

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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[SINGING] At home in the islands, at home in the middle of the sea.

Have you told Robert that you don't think Brothers Cazimero will ever play again?

No, I haven't told him. I think he knows. I tell him that I'm very proud of him doing what he's doing, and that I want him to continue. I miss playing with him a lot. I would love to play with him again, if possible.

Roland Cazimero, together with his brother Robert, are the very definition of contemporary Hawaiian music. While Robert continues to perform, Roland's life journey has taken him in a different direction. Roland Cazimero, next, on Long Story Short.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawai'i's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Roland Cazimero was hospitalized after falling ill during a May Day performance on Maui in 2014. Since then, Roland's health problems have prevented the Brothers Cazimero from continuing their highly successful forty-year run. Today, this composer, singer, master guitarist, and self-described bradda from Kalihi, remembers how it all started, playing in his parents' band.

Mama had a group called Betty and Her Leo Aloha, which was Betty and her Voices of Love. Leo, voices; aloha, love. I gotta tell you. Betty and Her Leo Aloha; I would go with my dad and we would set up for the gigs, you know. And we'd go down to like, the Pearl Harbor substation or destroyer, or wherever the place we're gonna play. People, you know: Hi, Leo; Hi, Leo. My dad go, Hi! You know, like that.

And moving around. I'm going—

Who's Leo?

--What the hell? Who's Leo? You know. And finally, one day, I was looking at a poster, and it said Betty and Her Leo Aloha. And I went, Oh, my god; Betty and Leo, and our last name is Aloha.

My mom had a couple of bands. Like, my Auntie Lovey played piano, this other lady, Rose Kamauna played piano after her. Daddy Camacho; all these different players that would come to the house, and every Tuesday night they would have rehearsals, or Thursday, depending. And by the time we were six years old, we would start remembering the songs. And Robert and I always had good ears. So, we would learn the melodies. My sister Tootsie, we made her sing the lead, 'cause she wasn't good at parts. And Robert and I would fill in, depending on what key it was in, and who would take the second part, who would take the third.

No formal training?

Well, Robert had piano lessons. He was my Mama and Daddy's pride and joy, you know. My dad would always say, Robert, keep playing the piano, I'll buy you your own college.

You know. He never said that to me, ever.

Now, why not?

Um ... kolohe.

Oh ...

I was very kolohe.

So, you had the talent, but you didn't have the discipline. Or the desire?

I don't know. But Robert played piano. And he was playing the song The Nearness of You in F. And my dad pulled out the bass and taught me how to play The Nearness of You in the Key of F. And he taught me the basics. I was about seven years old, I guess.

With a bass?

And I played bass; yeah.

I wish I had a picture of that.

Oh; it was funny. Because when I started playing with my mom, I would sit on a high stool with a big jacket, a long jacket, so it looked like I'm a big guy. And play at the back of the stage. And after we take a break, I would have to go outside in the car, 'cause I wasn't allowed to stay in the bar. My dad was dating the female bass player at the time, and my mom got mad and fired her. And I got drafted.

And you started with the bass, which is later what Robert played when you played with him.

When I became part of the Sunday Mānoa, I taught myself how to play guitar. And then, when Robert and I played with Peter, I taught Robert how to play bass. When my mom sang, you know, she loved to drink, love her 'inu. And she drank scotch, which became my drink. But I would sing the high parts for her. That's why when you listen to The Brothers Caz, you hear the high part? That's because I sang behind Mama. Whatever song she sang, I always doubled her part.

So, before you learned to do Hawaiian falsetto, you were singing a woman's part?

Yeah.

Wow.

Because Mama needed the help. We played at all their parties, you know. And I even got to go with my mom on the Lurline, you know. We'd get on a tugboat, the Mikioi, and take us out and we'd get onboard and ride in. And you know, along with all the old-timers, Auntie Flossie, all these wonderful ladies, you know. And they took Robert and I under their arms. Come babe; baby, baby come, come. You know. You make stink ear, 'cause Auntie Flossie not too good today; okay?

You make stink ear?

Yeah; make stink ear.

Auntie Flossie not quite singing that good today. And you know, we would laugh with her, but whatever they wanted, you know.

Your dad worked at Pearl Harbor Public Works?

Yeah, the Public Works Center. My dad, you know, I gotta thank my dad because one day, I was sick, and he says to me, Boy, are you sick? And I said, Oh, yes, Dad. And I was; I said, Oh, yes, Dad, I'm really sick, Dad. He goes, Mm, are you dead? I went, No, Dad, I'm not dead. He goes, Okay, go change your clothes, get in the car, we going work.

That's a life lesson.

That stayed with me all my life. Am I dead? No. Get up, go to work.

Tell us where you grew up, and who were your siblings? What was life like in the home, besides the entertainment part?

My dad and mom were married before. My dad had married a Spencer woman, and then, they had four. My mom married a Heirakuji man; they had four. And then, they got together and had the last four, which was my brother Rodney, Robert, my sister Tootsie, and I. When they came here, they lived in the Pali Hotel.

Where were they from?

Daddy was the luna for the sugarcane company.

Where?

In Kohala.

