

GUEST: NAKE'U AWAI

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I used to often tell my mom, How come we can't go shopping in slippers and wear shorts? And was, No, any time you're Downtown, it's pants and shoes. Well, all the *Haole* tourists wear slipper and shorts. But, yeah.

It's a long way from Kalihi to New York, to Hollywood and back, but it's the journey of a man whose life has been dedicated to entertainment and design, from a big city to a little shop at the foot of Kamehameha Heights. It's Nake'u Awai, on Long Story Short.

***Aloha mai kakou.* I'm Leslie Wilcox. In this edition of Long Story Short, you'll meet a Honolulu man who's had a fascinated—well, careers, really. After graduating from Kamehameha Schools with an interest in drama, Nake'u Awai went on to take his shot in the bright lights of the New York theater scene. Later, he appeared in network television shows in the heyday of live TV production. But these are careers that few in Hawaii really know much about, because since he returned home, he's made a name for himself as a fashion designer. To have a Nake'u Awai design in your collection is to have a dress or shirt that will never go out of style.**

Where did you grow up?

I grew up in Punchbowl.

What was that like?

Sidewalk skating. Golden Wall Theater—swim and tap at the YWCA down on Richards Street.

Tap, as in tap dance?

Tap dance; Mrs. Barnes. My first try at dancing, and swim, it was mainly swimming, and I got interested. Oh, I want to take tap, I want to take tapping. And then, I snuck into Alice Keawekane's, some of her classes, and that's Alicia Smith, Loyal's mother is Alice Keawekane. And Loyal and Alicia, I mean, they're all connected, Loyal and Alicia. And she taught *hula*. And because, when you're waiting for your parents to pick you up ... Come on, *keiki*, come join. So I snuck into some of her *hula* classes. So that was my early exposure to dance, which I would use later on. Golden Wall Theater, lot of my background comes from the movies, from the time we were little, during war years when blackout was part of our living. I don't remember that part of it, 'cause I was a baby. But Mom would take the kids and she, so it was brother and two sisters, and we'd go to the Golden Wall. And she'd come out and it would be all dark, and she'd hold me as the baby, and everybody would grab around her skirt, and we'd make it home.

And Golden Wall showed the latest Hollywood movies?

All and one day, I thought maybe if I had enough money, I'd bring back Saturday matinees. It was where all the kids came. And ee screamed our hearts out, because it was all the Westerns, and they would have serial chapters where at the end, the guy would be falling off the cliff. Next week—

[CHUCKLE]

—follow through what happens. And when he fell off the cliff, he grabbed a branch, so he was saved, yeah.

Do you remember how much it cost to go to those matinees?

No.

What did you have for snacks?

I wasn't too much of a snacker, but popcorn, I guess. And they had seed *mui* in bags, the paper bags. I mean, they dug it out like this, and that's how you got it.

Influenced by all those afternoons at the movies in the Golden Wall Theater in Nuuanu, Nakeu Awai began to see a future in art and design, eventually merging theater and fashion.

But you're a visual person, so movies—

But this helped—

—were preferable for you.

Yeah. This helped me, yes. Yes. And then television came after that, from black and white into color. Yeah. So a lot of things that I create today because aside from fashions, it's putting fashions into visuals that is I enjoy that more.

More?

More.

So putting fashions into, say, musical revues?

Yeah.

And ... shows.

I enjoy—

Fashion shows.

I enjoy that. I enjoy that the most. And using other people's—you know, so I will use my clothes as well as the other people and do shows. Because drama was what I majored in at University of Washington.

So the shows are more important than the clothes that you have designed?

I feel that. The segments that I do are universal emotions that we all experience.

Have you thought of doing other than your fashion-related shows as musical revues?

I'm open to, I'm always open to being creative. I've already started my Christmas show this year. I'm thinking about next year up at the Waikoloa. You know, Pili Pang's *haua* in Waimea.

So you're that generation that sort of—you were before the Hawaiian renaissance. You didn't speak Hawaiian.

No. In fact, we grew up speaking only English.

And Kamehameha insisted on it when you were a student there.

And Kamehameha had a Hawaiian language teacher. His name was Reverend Judd. But I felt so bad, and I guess I wasn't strong enough to stand up against my peers. But it was after lunch, and the movie *The Blue Angel*, where the guy becomes taken advantage of, where he plays the dummy in the club, and all these horrible things happen to him. In the movie *The Blue Angel*, with Marlene Dietrich, yeah. So the same thing I thought about this man. See, so I relate back to when I saw this man. After lunch, kids brought straws back from the dining hall and was doing spitballs at him. And this old man was going, Oh, ooh.

And he was the Hawaiian teacher.

