

**GUEST: JON DE MELLO**  
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**No, you're not at a Consolidated Theater! Aloha I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to *Long Story Short*. We've all seen that dramatic trailer at the movies. But what you may not know is that the music was written, produced and performed by none other than our guest, Jon de Mello. He's the creative mastermind behind the phenomenally successful Mountain Apple Company. Jon's non-stop creative energy seems perfectly suited to the high-powered world of entertainment. But as you'll see, he's multi-faceted; and that always makes for an interesting conversation. Mahalo for joining us on *Long Story Short*.**

**So I can't help but notice; you have a still camera that you're wearing. Is this fashion, or is this ...**

This is the real thing. I go along and I just continually take pictures everywhere. I take 100 pictures, 150 pictures a day.

**Of what; anything?**

Anything; anything that catches my eye. It can be people, it can be water, ocean, things like that.

**Do you save the pictures?**

Yes; yes. I think at last count I had 47,000 of 'em. You know.

**Do you use them for any reason?**

Yeah; sometimes backgrounds. Like the tree is like close-ups of textures of woods and stuff like that. And in Photoshop you just throw those in the backgrounds and use those as anything. It's amazing. I love it. It's fun.

**You know, when you were growing up, your dad was well known as this music producer, you know, that nobody could ever get better than. But here you are. You know, I guess so often you don't think the son will follow the father in business, and often, the son is overshadowed by the father. But here you are, and your dad and you still work with your dad, but your business has taken you so far and wide.**

It's amazing, and I've been lucky to work with almost everybody in the islands. I'm fifth generation from the islands, and growing up, my first ten years was in Waikiki when it was a beach town. And we were on Lewers Street on that yellow building, on the top floor.

**Is it still there?**

No; they just tore it down for the whole new promenade they have down there. But we lived next door to James Michener. And he was writing the book *Hawaii*. And I remember we were right next door to him. I remember him waking me up in the middle of the night, because it was ching-ching-ching-ching-ching, crank, ching-ching-ching-ching-ching, crank. You know. And he was writing the book, and my father was orchestrating Hawaiian music. And this is '56, '57—all the way from about '55 up, you know. And it was a beautiful time in Waikiki with Stewart's Pharmacy right there on the edge of Lewers.

**I remember Stewart's Pharmacy.**

And we were on the eighth floor of this building—it was only eight floors—on the corner. And we were looking towards Diamond Head, and nothing blocked Diamond Head; it was complete Diamond Head. And I remember in 1955, when the International Marketplace opened, they had these bell horns in the big banyan tree in the front. And on the 30-minute mark, they would go chiming; and then on the hour, they would play Aloha 'Oe, and then they'd give how many chimes it was for the hour and such. And all the way across Waikiki, you could hear that. It was just amazing. And it had a different aroma; it had just a different feel. It was a beach town; it was a very safe beach town at that point, you know.

**Your parents didn't care where you were during the day, that you'd be okay, you'd be with your uncles at the beach.**

My mother would go to Everybody's Supermarket, where everybody shopped, and she'd take me down to Stewart's Pharmacy where they had this little Japanese lady weaving leis. And she'd sit against the building and then she'd open her muumuu and put the plumeria right in her muumuu and she'd lei. And so my mother would leave me with her, you know, and we'd make leis together until my mother got back from the marketplace. It was amazing. It was a great time.

**Did you get into the surf scene very much?**

Very much; yeah. I loved to surf when I was a kid. I probably gave it up when I was um, just coming out of high school, 'cause of things were getting—speeding up a bit in college and things like that. But yeah; I was a surfer boy, and I learned to—Splash taught me how to steer canoes and stuff, and all sorts of things.

**And you went to Kailua as well; you lived in Kailua later, and then came back to the east side?**

Actually, yes. We lived in Waikiki, and then we moved to Kailua. And then we moved back to the east side for my high school years, which was Kalani High School. And I was in a rock and roll band, and all of my fellow players were Punahou students. And so we were playing all the dances, the cantinas, and all that kinda stuff, and the parties every weekend. With all—Henry

Kapono was lead guitar player, and all the rest of the people I know. In fact, we just had our reunion, and that was that was quite a mind remembering task.

