

**GUEST: NOLA NAHULU**

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I'm at a point where it doesn't matter if you're five years old, thirteen, or seventy-two. There's always a teachable moment, and if you do it with compassion and caring, then it absorbs. And then, usually, your singers feel stronger about it, and they make better music.

**Who you gonna call when you need a conductor? For the past thirty years, Hawaii choral groups have been calling on Nola Nahulu. This talented teacher and musician is known for making singers sound good in church, in school, and on stage. Nola Nahulu's story is 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. Choral music plays a vital role in Hawaii's artistic, spiritual, and cultural life. And many of our choral singers look to conductor, Nola Nahulu. Her talent, commitment, and ability to bring out the best in singers of all ages have attracted opportunities to direct Hawaii's storied choral groups. Thousands of former students and singers can trace their vocal roots and music appreciation to their work with Nola over the past three decades. Conductors are usually seen from behind, and are rarely in the spotlight. In this edition of Long Story Short, we ask Nola Nahulu to face the camera, and take us along on her musical life's journey.**

**What was your early childhood like? What's your first memory, and where was it?**

Well, it's in Waianae. My sister and I went to Waianae Elementary School. And to date us, that's because there was no Makaha Elementary School at the time. Our parents would wake us up in Makaha, we would drop off at our *Obachan's* house, 'cause she lived right across the street. And the routine was, go *Obachan's* house, have breakfast, go school. Go back to *Obachan's* house, have guava ice cake that she would have made. And then, go to Japanese school.

**Where was Japanese school?**

Japanese school was at the Waianae Hongwanji. And everybody went. Sometimes, we even got to ride our bikes there. And for those now, in this day

and age, it's right behind the McDonald's in Waianae. But at that time, it was an open-air theater. Waianae town had two theaters; one regular theater house that was covered, and the other one that was open-air.

**I mean, was it a drive-in theater?**

No, it wasn't a drive-in. There was just no roof. And there were seats, wooden seats, and a screen.

**Wow.**

Yeah. And around fourth, fifth grade, we had the opportunity to take piano lessons. I keep on saying we, because my sister and I got afforded the same opportunities. So we took piano.

**Did you take piano because it was a good thing to do, or because you had a yearning desire to take piano?**

Our parents said, Do you want to take piano? And we said, Yes.

**Really? Because I said, No. I had no desire to take piano when I was a kid.**

We had nothing to gauge against. It was an opportunity that came up, and there was a piano teacher that moved into Waianae, and so they asked. And we were, Yeah, okay. And then, we actually got a piano. And we know that was a big sacrifice. But one day, a piano showed up in our house, and we know that our parents invested in that. So we got to take piano.

**What was your parents' background?**

Dad's from Nanakuli. Well, Nanakula via Lualualei, via Laie.

**Okay.**

And my mom's Waianae, plantation. My grandmother, my maternal grandmother is a picture bride. Yeah. So she came over early 1900s as a picture bride.

**So your mom was Japanese. Was your dad full Hawaiian?**

Yeah, he's full Hawaiian. And my mom's Hiroshima-ken.

**How many Hawaiian-Japanese families were there around you?**

Not many.

**Not a common combination back then.**

Not a common combination. It is an odd combination.

**Was there any feeling between sides of the family?**

Oh, I know at first, the Japanese were very concerned about my mother marrying a Hawaiian. Of course, you need to realize, the Hawaiian-Japanese combination is pretty cute when they're babies. And we were the first two grandchildren. So it seemed to work. We never felt any kind of resistance being brought up. We were always cared for, and loved, and ...

**Did you grow up with a sense of, as many part-Hawaiians do now, I have to learn my Hawaiian culture, my Hawaiian values?**

No. And let me say no, because we were learning them. It wasn't like I needed to learn them. Both sides, Hawaiian and Japanese, we were learning the culture from our family and from community activities. And we were learning who we are. I didn't have to say, I am Hawaiian, or I am Japanese.

**You didn't have to choose?**

No. To this day, I'm both. I'm *keiki o ka aina*, I'm from Hawaii.

**And I notice when you talk about values that are important to you, you use a Japanese expression.**

I do. *Okage sama de*. Because I do believe that we are influenced, our lives are influenced by those around us. So whether it's our immediate biological family, or it's our community family, you know, so-and-so's mother is your auntie, whether they're biologically related to you or not. And then, of course, if they happen to be a Chinese family, you learn all their cultural values too. And I also think it goes into your workplace. Your colleagues, your staff. It's very important.