In Kohala; okay.

And Mama was from Kohala.

That's right; the Cazimeros are from Kohala.

Yeah. And then, eventually, they moved to Kalihi, where we lived at Palena Street, P Street.

With all the kids?

At one time, yeah.

That's twelve kids.

You know, that wasn't the, the heavy part. The heavy part was during football season. One would come home crying, one would come home happy.

Different schools.

Yeah. The rest of 'em could give a rip. You know. But next week, another sister would be crying, another brother would be, you know, cheering.

And you were the baby; you're even younger than your twin, right?

Yeah.

Kanoe.

Fifteen minutes.

Yeah, I was the baby. And eventually, came to the point where, a force to be scared of. 'Cause you know, when we started having family meetings, you know, if I didn't think things were right, I'd go straight to my number one brother and tell him where I stood about that, and what I thought about it, and that I wanted to bring it up at the meetings, and you know, whether he would back me up or not.

So, you needed permission to speak.

Well, in a sense. But you know, I didn't want to say anything and get shot down. I was bullied a lot. And so, I learned to fight.

Bullied by ...

Classmates. You know, 'cause I was kind of skinny and runty. I got bust up. You know. And then, I started lifting weights, and then I started taking martial arts, some. And the best thing I did for myself was learning how to punch stone walls.

Ouch. Really?

Yeah.

Literally?

Literally. You know, just bleeding. But every day, go out there and punch stone walls. And knowing that if I hit you, you won't get up.

Wow ...

And so, I stopped being bullied.

After Roland Cazimero graduated from Kamehameha Schools, he and his brother Robert joined Peter Moon's band, The Sunday Mānoa. In 1969, this trio released Guava Jam, which sparked the beginning of a new movement in Hawaiian music.

When we joined Peter, it was a given, you know, that Peter wanted to do Hawaiian music, and so did Robert and I. And the rest is history.

You and Robert, and others woke up and—well, Peter Moon was one—woke up Hawai'i. You were at the vanguard of the Hawaiian renaissance.

I still can't spell that.

But you know you were there. How did all of that happen? You know, Hawaiian music, Hawaiian culture, Hawaiian language, all of a sudden became something to be proud of. Because truth be told, for years, there wasn't a lot of pride on the part of Hawaiians because of what had happened in history.

Yeah. We didn't know. We didn't know. We were having fun, you know. We just played music. You know, Robert and I had enough repertoire that when Peter came up with an intro or something, we had the music to fit in there.

And you knew Hawaiian music. You knew mostly contemporary Hawaiian music; right?

Well, we knew both.

Both; you knew traditional and contemporary. And then, you put your own spin on contemporary Hawaiian music, with Guava Jam.

Yeah.

That wonderful, wonderful recording.

And it was a wonderful time. So, you know, how did it grow? We don't know. It just kept growing. We just kept: Well, let's do another album. And people gravitated to the stuff we were doing.

You mentioned how sometimes you, Peter, Robert, you all played off each other, and magic happened. Music is an art, and the eye is in the beholder. So, I'm sure it must have happened the other way too, where maybe one had a great idea, and somebody else didn't like that way of doing it.

I mean, you guys must have bumped up against each other, too; right?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

How was that? Because it's kind of personal when someone doesn't like your art.

Usually, they didn't like me.

Really? The others too, would tend to agree with each other?

Too rock and roll.

Oh, too rock and roll; got it. 'Cause Jimi Hendrix is your hero, always.

All Along the Watchtower, you know.

And I love that. You know, I love that, eeee. You know.

Always Jimi for you.

Yeah. And you know, sometimes, my suggestions or what I wanted to use or do at the time, it didn't sell with them. But, you know, I didn't care. I didn't care. You know, I didn't make a big thing about it. I said, Oh, okay, that's fine. And then, whatever they brought up, I'd make sure that I put my flavor in there.

Roland Cazimero and his brother Robert formed their own band in 1974, The Brothers Cazimero. They played together for so long that they became an institution, performing for years at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, and at the Waikiki Shell on May Day. When The Brothers weren't performing or producing albums together, Roland was a solo artist. He recorded several albums, each with its own cultural inspiration.

That is such a magical album you did; Pele. How does it begin in your head? I mean, do you hear the music in your head before you ever play it?

In Pele, I heard a great canoe came in from the universe, carrying a woman called Pele. A big canoe; a canoe so huge. You know. And I see it coming in from the cosmos, with Kaumuali'i standing there. And what you see is Earth ... coming in from Kuaahelani to Earth, bringing Pele carrying an egg in her bosom. Hi'iaka i ka poli o Pele; Hi'iaka in the bosom of Pele. You know. And so, I hear the thunderous . . .

I am ruler of this land, I rule with a strong hand. I am Pele. I am Pele. I am Pele. Pele. I am here to stay. I'm your nows and yesterdays.

So, you visualize, and then you hear it.

Am everything you see.

Lot of times, I just write the words; they just come.

While Roland Cazimero was busy pushing the envelope of Hawaiian music, garnering recognition and awards for his work, his personal life was a different story. It was careening out of control.

You were a bad boy?