**What was the name of your band?**

New Generation. It was with Henry and Leonard Sakai and Mel Mossman, who was one of the famous Mossmans, and Sterling was his uncle. And Chucky Souza and Henry. Yeah.

**Were you a good student?**

Yes. M-m. And no.

**You didn't color in the lines, did you?**

I didn't color in the lines. I went out of the lines. I was probably stubborn and wanted to do my own thing, versus my father, okay. 'Cause when I went away to college, I went to the Bay Area; I moved away here—from Hawaii for the first time basically, and lived in Oakland and Berkeley. And I went to a very fine school called California College of Arts and Crafts, third in the nation as a private school; terrific. I never missed a class; it was so much fun. I just loved it. So I got my pedigree there. But three miles down the road was UC Berkeley. So I basically went to two colleges at once. It was kind of a juggling act every now and then, but music was UC Berkeley. And so—because this was right in the middle of the 60s, and all the hot groups, all the old-time—you know, Janis Joplin, The Doors, the Jefferson Airplane, all those people; we would see them every weekend in San Francisco. And they would come to UC Berkeley and give us lectures and talks and concerts. They would come to our school, in to the art school and give us lectures and talk and concerts, and things like that.

**'Cause you grew up in a recording studio; your dad was always bringing you in, right?**

Oh, yeah.

**So you were familiar with music and on a technical level too.**

Oh, yes; yeah. I followed my dad around all—everywhere, you know, and such. And saw some great, great things happen; you know, some terrific things happen.

**So did the light go off when you were in the Berkeley music scene?**

Yeah. It was always there. You know, I kind of approached school and had this interesting new road that was developed called multimedia. But in those days, multimedia was a carousel slide projector with a wire remote. Okay? They made a lot of noise 'cause it was trying to fan the heater down the light down. Okay, you know; that. An overhead projector; we all kinda used those in school still. You can put a book on there and project it on a wall, okay. And if you're really high tech, you had a cassette player and/or an 8-track, and really high tech, you had 16mm camera or an 8mm camera. None of those could be synchronized; none of those could be used together. So I was looking into the future saying, Someday technology is gonna connect all these so we can thread it and make things. So multimedia was what I was after. That's why I went to the two schools at once, the UC Berkeley for music, and California College of Arts and Crafts, and got my degree as a painter, as an oil painter. So that was my main thrust there. Got back, and slowly, but surely things started to change and now we've got the internet with flash technology and all those enormous multimedia stuff. You know, it's beautiful.

**What were you doing when you came back, and before everything seemed to connect?**

When I came back, I too was lost in what do I do, you know, in the art world and the music world, okay. I was following my dad around. At that time we were, he was producing and I was assisting in Keola Beamer's first album, his first solo album, and he was—he's magnificent as a slack key player and as a classical player too, and such. So I was following him around, and—my father, and keeping the music together, and then using his office facilities a bit, just to kinda keep things in line, and such like that. And suddenly, a business hui—they were one generation above me, took me under their wing. And it was a banker, he owns a bank; there was an attorney; and there was a judge involved; and there was an entrepreneur that's now in government. And we were building condominiums in Salt Lake, and I was sort of the little gremlin that was following them around, but I could take pictures of models, I could make models of buildings for them and such like that. And if I look at it carefully and squint, I kinda look at those—it was about five years, four and a half years I was with these men. I kinda look at that as my formal education, because I had all the arts and crafts and music, and all these bits and pieces, and I didn't know how to glue it together. And these people were a generation above me, taught me how to connect it to real life and to apply it.

**Your own personal focus group and mentors.**

Absolutely.

**A real melding of business and creativity.**

Correct; correct.