**It sounds like your parents were actively trying to do things for the girls, to help you get ahead, learn.**

Now that we look back, they afforded us opportunities. Something as simple as having piano lessons. I know this sounds really weird, but also having ballet lessons. Think about it. Waianae, at the Hongwanji, and then they moved to Piliilaau Park. That's kind of odd. Most people go, What? You took ballet at Piliilaau Park? And we're like, Yeah. Because a teacher took time to drive to Waianae, and afford that for us, so that we could have experiences.

**At what point along the way did you find out that music was very special to you? Was it the piano lessons? Was it before?**

You don't realize it, because you're having it all the time. We had a very good general music teacher at Waianae Elementary School, Mrs. Keaka. So we got lot of basics. We assumed everybody got it, and everybody did. Not so now. And Fred Cachola, who loves singing, was a teacher there. So he decided that Waianae Elementary School should have their own song contest. So we did. And we went to Kamehameha in seventh grade ... continued with our piano. We sang in the choral groups there.

**You were in a big class at Kamehameha, one of the Baby Booming classes.**

[CHUCKLE] Yes.

**Were you the song leader—**

No.

**—for the Song Contest?**

No, no, no, no; I wasn't. Senior year, I got to conduct the entire school, with Kamehameha Waltz. But our song directors for the girls was Teresa Makuakane--Drechsel now, and our coed was Ron Chun, and our boys' was Aaron Mahi.

**Who became the Royal Hawaiian Band Leader.**

Yeah; yeah.

**But, where were you?**

I was the garrut [PHONETIC].

[CHUCKLE]

We were the gang that was doing all the sectionals, and preparing. Because in that era, the class, we had to provide our own leaders and teaching the music.

**So you were very much involved, but just at a different ...**

Capacity.

**Yeah, different facet of it.**

Yeah; we were pounding notes.

**[CHUCKLE]**

Still pounding notes. Yeah.

**Still pounding notes?**

Yeah; yeah.

**Nola Nahulu majored in psychology at Whitman College in Washington State. She continued to pursue her music studies, and eventually earned a Master's Degree in Music Education from the University of Hawaii at Manoa.**

**Where did you learn about conducting?**

It didn't really start fine tuning until graduate work. Because then, my focus was on conducting, specifically. And I did some post-graduate work at University of Washington. And there, I met Rodney Eichenberger, who is still a mentor to this day. I'd get to a point where I would listen to a choir and go, Why do they sound that way? Whether they were good or bad. And then, I looked at the conductor, and I realized, ooh, it's a lot of responsibility. 'Cause I remember thinking in high school, Oh, I can do this. Who cannot do this? But when you're a kid, you don't realize, oh, you actually have to be able to hear what's happening, and how do you create the sound.

**I don't know what it's like to be on that side. How do you conduct?**

It is much more than beating pattern. I've decided that we can actually shape sound, just by what we do with our face, our body, and our arms. And we can shape all the way through performances, instead of getting it so robotic, especially for choral music. Then the lyrics make more sense with the music. And we continue to learn. Because each group that we get is always gonna be different.

**And are there groups that you just can't make headway with?**

No, 'cause I'm an educator. That's what I've decided. **[CHUCKLE]**

**But sometimes, it's not a musical problem. It may be a personality problem.**

Personality, or a discipline problem, a self-discipline problem. So then, you teach them discipline, how to control yourself, your mind. My thought is, as a conductor, if they sound great, that's because of you. If they sound terrible, that's because of you.

**[CHUCKLE] Oh, you do blame yourself.**

Oh—

**I thought you were gonna say—**

—yeah.

**—it's because of them.**

No, no, no. It is, it is. And I think as an educator too, we can't always say, Well, you know, that kid's autistic, he's never gonna learn, or, nobody reinforces at home. It's still your *kuleana*. So if they do well, it's you, and if they don't ... it's you too.

**And do you know what everybody's doing, even though you've got a bunch of people there?**

Yeah. Well, I do now. I didn't, when I was younger. And that's part of the learning process. Can you hear four parts, can you hear eight parts?

**And all at the same time?**

Yeah; yeah.

**You can do that?**

That's why—yeah, I can now. Like I said, it's something that you need to develop. Can you play the piano and sing at the same time? Can you play one part, and sing another part?

**How did your musical career develop? I mean, even in college, you were planning to be a psychologist? You majored in psychology.**

I did; I did. And at one point, I was actually gonna do my master's in psychology. But as my master's graduate advisor said, Well, you're gonna use a lot of psychology in music, especially music education. I am a believer in fate. When I came home, and I went to UH Manoa, Dorothy Gillette was still there, teaching. And she said, This civic club needs a new choir director, 'cause their choir director is going to law school. I said, Okay. I don't know if I have the ability yet, but I said, Okay, I'll go check it out. And that was back in, I think, '77. So I'm still their choral director; Pearl Harbor Hawaiian Civic Club. I learned a lot from that.

