

**GUEST: ROBERT CAZIMERO 2**

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**Aloha no. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Mahalo for joining me for another *Long Story Short* – another island program produced and broadcast by locally-owned, non-profit PBS Hawaii. When singer Robert Cazimero stopped by to talk with me, one on one, he wasn't alone. He mentioned that his ancestors, all those who went before, were right behind him. And part of the reason he is driven to meet high standards is the heavy obligation he feels to make them proud. Coming up next – Part Two of a two-part conversation with musical artist Robert Cazimero.**

**Robert Cazimero is more than a successful singer and recording artist. He's also a most-respected kumu hula – teacher of Hawaiian dance. His all-male hula school is called Halau Na Kamalei. The halau is the subject of a documentary being shown on PBS channels nationwide that explores expectations and stereotypes, following the halau as it prepares for competition. Produced and directed by Lisette Marie Flanary, *Na Kamalei: Men of Hula* shows us Robert Cazimero's exacting and sometimes harsh teaching style and it reflects his deep devotion to his kumu, the late Maiki Aiu Lake.**

I had a hard time with that, 'cause they wanted me to tell stories about my kumu. And you know, outside of the family, we don't tell stories, because it's just so personal. You know. I didn't want to tell stories. And then I said to Lisette, If this will help to show my respect for my teacher, then I'll do it. Not realizing that it was really gonna show a lot more, and that it was okay. And that what I found out about my students is that they love me like how I love my teacher. [Whispers] Sorry.

**How easy was it for you to control people's lives? I mean, you know, kumu hula –**

That's a really –

– **by definition is a –**

– good question.

– **control freak, right?**

Yeah.

**You know, it –**

Yeah.

**I'm not saying it very graciously, but –**

No, no, no; it's true, though. Yeah. And you have – there is such a power in being a kumu hula, you know, that is willingly given to you when the students come in. Because it's what I did with mine. You know. If she told me to jump off a building, I would have asked, Which one, and how much higher do you want me to go? 'Cause you just love them, you know. But I didn't really know how to become a kumu. It's like being a parent. You really don't know how to be a mother or father until you have kids, and they teach you how to be that way. It was the same thing with being a teacher. When I started, my kids were like 15, 16 years old, and I was like 23, 24. And the only way I knew how to do it was to scare the well, to scare the –

**And you used those –**

– out of them.

– **words too, right?**

Yeah.

**You would swear?**

Yeah.

**You'd call them names?**

Yeah; I did. And they would say to me, You know, I don't even let my parents talk to me this way. I was like, I'm not your parent; I'm your kumu. So you just better get over it, or there's the door. And luckily, they stayed. Or luckily, they didn't beat me up.

**And by definition, you have to keep order and discipline. How did you decide how hard core you were gonna be as a disciplinarian, as somebody who punishes, or has control over –**

I just played by –

– **second chances, third chances?**

Yeah. I played that by ear. I set really – you know, some really heavy duty rules on them. And if they broke it, then you know, there was no second chance.

**What's an example of a heavy duty rule?**

Well, you know, I did not like drugs. I was never a drug person. I, well, sans liquor. Sometimes.

**M-m.**

But yeah. So it's like, you know, if I knew that you were coming to a performance, and if you were stoned then you're out, from the performance and the halau, too. You had to be a certain look, you know. No one could – I still say it, although I'm much more lenient now. No student could dance if they were bigger than me. And back then I was almost 300 pounds when I first started. You know. So they all had to make sure that I the clothes, they looked good. Otherwise – 'cause you know, people don't really want to see guys dance in clothes; you gotta wear those malo things, and the lawalawas. And I never could wear them, because well, 'cause you know. But they had to. You know, 'cause it was the look, and I wanted to make sure that people knew who we were.

**Well, at that time, you had the only male halau.**

Yeah.