**The influence of his mentors and certainly his father has shaped the way Jon de Mello thinks about music business. But who could have imagined how far Jon would take the business. The Mountain Apple Company has changed the way we think about Hawaiian music and has taken it to an international stage. We'll find out how all that happened, as our conversation continues.**

**I hear your studio is just amazing. You have every top of the line, state of the art thing that one can think of in your studio.**

Oh, I don't know if I'd go that far, but it's—

**You want more stuff, of course.**

No; I hate stuff. You have to hook it up. You have to maintain it.

**And replace it.**

And replace it. Because the day you buy it, it's obsolete, okay. The one interesting thing, though, in fifteen years, as a record company. I have not owned a tape recorder in fifteen years. It's all been recorded on hard drive, and with computers. I have a library, however, that is big as this room with antique tapes in it, that I have a gentlemen in Santa Monica that is a refurbisher of tape. And he brings them back into pristine quality, and then he burns them off into the digital world. And we're going through all my father's stuff. The whole library is being transferred slowly, but surely, you know.

**When did the Mountain Apple Company come together?**

I incorporated the Mountain Apple Company in 1977.

**Why did you call it Mountain Apple?**

I lived on Tantalus, and I was sitting—I had one of the first Apple II computers that I wish I had it now, it's probably worth more than the building, you know. And I was sitting there, and it was absolute quiet, pristine, no sound night. And I was sitting there doing just some word processing, just doing some lists on what's going on. I had a tin roof, and in the back of my house—and it was beveled. In the back of my house, I had a mountain apple tree. And I was actually typing in, I gotta find a name for the company. I gotta do a few things. And I all of a sudden hear a thump and a whomp-poom-poom-poom-poom-poom-poom and it fell right in front of me. And I knew it was the Mountain Apple Company, and I wrote down Mountain Apple Company. And that was the name of the company.

**And it's with you to this day. Now—**

It's with us to this day.

**--your first clients where who?**

Booga Booga, Brothers Cazimero, and Rap spun out of that, Richard Natto and Andy Bumatai, and the Beamers, and all sorts of things.

**So you were a young guy bringing in other young guys.**

Yeah. Yeah. And it was thrilling. And the talent; the talent was just, you know, sparkling. And radio was different, and we did a CD. And we did a record. And we still call them albums. . When we did an album, we used to be able to walk into a radio station and and walk right into the studio, and they'd just say, Come on in, come on in. You know, and we'd talk about it for 30 minutes, da-da-da-da-da-da. And now we can't get our stuff on radio at all. You know.

**Play lists and—**

Play lists.

**--pre-recorded DJs.**

That's it; it's all that. We could hardly, you know, do that. But in the old days, we could just walk right in, and they'd love to sit there and talk with us, and play some cuts, and everything like that. I have Rap Reiplinger's first break of Poi Dog on Ron Jacob's show at KKUA. It was funny; it was great.

**Different times. You know, now we have digital and I'm wondering how—I know you love gadgets, and you're really tuned into technology. And you've gotta be on the forefront of what's happening in the digital world. People downloading music, and not buying it.**

Yeah; yeah. It's a very interesting thing. Napster was the first to start it all. And I remember television stations calling me and saying, Can we get a sound bite on what you think of Napster? And first couple of sound bites were, R-r-r-ow, you know. And then after a while, I started thinking about it. And one guy came in from one station and started the cameras rolling. And he says, What do you think of Napster? And I said, It's the biggest and most powerful advertising campaign I've ever been in in my life. You know. And he went, Explain yourself. I said, People on the other side of the world are hearing my albums. Okay. Now, I'm not real comfortable with someone's hand in their pocket, on my wallet, and peeling little things—little green things off of there one at a time. But it was an enormous advertising campaign. And to this day, I think the popularity of Hawaiian music and local music, and ethnic music from around the world, not just Hawaiian music, is really stimulated by the internet.