Yeah.

Playboy?

A player. Sometimes your lust ... that's the word I want to use, your lust overrides you, to the point where, you know, my lust took me down to the point of like, I didn't care.

Didn't care about what?

About what I was doing, with who I was doing it with, and where I was going, if at all. Whether it was hurting me or not, I didn't care. I was in such lust that, you know, I'd fight the person to tell me that, You shouldn't be there. But I didn't care. You know. But one day, I took a good look at my two twins. You know. And when they said, Dad, Dad, you know, I knew it was time to stop. And at that point ... people that I felt very close to me were not around. You know, I was there for them, I helped them out, I did whatever I could, you know, stood up for them, whatever. And when I needed them to stand up for me, they were gone. You know, alone; alone. You know, when you're alone, what's the use of being here? What's the use of being a part of all this? It means nothing.

And you're saying you were alone, even though you had all kinds of admiring audiences, and professional respect, but you felt alone.

Alone. And you know, I was ready to just end it all, commit suicide. You know, 'cause there was nothing for me to stick around for. At that point, I was so alone, I didn't even think about my own children. And you know, when you're at that point in your life, you'll just step off the edge, or whatever. A good friend of mine, John, I heard him in my head. If you ever need me, Boz, call me. He and I would go to the mountains, you know, in his jeep. And I did; I called him. And he came within five minutes, and he took my hand, and he says, Pray with me, and ask the Lord to forgive you of all your sins. And I did. You know, he said, Sinners pray with me. And it was just like a whole lot was lifted off my soul, off my body, and it looked like a good day again. You know. And I hated Him; I hated the Lord, because he took my good friend away from me. We were close pals, smoking pals, hit the mountains and, you know. But when I was at the lowest point in my life, I believe it was like he was right here in my heart and in my head. Call me, Boz; call me. And I did. And when he left that day, I said to him, So what, you going take me to the ocean tomorrow and baptize me? He goes, See, you got the program already.

And that's what happened?

Yup. He took me to Pokai Bay. We drove all the way down to the country, and blessed me. And I've never looked back. It was a good time. All of that was a good time. I don't say I regret it, 'cause I don't. You know, it was part of me learning and part of my writing. And I'm glad that time is pau. You know.

Why are you glad it's pau?

Because I have my wife. You know.

You've had a lot of health problems in the last two and a half years. And you've been right there by his side. It must be really challenging for both of you.

Yes, it is.

I went from zero doctors, to eight. And my doctors kept telling me that if I kept up this stressful life I was living, I would be dead by the end of the year. And so, they made me change my diet. They kept changing my medicines.

So, what's your outlook? You know, you haven't played music, except as on a drop-in basis, I think.

Not even.

Not even. So, no music since you left the stage on May Day, 2014?

I play funerals. You know, I'm still playing funerals. I go in, and I do a few songs. I kinda developed carpal tunnel. So, I can't squeeze, you know, although, I hope to get better.

So, carpal tunnel. Is it your heart?

ROLAND: Yeah; I have ... what?

LAUWA'E: Congestive heart.

ROLAND: Diabetes, you know.

LAUWA'E: All of the above.

ROLAND: All of the above. You know.

And they all act on each other, I'm sure.

LAUWA'E: Yeah. They all interact.

Your public image is, you're the bantering, smart aleck, funny half of the The Brothers Cazimero. And you were just giving your brother a hard time, and it was super-funny.

I knew what song was coming up, so I'd start hitting it; I'd start hitting it. And then, you know, as soon as I knew he was gonna start singing, I start strumming. You learn that after years of playing. You know, I love playing with my brother. I told him once, I don't have to play with you, I love playing with you. But if you want to go on and go do your hōlau, go right ahead, because I don't need you, Robert. I can go build a band. And I have. You know, I can go work with this, I can do this. But I love playing with you. I don't get that kick with anybody else in the world, that I do with you.

But, you know, I'm still writing, I'm still in the recording business. I have a lot of things that I want to record.

But you know that your main concern has to be your health; right? That's your real business right now.

Yeah. I have to take care of myself, and still record. You know. Otherwise, I'll just go back into the same spin. And I don't like that spin. I've been there long enough, you know, so I think the only thing I want to spin is a record or something like that. But for spinning in my life all the way to the cosmos and goodbye. You know. No; the Lord has better things for me to do.

Mahalo to Roland Cazimero for your tremendous musical achievements. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.

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Are you still a rebel, though? 'Cause bad boy and rebel are not necessarily the same thing.

I'm still a rebel. You know. I stand for Hawai'i. I stand for everybody to be treated right. But I put away the bad boy that hung with the bad people. You know. Lot of people don't know that about me, but I did hang around with the hoodlums. And I don't regret it, because you know, there was a camaraderie there that you can't put aside, you know. At times when you needed it, you know, they'd come next to you, and they stand up with you. And if need be, they'd back you up. You know. In the world of

entertainment, you know, I always tell people, John DeMello took care of all the high makamakas, you know, Robert and Ala take care of the middle ground and some of the high makamakas. And I hung out with the hoodlums. 'Cause you know, you gotta respect them, too.

[END]