**Is it still the only male halau?**

You know, I think it is. Because most people have both women and men dancing for them. But it was really Maiki's dream that I teach only men. And I'll tell you; like I said, I would have done anything she asked. So I had no problem saying, Okay; I'll do it. The thing that you need to know about, if you're gonna – Leslie, you're ever gonna teach men? You want to –

**Yes.**

– be a kumu hula. You'll be not making any money. And –

**As opposed to teaching women; you would make money?**

Women, you can make money. People buy houses by teaching women. Teaching men, you will not make money.

**Because?**

They're not gonna pay you to teach them how to dance hula. They're – and there go – it goes back my kumu again, who said, If a man dances for you, then it is a privilege that you should have them. So I you know, when I was in halau, I was constantly on scholarship. And so that's the way I've run my halau ever since; that it's all scholarship.

**You teach for free?**

Yeah; yeah. And then when we need money, then we have a fundraiser. Or, if it needs supplementation, I have my career. And I swear, my kumu knew that too. 'Cause I'm like her. She needs six of these things done, her daughter says, You can't have the money; she'll grab her money and do it herself. And I do the same thing. You know, it's like, Well, no one tells me no when it comes to the halau. But if I want something, and they're like, You know, we don't have that much money we're getting it. Yeah; we're gonna just do it.

**As successful as the halau has been, I've heard you say in the past that it's not easy to get men to dance.**

Yes; yeah. It gets harder and harder as the years go along. Although, a new revelation has come along for us; and that is that now, the sons of my students are dancing for me. And you know, I've graduated students as teachers. Four of them are teaching, even as we speak. And that's a legacy. That –

**M-hm.**

– really is. But as far as, for me, a real legacy and a continuation, so that I can actually see it myself; having the kids of my dancers with me. It makes me want to live longer. It really does. And it makes me want to be a better teacher, too.

**How does someone get into your halau? Can any guy get into your halau?**

Well, no. [chuckle] No, you can't. You have to be invited.

**And all of your dancers are part-Hawaiian?**

No.

**They're not?**

No. No; and I don't think that's really important, either. And that comes from my kumu. You know. Because it's more about the heart, I think, and the fact that once you become a member of my halau, then you are Hawaiian to me, because now you're not just a member of the halau, but a member of the family.

**Family; m-m.**

Yeah. And so all my family, all my brothers and sisters, and my nieces and nephews; they all know these guys. And they all know my family. So several years ago, we had a, a family reunion in Kohala, and they said, You know, we're all going. And I was like, No, you're not. They was like, Oh, yeah; we are. 'Cause sister Jean and sister Gerry told us, and cousin Momi, that we're family. So they all came. We all went to Kohala together and –

**What's more important; heart or dancing ability?**

Oh, right now, today, at this very moment with you and me; heart.

**But tomorrow, dancing ability?**

Tomorrow, if we have a show to do and it's time to get on the stage; dancing ability. But for right now, heart. But it doesn't mean I'll get rid of you. You know. Where before, I would get rid of people much faster. Today, I'm much more lenient.

**Among your students in your halau, you've admitted your brother.**

Yes. Roland came to halau for a while; I think it was a little over a year. And I kicked him out of halau because he was given an assignment and he didn't finish it.

**What was the assignment?**

He had to learn two chants. And we laugh about it today, because had he learned, especially one of them, we'd be – we do it all the time in our lives, you know; all the time now. But I give my brother a lot of credit. You know, we're born as brothers in this lifetime, and then he goes and puts himself, again, in my life by being a student. That's a difficult thing to do.

**Well, you could give him a second chance.**

Well, the second chance is that he's no longer a student, but he is a kokua. So my brother is there all the time. And I think in being the kokua now, it's better than being a student. 'Cause you still get the lessons, but you don't get too much of the same pressure that happened. And what's happened is, I've learned from that lesson too, and because of him, I've learned to be able to give chances to others. Where before, I would have [SNAPS FINGERS] got rid of 'em, like how I did him. You know.

**And –**

And the other thing is, you can't talk back to me.

**[chuckle]**

You can't talk back to me.

**He would have to stop talking back to you.**

You can't talk back – no. And Roland would like – you know, you can't talk to me. Not in front of my students; you can't talk back to me. That's just the way it is.

