

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: Louis "Moon" Kauakahi**

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**You're always the guy in the group who's busy arranging things and making sure everybody else is ok, and often you give short answers. You don't talk about yourself that much, do you?**

Not really. I like to be the background, and the reason why is that the background, um...even when, when I was performing, I'm still performing, I like to make sure that whoever's up front is well-supported.

**From jam sessions in Nānākuli backyards to Carnegie Hall, he composed, arranged, and performed the music that the Mākaha Sons shared with the world. Meet Moon Kauakahi next on Long Story Short.**

One-on-one, engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people. Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

**Aloha māi kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. He was not the best known member of the iconic Hawaiian music group, which gave the world the soulful voice of Israel "IZ" Kamakawiwa'ole, but he was the backbone. Business manager, music arranger, and six string guitarist of the Mākaha Sons of Ni'ihau, and he always kept his day job, his other career. His full name is Louis Robert Kauakahi, but almost everyone calls him "Moon", which goes back to his fascination with the work of the late Hawai'i musician, Peter Moon. Moon Kauakahi was an original member of the Mākaha Sons of Ni'ihau, which formed in 1976. After Israel Kamakawiwa'ole left the group seventeen years later to become a solo artist, Moon stayed on with the reconfigured group, the Mākaha Sons, until he retired from it in 2014. Kauakahi was born and raised in Nānākuli, O'ahu, to parents who came from opposite ends of the island chain. His father's side of the family brought musical talents.**

Both my grandfather and my father were musicians, uh, on the island of Kaua'i, and my father moved here in, in the thirties, and so on and so forth. And he never really pursued a professional career, so to speak. They used to just hang out at one of my grand uncle's house on the weekends, and they'd all get together, my, my grand uncle, my father, sometimes my grandfather, and some other musicians. Um, Willie K's father, Uncle Manu, used to, um, come on the weekends way down in, in Nānākuli, and also

be a part of this huge jam session. But that's where, um, my music background, probably, upbringing-

**Were they doing Hawaiian music?**

Hawaiian music. That's all they knew. And they would have the instruments all over. They would jump on any other instrument and, and, um, and just play something and sing something Hawaiian. I remember Uncle Manu one time, um...we had a concert in Lanikūhonua and he was there, and then we were there to perform, and he, he didn't know who I was per se, but he knew the group. So, he looked, he said, "Which one of you is Kauakahi?" I said, "That's me." So, then he mentioned my father's Hawaiian name. He said, "Who is Oli'oli to you?" I said, "That's my father." And it was, "Ah, yeah. Your father and I...your father taught me how to play mandolin." And I went, "Great! He didn't teach me, but wonderful." I picked up the 'ukulele one day, I was five years old, and I don't know how, I knew three chords. C, F, G7. I don't know how I knew it, but I would pick up my grandma's 'ukulele and I would start strumming. The first song I ever knew was a song called 'Cotton Fields.' It was only used three keys: C, F, G7. And I started strumming. And how I learned how to play that, I don't know. Even up until, to-I said, "Maybe I, I may have been watching my father perform." But I was, I mean, I was only five. and I said, "It had to be four or three, but I wouldn't..." Well, I take that back. I can remember events even when I, while I was three years old. I remember my first spanking. Definitely. Three years old. How I got to, to know how to play 'ukulele, uh, I don't know. I just picked up my grandmother's and started strumming one day. I could picture in my mind how to hold a key. And I pic-I played, I held a C, I said, "Okay, that works." 'Cause I think I watched, um, I watch other musicians, my father...and to me, it's, okay if you put your fingers here, and you-it makes a certain sound. And so, I just held a key, uh, the C, the F, G7, and I started singing. And every time I'd go visit my grandma, I'd play that one song. I ask her like, "Can I borrow your 'ukulele, grandma?" "Yep." I'll play that song two or three times, put the 'ukulele back in the room, and that's it. Every time.

**Did you ever learn, uh, to read music?**

Yeah.

**When did you learn that?**

Uh, in the sixth grade.

**Oh.**

From sixth, seventh grade, yeah, sixth grade to all the way, uh, 'til after I graduated, uh, throughout high school.