Yeah, language. And so, did we learn the language?

What did your parents do for a living?

My dad was a land abstracter.

What's a land abstracter?

Well, he worked at the Land Office, and it was reading land deeds and stuffs, and translating them. So on his own, he helped a lot of Hawaiians find land that was due them, that they weren't aware of. He'd ask them, Where were you born, who's your parents? And he'd go do research kind of stuff. And my mom was an educator. And every weekend, my dad because see, we grew up without cars, because Mother and Dad never drove. We'd get on the taxi down at Aala Park. The kind that had all the extra seats, and go to Haleiwa because—

Is that a jitney?

Huh?

Was that a jitney, with extra seats?

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, but it was called the Waialua Taxicab, and it drove you to your homes in Haleiwa, Waialua. And then it'd come back and pick you up. But we'd spend weekends there because he'd work up in the taro patch. Every weekend, he was in the *loi*, because—and by himself. And *loi* and *kalo*, as *kalo* people today will know, it's hard work

It's very hard work.

And you have to keep working at it. You can't let it go by, because—

So he worked five days a week, and then he goes to the taro patches—

Yeah.

—on the weekends?

Yeah.

That's not a weekend. That's not a break.

But he enjoyed that. And he would bring back a bag of *taro*, and he would cook, we would have to peel.

That's what he did it for, a bag of taro?

And he also sold. He started selling some of his *kalo* to Chun Hoon's Market, the old market on Nuuanu. So we had fresh *poi*. It was lumpy. I preferred the factory *poi*, because it was smoother, but we'd peel. Oh, and I still have his boards somewhere in my shop, the *poi* boards that he used and pounded *poi*.

Did you tell him his *poi* was too lumpy for you?

No.

[CHUCKLE]

'Cause he'd just strain it, yeah. And so, I mean, it was fine. It was fresh. But, after you get spoiled by having some factory made *poi*.

What was your mom like?

Mom was a hard worker. She believed in education, so she pushed all of us. After I graduated from Kamehameha School, I really wanted to get out and get into the working field. But, No, you gotta to go to college. So she pushed for that. Hard worker, a woman that wore the same pair of shoes until it kaputsed, then she got a new pair of shoes. So she gave up a lot. But then she wanted to see the world, so my first year after University of Washington, she wanted to see America. And Father hated traveling. So she ployed me into going, and so we saw America on Greyhound. From Seattle, we went straight across the northern route to visit friends and upstate New York, and then went down south, and came back across. Yeah.

Was she still very frugal?

Yeah. As she got older, because see, I was the last one. Everybody was—the two sisters were on their own, Brother was on his own, so maybe she felt a little more freer to do these trips. Because then she and Dad went to China, with Char's Tours. I still remember that, because it was such a negative thing.

After graduating from the University of Washington, and seeing North America by bus, it was time for graduate school. Catholic University in Washington, D.C. was a fine school; but for a young man from Hawaii in the 1950s, D.C. was not quite the place to study theater. Where would Nake'u Awai head next?

So I told my parents. What are you going to do? I said, Live. Pause, pause. And they hung up on me, click. Next episode. So I moved to New York. But, I went all over New York. And when you're young, you're really kinda daring, so I looked up every conceivable rental. The nice thing about New York is they have rentals by price. So you can look for what you want to spend, and they're right there. Well, I went Bowery, I went Harlem, I went all over New York. And after when I settled in New York, I said to myself, I would never, ever go back to all the areas that I went into. But one wintry morning, I was in Brooklyn Heights, and this woman in—you know, they have brownstones. She opened this tall black door. And she had a place, and it was within my price range, and it was a ... so every

time I watch TV, they have those steps going up into the brownstones, and to the side they have these two steps that go underneath. I was there. It went from sidewalk, all the way to the back of the house. It was long rental.

And did you think you were gonna be a lifelong New Yorker at that point?

I wanted to. Because New York will always be my happiest years.

Why did you leave New York?

Winter.

[CHUCKLE] How many winters did you get through?

Four. And the last winter, I had electric blankets. But when you're sleeping, you go, [GRUNT]. Just slight turning. It was freezing. And I had moved, how you move around, you find a better place. So my last rental was on the fifth floor of this walkup. Wonderful. I wish I still did that. Overlooked the—you could see the Statue of Liberty, and the lower rivers before they split off the Hudson, and the Hudson and the other river, and subway and stuff, and stuff, and stuffs. Yeah, but New York, the energy, there's no city that has the energy that keeps you, keeps you going.

Did you feel your Hawaiianess in New York?