**But he can as a kokua?**

Yeah. Yeah.

**So he worked it out.**

Yeah; he did. And I'm really glad he's the kokua. And yeah. I love him; he's a good guy. I've never said that before on camera, either. That took a bit.

**[chuckle] He's gonna want copies.**

I think so too. He'll be sending out to the family.

**In birth order, Robert and Roland are number 10 and number 11 in a family of 12 children from Kalihi. The two men are family for life and highly successful musical partners for more than 30 years now. Appreciating family and health became more important than ever to Robert in 1990. That's when he found out he has diabetes.**

**You were 300 pounds at one point?**

Oh, yeah. Yeah. It was a long time ago, but still, it was a part of my life. I look at those pictures, and I go, Who is this monstrous person?

**Had you always been heavy as a kid?**

Yeah; yeah, I always was. And then in 1990, my doctor said to me; he says, You know, you gotta watch out, 'cause you're a diabetic now. And I was like, Oh; okay. So he said, You have to really think about this, and you know, you have to cut down, and you have to do this, and you have to exercise, and stuff. And I was like, Oh, jeez; what a bummer. And I started walking in 1990, and it's been my companion for that long now, and it's kept me down so that I'm now – I fluctuate between 197 to 204 pounds. And it helps with everything; you know, the heart, the blood, the breathing; stuff like that.

**That's right; breathing. I mean, you have to have good breath control, or you'll lose your occupation.**

And that's why, you know, I never liked cigarettes. My father was real adamant about us smoking. You know. So I never liked that, 'cause I thought, Okay; I'm gonna tell you another story.

**Shoot.**

When Peter, Roland and I were recording our second album called Guava Jam, no; sorry, Guava Jam was first, Crack Seed was second. I had just finished singing a song called The Queen's Jubilee, from a family songbook of the laukea's. And I was sitting in the studio, and Peter and Roland and the engineer were in that small room that they are over there, and Peter said, Okay, we're gonna play this back to you. I was like, All right. So there were two big speakers here, and they started playing the song, and I'm singing along with it. Well, there was a mirror on the floor on the side over here, and I just happened to glance over it. And I was looking at myself in the mirror, and I thought, I found it very difficult to believe that the person I was looking at in the mirror was the owner of this voice that was coming through. Because I didn't feel that person matched the beauty of the voice.

**M-m.**

And that, for me, was – what's that word; epiphany.

**M-hm.**

It was an epiphany for me, and I kind of realized that this voice was something special; and that's when I decided that I'd better take care of it. So all these years, you know, losing the weight and keeping it down and exercising and watching what you eat ...

**And continuing to take voice lessons.**

And continuing to take voice lessons with my dear kumu leo, Neva Rego, who I love to pieces. Both Roland and I went to Neva at a time where our voices were beginning to fade a bit. We weren't aware of it. Well, maybe we were, and that's why we went. But she added so much to what we needed to remember and do. And still does, you know. I don't go as often as I used to, but she has spies. And they'll come, and they'll see us, and they'll call her. And then she'll call me and she'll go, Roberto ...

**[chuckle]**

Can you come see Auntie Neva?

**And it's all about getting the best of your voice at any time in your life.**

Yeah, and to keep it going. You know. My doctor, Kalani Brady, who is also a student of Neva's – you know, we're all kinda like intertwined. So there's Neva and me, and there's Kalani, and there's Roland, and all of us, and stuff like this, and they always

say to me, you know, This is something special; you have to take care of it; we're gonna help you the best we can. So it's an obligation too, you know.

**You mentioned the beauty of your voice, which is so true. How do you look at that? Do you see that as a gift you take care of, or do you think uh, of something you created, or ...**

No; I think it was a gift. I really do. And I find that as I get older now, and as much as I love to sing, I think singing makes me beautiful. I also think that it's one of the most honest and scariest things that I do in my life. Because when I'm on stage, or I'm at home, or at a cousin's party, and if I'm singing, it is the most honest I could possibly be. I am as wide open as a book; and you can read all the chapters, 'cause nothing [chuckle] nothing's been blocked, or censored. It's just honestly, blatantly there.