**Just as soon as Nola Nahulu picked up a baton, she was picking up her phone as well, because offers started rolling in. Nola accepted invitations to teach and conduct at the University of Hawaii, University High School, the Molokai Children's Chorus, Hawaii Children's Chorus, and the Hawaii Youth Opera Chorus, just to name a few.**

[SINGING] That's it, that's it. Could you crescendo? Sopranos, crescendo your long notes, your half notes and your dotted half. [SINGING]

Presently, I'm the executive and artistic director of the Hawaii Youth Opera Chorus. This is my twenty-fifth year, and it's their fiftieth year. Aileen started them, Aileen Lum, in 1961. And she gave me a call, and asked if I would take over. So that step in fate also?

**You've never applied for anything to date in your story. You don't—you haven't—**

Not yet. [CHUCKLE] Not yet.

**You just keep—**

Right.

**—picking up the phone. [CHUCKLE]**

That's right; that's right. Mm, I never thought about it that way. I have applied for a few things, but seven years before that, I had just graduated, got my master's, I was teaching at Kamehameha. My classmate, Kalena Silva, calls. He

happens to be Aileen Lum's cousin. Nephew; sorry, nephew. Hey, Nola— 'cause we were both in master's work together. My auntie, she started a children's chorus on Molokai, but she has to come back to Oahu. I said, Oh? And? Well, would you consider doing that? And I said, I really don't know how to do anything with children's choruses, but I'll try. So I learned about children's voices. I also learned that it doesn't matter what language you teach them, because as far as they're concerned the sky's the limit. So we always sang Molokai songs, we sang in German, Italian, Latin. They were charming, they're great, they love to sing. Every Wednesday after school, we rehearse for three hours. Can you imagine? So, seven years later, when Aileen again said, I'm ready to retire, will you take over?, I at least had experience, and I could do something with the voice and the repertoire for the kids. So that's the Hawaii Youth Opera Chorus. And since then, we've grown tenfold, numbers wise. And staff wise, we're very music education based. And we're K through twelve.

**You also have been at the lead in one of the most respected and revered historic churches in the islands, Kawaiahao.**

Yes. It's been twenty-one years, actually.

**You don't do anything for a short amount of time, do you?**

I make a commitment, usually. Yeah; I think the shortest was seven years.

**That's such a historic church. I'm trying to think. Who are some of the other people who've been influential in the choir there?**

Well my predecessor as choir director? Senator Akaka, who by the way, when he comes home, comes up and sings.

**Wow.**

And David Kalama, at least for thirty-plus years. And of course, Liliuokalani.

**Wow.**

I know. It's kinda spooky.

**And Bernice Pauahi Bishop.**

Bernice Pauahi Bishop.

**The first time Nola Nahulu received a call from Kawaiahao Church, she did not feel ready as a conductor to join that historic lineup of luminaries. But a few years later, she was invited to take the choir on a European tour, and that became a tryout for a permanent position.**

David Kalama transcribed the major choral works of like the Messiah, or Mendelssohn's Elijah, into Hawaiian. They never sang it in English, only in Hawaiian. In addition, he was a prolific composer, so there are tons of anthems. And it's all hand manuscript. So I'd be conducting at rehearsal. I'm going, This is not what's on the paper. They go, Oh, no, Uncle David changed it. Oh, but you didn't—no, no, we never change 'em on the paper, but this is—I said, Okay, all right.

**So you were onto this. You stuck with this gig.**

[CHUCKLE] Well I committed, and they only committed to the tour. But after the tour, they invited me to join them, in September. So that's what I did.

**In addition to taking the helm of existing choral groups, Nola Nahulu started a new one, Ka Waiola o Na Pukanileo, an adult a capella ensemble dedicated to perpetuating Hawaiian choral music. Her many musical endeavors have taken Nola around the world, and also allowed her to share Hawaiian culture with musicians on the US continent, and abroad.**

What we all have in common is, we all know the Western European repertoire, and the musical basis that it comes from. But if they're from—for example, we get to go to Austria in June; it's our fiftieth anniversary. We're learning Mozart's Coronation Mass. We're going to work a German conductor. When people come here, or they see us, they want to learn Pacific Rim stuff. They want to learn Hawaiian things. And so we can share the culture that way.

**Nola Nahulu is also helping to perpetuate local fashion in her side job, as co-owner of a *muumuu* design and manufacturing company. Though they took radically different career paths in music and medicine, Nola and her sister, Linda, came together to follow their mother's footsteps into the dressmaking business. They purchased Bette Muu in 1994 from then owner, Rene Kubo.**

We went into their production room, and it was like being in our *Obachan's* kitchen. Because a Japanese radio was going on, most of the seamstresses were Japanese, some Chinese. The cutters, Japanese, because they're—not because, but they happened to be Mrs. Kubo's nieces. We felt very comfortable. We talked story with her. She's from Lahaina. Talked story. Literally three days later, she said, You folks can have the company.