Yes. I have some pictures somewhere that we'll see Rowena Akana and I, and this Filipino guy doing a Hawaiian revue down in Atlantic City for Tutasi Wilson. She was a woman that lived in Florida, and would come up and do these big Hawaiian conventions in Atlantic City. And that was the only time I did Hawaiian. I never really studied Hawaiian. There was a Hawaiian restaurant that all the Hawaiians gathered, but I quickly stayed away from it, because even back then in the 60s, the *Alamih*i Syndrome ... Hawaiians—

Explain that.

The *alamih*i is the black crab that goes crawling up, yeah? And as it gets up to the top, another one will come and grab and pull them both down. So, I didn't want to be part of the *Alamih*i Syndrome.

Definitely not. The ambitious Nake'u Awai had a lot more that he wanted to do, and he kept on his path, a path which eventually led him back to Kalihi. But first, there would be a stop in Hollywood.

I keep expecting that you're gonna say, And then I became a costumer and a design person. But you're not saying that.

No.

When did that come along?

Not until my years in Hollywood. Because then, after the last winter, I came home, and got right into *My Fair Lady* with Linda Ryan. And the choreographer who came from Vegas saw that I had potential, so he pushed me to get the role of Carpathy the Hungarian. So besides being a dancer, I played a secondary part. And so I did that. While I was doing that, the people that I worked with in Atlantic City, *Flower Drum Song*, were being hired for this show in Reno. Direct from Japan, *Hello Tokyo*. We need another guy. Well, there's Joel

Awai, he lives in Honolulu. So they called me. I got hired to go up to Reno. And the three male singer dancers were myself, Jimmy Borges, and Bob Ito. Now, Bob Ito ... Quincy. Remember that show? It was where he was the mortician.

Right.

His assistant was this very well spoken Japanese guy, Bob Ito.

I remember him. Okay, that's Bob Ito.

And he spoke so well. See, Bob Ito is a Canadian, so of course, he will speak very well.

And that's where you met Jimmy Borges?

And that's where I met Jimmy Borges.

What was he like then?

Well, like all the dancers, they make fun of the singer's walk, Jimmy.

[CHUCKLE]

In other words, the same leg and the same arm swing. Instead of opposition, yeah? That's the natural walk. They walk da, da, da, da. Yeah.

So he was definitely a singer, the way he walked.

Yeah, but the three of us had to do singing and dancing. I stayed in West Hollywood until I found my own place. Then I started going to auditions, and I started dancing on television. So that is the next nine years of my life.

Nine years dancing on television and other venues. What kind of dancing did you do?

Jazz; modern dance. Back then, musical specials were big, so I performed like the Jack Benny Special, or the Petula Clark Special, or Elvis had a special I was a part of.

Now, you said you weren't an extraordinary dancer, but it sounds like you're getting some good roles. You're getting hired.

Well, so maybe I was better than some of the others. But I mean, I don't consider myself a solo dancer, because I worked with a number of people who were great solo dancers, like in the Elvis Presley Special.

So what was it like? Did you actually encounter Elvis? You saw him on the set?

Well, Elvis was a very quiet, timid fellow who was like a school kid. And when he tried to relax and socialize, the moment Colonel Parker came in Elvis.

How old was Elvis then? Was he out of the Army?

He was out of the Army, yeah. I don't know. Because this was in preparation for him to go to—because Elvis performed, then he went to movies, then he went into the Army. Now he's out of the Army, and he's gearing to go back to—because then he made a big—after television special, he went to Vegas, yeah? I think Elvis and I would be about the same age. I don't remember. Do you know how old he is, or would be?

No, I don't know how old he would be.

Okay.

So did you have any interaction with him?

No. No. Because he didn't socialize with us, because he was under wraps, or when he did come in and the Colonel would come in, he would jump up and

he would disappear. Yeah; so dancers, they're like cattle. They're just kept in some room until they need them. And the thing with television, which is really junk, is you don't have time to really warm up. So we call it the warm up special. We'd come to work, go get our face done. So you go to make up, get your face done, then we greased up our bodies with um, Bengay. Because then—

You didn't want to hurt. [CHUCKLE]

Yeah. No, because then when you got up to dance, you would be all warmed up. Because Bengay would get your muscles and bones ready for performing. Because you never knew; sometimes you would wait hours before they'd call you. Dancers! So like when these musicals started to dwindle, the first people they got rid of were the dancers. The second people they got rid of were the singers. The last people they got rid of were the actors. That pecking order; yeah. So I worked with a lot of big names. Bill Cosby was one, his special. I came back to do Don Ho's special, because the dancers were hired in LA, and so we came back when he did his special. And I still remember getting flown, a few of us getting flown to Lahaina to work with the children at the elementary school there, where they did this One Paddle, Two Paddle, walking down Front Street. And we were like guides, yeah, or aides or guides, I mean, as dancers. So that was Do Ho's special.