**What do you think's next in this digital world?**

Well, I don't think—most people think that CD's going away; I don't think so. I believe that in a few years, it's gonna change configurations, but you won't know the difference. You and I won't know the difference; it'll be a DVD instead of a CD. Only because a DVD can handle so much more storage and the resolution of music can be much higher. Now, even though we can only hear certain highs and certain lows, I think that you can feel things, even if it's sampled in an area where birds can hear it and dogs can choke to it. We hear it; we hear it with our bodies, we can feel it somehow. So I think the resolution of music will, meaning the quality of music, will get enhanced. And it'll be a fairly seamless transfer.

**I'm just listening to you talk about music and recalling that I believe I read that the first ancestor of your family in this country came with an understanding of the forerunner of the ukulele. The Portuguese did bring it to the islands.**

Yes.

**And so you had music in your background back then.**

Yeah; my great-grandfather was an ukulele player from Kealakekua. We're from the Big Island. And I just saw a picture of my great-grandmother for the first time about a year ago. And I found her address; she took care of Kamehameha's children and—Kamehameha V's children—and the address was Ke'eaumoku. And it was numbered, and thanks to Google, which I can't live without.

**Don't tell me it's a hostess bar.**

No. The house is still there. And I have the picture of her standing in front of it, and the house is still there. It's a plantation house, two stories, with the green belly band around it. You know. And it was like time warp. You know, I never knew what this lady looked like. You know.

**What an amazing transition. What a huge transition in music.**

Whew; wow.

**And what's next? I mean, the pace of change is so fast.**

Yes; yes. The pace of change is so fast. And you say, what's next in music? I don't know. I read an article—I love science; I read Scientific America a little bit. And there's a guy now that has figured out in Germany how to get the molecules of air to vibrate. And so he's in essence saying, I have figured out how to get music to happen without speakers.

**Amazing. You know, Billboard Magazine has called Mountain Apple Company the strongest independent record company in America. So you're the strongest. How do you do it? What do you do for your clients?**

We ship to 27 different countries. And actually, they said we were the strongest in the world.

**In the world.**

Not just America. We ship to 27 different countries and we're very aggressive. And we chart in every major city in America, we chart. Sometimes it's only three or four units a week, but sometimes it—and then sometimes we find these little spikes that happen all of a sudden for some—no reason. It's quite amazing. And in Google there's a thing called Google Alert. If you go into the regular window and you type in Google Alert you'll get another window up. And you can say, search for this string—a string is a sentence—or search for this name, and you put it in quotes, and then you give them your own email. And every time that name shows up in an article, you get an email. And obviously, I've done Israel, Brothers Cazimero, Beamers. I do everybody we have, okay. And you do all sorts of spellings like Israel, and in quotes, I-Z, Kamakawiwo'ole, or you don't put Israel because then you get all the things about the country alone.

**M-hm.**

You know. So I get all these little blurbs from these people around the world that are just amazing. Probably get 40 to 50 a day, you know.

**The music business is about more than business. What about relationships; how do you take care of those?**

Relationships and music is very important. And they're all my children. Okay; no matter what happens, they're all my children.

**No matter how old they are?**

No matter how old they are, and no how much they hate me. They're all my children. But they love me too in the end, okay. And relationships are great, like Israel. You know, to be in the studio right next to him. And I do that a lot with people; I sit in the studio with the musician, to give them more of a homey, straightforward attitude. I've been so fortunate to work with some of the best in Hawaii. Kamokila Campbell was my godmother. And in the 50s, we were going out to Ewa all the time, and there was a piano out there. My father would be writing legends with her, and we'd be sitting around, and she'd be telling us stories after dinner, after supper and such. Just amazing stuff. So I'm so lucky to be able to have all these different kinds of relationships, you know. And I take great pride in representing our cultural movement and music and dance around the world.

