.

Yeah.

But that's how long we've been going. A long time.

That's right. So much travel.

Yeah; a long time. And from that one event, our very first event, we had several people who wanted to be sensei who came to see us. And now, they're great sensei of hula in Japan.

Wow.

Yeah. They have some of the biggest hālau.

What are your predictions for the future for hālau, and for The Lim Family?

Lim Family, we have another generation of musicians and dancers.

Who are they? Who are your dancers and musicians?

Well, of course, Asia.

Your daughter.

Yeah.

Your son.

And Manaola, of course.

Nani Lim Yap's son, Manaola Yap, is a widely known fashion designer. He learned costuming from his mother, researching and designing fabrics to tell the stories of the dances and chants.

You know, he sings as well, he writes as well too. And of course, Asia plays the bass, she can sing as well, she sings with all of us. Anuhea, my brother's daughter, she plays slack key. So, that's another. And then, of course, Lorna's children are the two. This past weekend was Keiki Merrie Monarch, and her youngest daughter won third place, and her hālau won third place. And so, lots of hula. The future is really wide open.

Mahalo to Nani Lim Yap of Hawai'i Island, for sharing her Kohala style. And mahalo to you, for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

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No Kohala Ka Makani 'Āpa'apa'a

by Sarah Pule

No Kohala ka makani 'Āpa'apa'a

Ua kaulana 'oe a ha'aheo

Ka nuku a'o nā kānaka

Ua piha ho'i me ke aloha

No Kohala ka makani 'Āpa'apa'a

Ua kaulana 'oe a ha'aheo

Ka nuku a'o nā kānaka

Ua piha ho'i me ke aloha

Ke aloha 'āina ua 'ike 'ia

Ke aloha pōina 'ole a kākou

Ho'omana'o a'e e lā e nā kūpuna

'O ke aloha 'o ia mau lā

Huli aku nānā i ka ulu hala

E kau mai ana lā i luna

Me Kona nani uluwehiwehi ...