It was in Lahaina, during the shooting of a Don Ho television special, that the germ of the idea of a career in fashion design finally took hold in *Nake'u Awai*. Remember those photos of jumpsuit Elvis, macramé'd beaded belt flying? That was his handiwork.

While I was there, I was fortunate to have a close friend from Japan teach us how to do macramé. And because all Japanese children grow up learning knots, what the sailors do, the art of knotting. And so he taught us how to do macramé. And so this other fellow from Hawaii and I decided to go into business doing macramé belts. This was before the hippies then got hemp and were doing macramé baskets, macramé wall hanging and stuffs. We did belts and accessories. So I sold these belts to stores in Beverly Hills, to fur shops in Beverly Hills, to designers like Bob Mackey, where I still have some drawings. 'Cause Bob Mackey was a good artist, and that's how he started before he got into fashions. He was an artist who drew for designers. And so, he gave me some sketches of macramé that we did for Carol Burnett and stuffs and stuffs, where we did the macramé, and he did these sketches. Because he could make the drawing look like Carol Burnett. And so I got to meet designers besides he, Jean Louis, which is the old film that Lana Turner did, her gowns by Jean Louis. Jean Louis, who was a French designer who also, for a long time, did the uniforms for United Airlines, long ago. Well, he had a factory in Beverly Hills. And what's interesting, half of his factory were Japanese, and the other half of his factory were Haole. And you could tell the difference, because the Japanese factory was zz, zz, zz. The *Haole* factory, [GIBBERISH]. So, I became

aware of clothing design there. My Black choreographer mentor, Claude Thompson, felt that I could do it. So he gave me this job where I was doing costumes for Sammy Davis' girls, because Claude was choreographing them. And he wanted me to do the costumes, so I was given this wonderful budget to do costumes for six girls. And that was my first try at clothing.

What did you do for them? What kind of costumes did you come up with?

I had fun. I was very creative. I went downtown LA and found all these places like where you could buy leather. And I bought chamois. The stuff you clean cars with? I bought skeins of chamois and cut them into—left parts of it rough, because the edges of chamois uncut, and did a wrap blouse for them, and sewed and hung beads on them. And then I got scarves that they did what the Blacks do, a do-wrap, the tight um, head wrap with a knot here, and bought a whole bunch of scarves, and did a scarf skirt. So I asked friends of mine, Well, if I want a scarf skirt, how do you do it? Well, you hang the scarf point-to-point, you sew from point to this point, from point to that point. And so, as long as I knew the construction, then I could pass it on to a seamstress. So they had these scarf skirts. So when they stood ... would be all scarves hanging, but when they spun, it didn't split apart, it connected. And with that, I had these big clunky boots.

And it worked.

Yeah. He loved it, and Sammy loved it too. So on a couple of times, I met Sammy and his wife Altovise, who was one of his dancers that he ended up marrying, and Sammy's little black poodle, who I hated, because he'd run down from the house, and he'd straddle your foot, and shee all over you.

[CHUCKLE]

And I'd go ... [GAGGING]. [CHUCKLE]

When you look at your career, and you're still going, how do you describe it?

Well, it's something that I look forward to every morning. It's not like I don't want to go to work. I get ready, I get up at five-fifteen, I do my things.

What's in your shop? Tell us about your shop.

My shop is a collection of my fashions, and a collection of things that I like, and have cluttered my shop with. Like I have these blown-out Portuguese man-o-war [CHUCKLE] that Colleen Kimura did. So it's like this blue spacey thing, and it has all the tendrils hanging down. And I have an old wreath that Noelani Pomroy did when she came from Kauai. I have an old, old, old, old wreath that Amelia Bailey brought to the shop many years ago, that's still hanging up there. So it's like going in a Chinese shop full of all kinds of—I mean, people come in, and they're like [CHUCKLE]—the look is ... Or they'll come in, and they'll take a long time, because there are too many textures and colors, and blends, and things to look at. I mean, yeah. And I like it. Everybody says, You need a bigger shop. No, I've gotten used to it.

At the time of this conversation in the summer of 2011, Nake'u Awai continues to create and design, an icon of Hawaiian fashion. From his overflowing shop in Kalihi, he continues the dance of life, inspiring a new generation with his timeless

textiles. 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.

When you see Elvis and he has these gyrating hips with these belts with beads on them, those were the belts that we did for Bill Ballou was the designer. A lot of things, as I look back, I've done stuffs that people didn't understand what I did, and why I was doing it until later, and then you see them doing it and understanding it.