**Relationships mean so much to Jon de Mello and the Mountain Apple Company. That's certainly a big part of their success. But there is one relationship that is closest to Jon's heart. As our conversation continues, Jon talks about his profound relationship with an amazing singer, the late Israel Kamakawiwo'ole.**

**What's your history with Israel? How did it start and how did it go?**

How did it go; how did it start. He called me; it was in 1993, he called me from the hospital and said, I want to break up with the Makaha Sons of Ni'ihau. And I said, What drugs are you on; are you crazy; are you out of your mind? This is a staple; you don't do that. You can't break for this, and stuff. He says, Will you come see me? And I'd known Israel all my life, and he knew me too. And I said, Sure, I come. I went up there. And he had all the right answers. I want to make some of my own decisions, and I need you to help me guide me through this whole puka. You know. You know, I need you. You know, and stuff like that. And in an hour and a half, I said, Okay, let's start, let's go; let's go get 'em, let's do it. It's risky, but let's try it anyway. And we jumped in. We were in a studio within three weeks later and making Facing Future. I had a funny way of recording Israel. I would be in the room; I would be sitting about three feet in front of him, facing him. And the first couple of times, it intimidated him a little bit, but he would always sing with his eyes closed anyway. And then at the end of the song, he'd crack one eye and kinda look at me, like, Okay? You know. Okay, boss? You know.

**Why were you right in front of him like that?**

I wanted to feel his energy; I wanted him to stay energized and focused. And I could help him out with chording or structures or we could just talk instead of me on a squawk box in this control room going, Okay, what's next, you know, Israel? What do you want to do? I was just there, and it was more of a conversation. And I think after the first couple of sessions, then he got to feel like, Oh, this is just my living room, this is fine, and here he is, I'm talking to him, and what else. You know, 'cause it was wide open. And a lot of times after the session was over, we would record just conversation, and then he'd pick up his book and say, Okay, tomorrow, why don't we try this one? And Mona Lisa was one of this, okay. And he says, Try this. And he'd sing it; Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa, da-da-da-da. And he'd done verse and one chorus, and he'd say, You think so? What you think? I said, Yeah,

let's do it tomorrow. Okay, got sick, never came into the studio the next day. Okay. Never recorded it fully, okay; but had it on digital DAT, the rehearsal part, which was his vocal and his thing, and managed to cut it up and make a piece out of it after the whole thing was over with, you know.

**So he probably has uh, a huge further career in what you've already recorded?**

He has—I have four or five songs that have never been heard before that he's done.

**He was into trying new things.**

Oh.

**Do you know where he'd want to go? Do you think you know him well enough to know that?**

He loved all kinds of music. He loved everything from rhythm and blues to rap, to classical, to everything. He listened to classical music; he just never was around it, you know. And he loved everything; hip-hop, bop, you know, all kinds of things. That's why he was picking—his repertoire in his book is so wide, you know, so diversified.

**Grammy Awards are coming up again, and we have a Hawaiian music category. Never had any Hawaiian language in this Hawaiian music category.**

Oops.

**What do you think's gonna happen this time around?**

Another oops. Raiatea is in there with a vocal album, and she's got a very good chance; she's got a very, very strong chance. But you know, slack key guitar is very well understood. So it's easy to figure out, okay. When they come across a long Hawaiian name and oh, my god, and a language—ooh, I don't know if this is any good. You know. You're supposed to be in the—to vote in the Grammys, you're supposed to be qualified in the areas that you vote in. But unfortunately, you know, there's a little bit of slush there, okay. I don't know. It's gonna be, I think, another upset this year, unfortunately. Or fortunately. I don't know.

**To spend any time at all with Jon de Mello, is to spend time in the creative zone. I think that's part of why so many artists like Bruddah Iz, the Cazimero Brothers and scores of others have trusted him with their music and their careers. Jon de Mello has a proven record as a businessman, but in his heart he'll always be an artist. Mahalo for joining us on Long Story Short. I'm Leslie Wilcox with your public television station, PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou!**

*At this point in time, we are so proud of what has happened to the language. When the Queen left us in 1917, she died thinking that it's over, it's gone; my whole culture is behind me, and it's stopped. If she was sitting in front of us right now, she'd be grinning from ear to ear because it's revived; the language is living and all over the planet Earth, the language is living. Okay. The Hawaiian language is living.*