**So she was selecting a buyer.**

Yes. 'Cause she had already gone through several.

**What did she want? What was she looking for?**

Number one, I think she needed to feel comfortable, and that she would have confidence that they would continue the line in its purity. So keeping the tradition going. I mean, literally three days, she goes, Okay, you folks can have it. And she also told us later that Bette Manchester always wanted it to be Hawaiian owned. So it kind of fit. We went in with it knowing that we wanted to keep the tradition alive, and to keep it going, and knew that we would have a really high learning curve. Very steep.

**So how has to gone with Bette Muu?**

We have learned a lot. It's still tough. It's pretty tough. Not many people wear muu's anymore, and there's still the misconception that it has to be huge and big. But it's been a totally different door opening in our lives. So we're hanging in there. We're still producing.

**When did Bette Muu become Bette Pantsuit? 'Cause that's what you're wearing.**

I know. They make these long pants for me. And so, I know, I need to tell my cutters that we need to get it out. On my artistic side, what you have on makes a big difference too, on how you do act, whether you're in a meeting, or like ... like she said, you're not gonna go out on a baseball field in a Bette Muu. Because that's not the appropriate place to wear it.

**So do you wear them when you conduct?**

I do.

**Because it makes you feel more appropriate and poised, and calm?**

Absolutely. And, it's kinda cute, actually. My cutters and my staff make sure that the back of it looks the best.

**[CHUCKLE]**

Because as a conductor, that's what people look at, is my back.

**Have you seen a decline in choral groups?**

There has been. There has been, and it's kind of a Catch 22. I know through the 60s, strong all the way through. Roosevelt, strong. I also think that's part of the era of strong general music coming up through strong music programs. Not only choral, orchestral as well as band. But there was a decline, and I'm sure it's budgetary, where positions were cut.

**You don't think it's lack of interest?**

Oh, no, I don't think so. Students were choosing not to major in it, because there were no jobs to be had. So therefore, then we lost competent people. And then when positions come up again, we don't have the staffing. I will say, though, we have some young directors out there that are doing some great jobs. They're building their programs, and there's a commitment. And so, I see there's a little light at the end of the tunnel.

**In this period, we've seen the demise of the Honolulu Symphony as it existed.**

**And we've seen a reduction in music and arts education.**

M-hm.

**How do you feel about music getting cut, as if it's not a priority subject?**

Yeah. Don't get me started. [CHUCKLE] It is a priority, and it's not just the learning of the notes, or the learning of rhythm and those concepts. That's part of it, that's an important part. But I think more on the self esteem of a child, self exhortation of a child, and what effect it has growing up into adulthood. I know my parents' generation, you got a good job, you stayed in it thirty, forty years, you retired; *pau*. My dad went back to farming, which is what his family does. But I think for my generation, we have so many interests, and so we get to do different things, and it's not unusual to do something for fifteen years and, Oh, but I like doing that, so I'm gonna learn how to do that. And do that for another fifteen years. Some of us do it simultaneously; that's a little nuts, but I think I've been very—and my sister too, I think we've been very fortunate in that we were afforded the experiences, so that we wouldn't feel locked in. Yeah.

**And you've used the opportunities you've been given.**

I have, and I really feel that I've been fortunate.

**Any regrets?**



Frankly, no; I don't think so. Not yet.

**That's a great thing to be able to say.**

Yeah. I mean, at times, you're kind of like, Oh, my gosh, what am I gonna do? But like they say, when one door closes, another one opens. And if you're given enough support and guidance, you take that new avenue.

**At this time in 2011, Nola Nahulu continues to lead and conduct, and teach. But she's also starting to think about passing the baton. Her plan going forward is to devote more time to mentoring. Like the talented conductors and teachers who gave her so many opportunities to work and learn, Nola is on the look out for promising conductors who will keep Hawaii's choral tradition alive for future generations. For Long Story Short, and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.**

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit [pbshawaii.org](http://pbshawaii.org).

As a third grader, I know this seems really weird, but I actually choreographed Waltz of the Flowers from the Nutcracker.

**And you didn't think you had special musical talent?**

Well it probably wasn't that great, but I do know I did it. My mother sewed the costumes, and this is on the little stage which is still at Waianae Elementary School. [CHUCKLE] I did choreography for synchronized swimming when I was in high school, because I learned—well, it was interesting to me. My artistic side of swimming.

**But your life was full of music, so it was just a way of life.**

Yeah.

**Yeah.**

Yeah.