**Well, funny you should say that. Because I was reviewing what's been written about you over the years, but, you know, I didn't really see a lot about who you are. Just what you do. Is that because you keep it close?**

Yeah. You know, it's not that I do that conscientiously; it's just, I've always felt when we were talking to anybody, being interviewed, you know, that has a game plan. We're talking about the CD, we're talking about this May Day concert, we're talking about entering Merrie Monarch and why we're doing it. And so I did that. You know. Someday, someone will. And maybe it'll happen; I'm not real sure.

**I mean, well, you could do it now.**

Okay; go.

**[chuckle] I would just like to know what drives you, what moves you, what ...**

I think, first of all, my family. And my kupuna, the ancestors, and the fact that I feel that the – my heaviest obligation is to make them proud. To not make them embarrassed. Because – and I've said this before, and I love this image. That even as I'm here speaking to you, there are thousands of people behind me right now. Some I know, and some I don't.

**From generations back?**

From generations before, from countries that I don't even know about; they're just here.

**And you don't want them rolling your eyes.**

Yeah.

**Their eyes. [chuckle]**

Yeah; uh-huh. Or this thing; [clucks tongue]. You know how local people do that [clucks tongue] thing. And that would just kill me. But they're all here, and I feel an obligation towards them, and you, and our people and this land. And then I think if I'm gonna do that, then I have to have an obligation to my health. Even as last night, I'm at a restaurant eating stuff that maybe I shouldn't have, you know. I didn't have the dessert, but okay, I had the pasta. And then when it comes to the hula, I have an obligation to my teacher and to my students. And I just want to be good for them. I want to really be good for them. And if it means that my personal life – my personal life does not suffer from anything; it suffers from me, if I want it to suffer. Okay. But my personal is really the family. And it's a real broad use of the word family, because it encompasses the ones that I'm related to by blood, and those that I'm related to by heart. And it just keeps getting bigger. Sometimes I feel like I have no control over this; and at the same time, maybe I'm not supposed to. So I live my life now in a – I love to say this; a perpetual state of gratitude. I wake up every morning, and I just say thank you to everybody, and everything. You know, we're from Kohala, on the Big Island.

**North Kohala?**

North Kohala. My mom is from Hawi, and my dad's from Niulii. And my mother used to say, When you go to Hawaii Island, she says, you must say hello to everyone – the people, the rocks, the ocean, the trees; because they're related to all of us. You know. It's how I feel with uh, with everybody that we meet now, you know. That there is a purpose, and nothing is by accident; that I'm there to learn the lessons that are happening. And that I'm really, really grateful.

**It's been such a long haul for Hawaiians, who still populate our prisons and are represented on the poverty lists and many haven't had access to Hawaiian homelands. I mean, how do you see the Hawaiian condition today?**

Oh, I think it's appalling. At the same time, though, I'm one of the lucky ones, you know, who Hawaiians will look at me and say – well, sometimes they'll say, you know, You sold out. I don't – I'm not so sure how I did that; I was just working. But the other they say is, you know, I want to be like you. And I'm thinking, Oh, I don't know whether you want to do that either. You know. But if I can help in any way I can and I think of Don Ho. 'Cause he said to me one night when we were at you know, he used to go to McCully Chop Suey all the time.

**M-hm; at 3:00 a.m. [chuckle]**

Yeah, yeah; there you are. Okay; order all that food.

**Yeah.**

And Don said to me; he says, You know, when people ask for money, I give them money, our people. He said, Are you gonna do the same thing? I said, I don't know that I can give them money, but I'm gonna give them what I can. You know. And if it's the voice, or if it's just being there then I'll do it.

**Do you what you can with what you have.**

Yeah. Yeah. God, I can't believe I said some of that stuff.

**I forgot Don Ho used to go to McCully Chop Suey in the middle of the night. No, but it's true; you've got to decide you know, how far you're willing to go, and how much you're willing to give.**

Yeah. And you cannot just talk it; if you said something already, you know, people remember. They can go back now – especially with the internet; they can go back and see what I said 20 years ago. [chuckle]

**Yeah. Well, that's interesting. He was trying to get you to do the same thing he was doing.**

Yeah. Yeah. And you know, Don was one of our greatest supporters.

**Wow. He didn't feel a competitive deal?**

No. He just liked what we did. And his mother liked us. So you know, it's a Hawaiian thing. You know.

**Yeah; yeah.**

You're a local girl; you understand that.

[chuckle]

You know, I used to always say I don't know that I would go to war for the United States of America. I don't know that I would kill someone for the United States of America. But if they're threatening Hawaii I would stand out front. And years ago, we had this – there was a kue. there was a march of all Hawaiians. It started at the Aloha Tower, and it came up to the Palace. Several – Ala, myself. Mapuana, maybe Vicky; we were there at the front, and our job – Manu. We were to chant all these people as we came in, continuously; it was to be hours and hours of our chanting these people in. And just before they were gonna open the gate, someone had told us that there might be something happening. That would include, you know, guns and stuff like this. And Roland had told Ala; If anything happens, you grab my brother, and you folks go in here. And you can talk the talk but if you can't walk the walk, then what's the purpose of it? I said, You know, if anything is gonna happen, then it's meant to happen, and I'm putting it out there right now. So if anything happens, I ain't going; I'm staying right here. I think it's how you – when you believe in something, whether it's our world, or peace or just another person, we have to do what is best for ourselves, and hope that it's best for everyone too.

**You know, you mentioned that lyrics really speak to you in song. What are the most beautiful lyrics that you sing, and in what language are they?**

Well, there's – if I had to pick an English song it would be two. One would be David Gates from Bread – he wrote a song called If. And my favorite line in that song is, And when my life and when my love for life is running dry, you come and pour yourself on me. When I sing that line, it's like, to me, the heavens open up, and I am just drenched with all this love from the people who know me. The other one is from Carousel, I think. If I loved you, da-da longing to tell you, but afraid and shy I let my golden chances pass me by. And I've let many a golden chance pass me by. But there's no regret. You can't have regrets; I refuse to have regrets.

**What about in Hawaiian?**

In Hawaiian, too many; too many. You know, for me, the most simplest things have the deepest meanings. So oh, gee; god, what's the – there are so many. I can't even think of – okay, there's a song what was written by Lei Collins, and it's called – they call it Kealoha. And it goes, [sings]. In the third verse, it says [sings]. That I become very relaxed and I am comfortable when the scent of my lover is present. I love that line. Because no one knows that scent, except you, you know. And whether they're there with you or not, physically, that scent that you remember can put them right in front of you. And I think that's powerful; that's – you know. And then another one is from Pua Ahihi, written by Kawena, and it says [sings] No, no, no, no. There's this one verse, and it talks about there's a flower, okay, so it's you know Lanihuli? Lanihuli is that mountain there at the Pali; when you're standing at the Pali lookout, it's the one on the left hand side. And what it says is that you're – this person that you love is like a lehua flower up there, but it is pretty much unreachable. And the reason that person is unreachable is because you put that person there. That that's how much your love is extended to the fact that you would take this person that you love, and put them so high out of reach that it's worth the love. That's what it means to me.

**Beautiful lyrics, lovely sentiments. Speaking of sentiments, I'd like to thank our viewers who've sent kind thoughts and encouraging words as PBS Hawaii works to deliver quality, local programming that inspires, informs and entertains.**

**Mahalo to you and to Robert Cazimero for sharing your time and joining me for this *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.**

**You know, we've lost some just treasures of Hawaiian music, and just recently too.**

Yeah.

**And of course, you know that you've earned a place in that vaulted place; I mean, you're already there, where you're a treasure. Do you ever think about how people will receive news sometime long from now, I hope, when you pass away?**

I think that's why I work so hard when we do an album to make sure that it's the best that it can be. Because really, it's that music that's immortal. It's not this; it's that music. So I try hard, and I wonder how they'll receive it. You know, I wonder.