**Which is why you're the arranger.**

Yeah. And, speaking of arrangements, my first arrangement didn't come across very well with my music teacher, but I did it anyway. Um, he was my music teacher, band teacher, music theory teacher from elementary to high school. And he created a group in, at Nānāikapono Elementary School called the Nānāikapono Boys Choir. We had a lot...and one thing I noticed, back then, we had a lot of good singers. They just loved to sing and loved to do whatever. Um, so he created the Nānāikapono Boys Choir, and I was a, I was a member. Jerome Koko, and...we were all...Danny Couch, James-Jimmy, that we knew him as. We never knew him as Danny. We just, we call him Jimmy or James. He was part of the choir, and his brothers. He had numerous brothers. And then we were all part of this choir. I think the choir consisted of well over a hundred, some odd. And then he would be our teacher. And then one day he was teaching this one song, it's a Hawaiian song. It was called 'The Hawaiian Wedding Song.' Not the Elvis Presley one, the original Hawaiian name. Ku'u... 'Lei Aloha, Lei Makamae.' And he was teaching us that song. So, he taught one part to half of the, the, the group there. And I'm...and he was getting ready to teach the other part, and while he was doing that, and I'm listening... 'kay, this part, this part. And I went...I turned to some of my, uh, they were probably some of my classmates, some of the people and the other boys. I said, "I hear a third part." And they go, "A third part?" I said, "Yeah, I hear a third part." They said, "There's-there are only two parts in this song." I hear a third part. And it's okay. So, I got, pulled some, some guys together and I said, "This is where the third part come in. This one." And I gave 'em the note. I just hummed a note, I said, "This note. And we do it this way." So we do it this way. So, we started doing...we started, you know, going back and forth. I said, "Listen to it." So, we started going. I said, "I'll give the pitch, don't worry. When, when it comes to this, I'll give everybody the pitch and you just join in." Okay, great. So, the, uh, uh, music teacher's teaching this and then finishing, "Okay let's-okay, let's put it together." So okay, so he starts to play, we start off in unison, we break out into two-part harmony. Surprise! There's a third part in there. So, so he's doing it, he goes..."Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop. Where is this third part coming in from?" And he goes, "It sounds good but it doesn't belong there." I looked at, "Oh well, we tried." My first arrangement. Years later I recorded that arrangement. Just, just in memory of, you know-but I added a fourth part this time to the song. But it was, it was interesting. And I never really thought it as it being an arrangement or it, it being the start of something that I would later do as a musician and an arranger, but that time comes to mind every now, when, when they ask me, "When was your first arrangement?" I went, "Sixth grade."

**So, when you decided to pick a career, you, you went into basic training.**

Yep.

### **Army.**

March of 1973, I enlisted, and I was still in high school. Um, there was only one recruiter that ever came, that ever braved, uh, the drive out to the leeward side. It was only a two, two-lane highway. And, you know, out of all the services, only the National Guard came to our high school. And I'm thinking, "I wonder why." I said, "Maybe...maybe they're not, not familiar, or they just didn't dare." So, and it was a Hawaiian guy, uh, Hawaiian person, who, uh, I ended up working with in the latter part of my career in the military. And he came and enlisted almost my whole class. All the guys, even the girls, uh, that, some of my classmates in, into the National Guard. A lot of them were stationed in Schofield. I, myself, Jerome Koko, and another person, another graduate from my class, went to Diamond Head, and we ended up in a fuel artillery. And I went, "Okay, where's the rest of...you know, where're the rest of our classmates?" So, we met the next day, went to school, and said, "Where were you folks?" They said, "Where were you folks?" Said, "We're in Schofield." "What are you doing in Schofield? We're in Diamond Head." "What are you doing in Diamond Head?" "I don't know."

### **They, they, they chose roles for you?**

They just, yeah, exactly. So...and we, you know, went into the, the National Guard after we graduated July 6<sup>th</sup>, I think, 1973. Off to basic training on Pan-American Airlines.

### **And you intended to make the military your career. And you did. How long did you work at the Department of Defense?**

I...

### **State.**

Well I actually, I...enlisted in '73, I stayed six years. It was to fulfill my contract, but only as a weekend, um, you know, person who, who on the weekend and two weeks, uh, annual training. Then I got out for a year and a half, until one of my former supervisors, bosses, asked me to come back because they had a full-time position that he felt I would be perfect for. Uh, so I said, "Okay." So, I came-I went back in, in October 1980, October 3<sup>rd</sup> I believe, reenlisted, uh, went for the interview, and December 1<sup>st</sup> 1980, I started active duty with the National Guard. And that went 'til September of 2002 when I retired. So, all that years stayed with me. And the background, I'll talk to you, because I was very strong, uh, with, with administration. And it started from high school, and I would be working in the Administration Office and I picked up a lot of the things, and I liked-

### **In which Administration Office in high school?**

In, in, in my school administration. After school, I would work in the, the admission-Administration Office. After, uh, you know, for about an hour and a half. Then my father would pick me up, and would take me up to Mākaha Inn, way back when it was Mākaha Inn, and I would work from 4:30 to midnight.

**Doing what?**

Bellhop.

**So, you, you've always worked.**

I've always worked. Even in the summer, I'd work.

**While pursuing his career in the National Guard, Louis "Moon" Kauakahi continued to play music. Although he was serious about Hawaiian music, he hadn't thought of it as a profession until he met Skippy and Israel, as well as their sister, Lydia Kamakawiwa'ole, who Moon married. The music group went through several configurations, especially with Skippy's death, before settling into the foursome that became the Mākaha Sons of Ni'ihau, which included Moon, Bruddah Iz, and the brothers, Jerome and John Koko.**

**No doubt about it, Peter Moon and the Cazimero's with him, they just turned everybody on their head over the sound-**

They...exactly. I think, when they came out, and there was a year, '76 or '77, when they had more Hawaiian albums come out that one year. I think they had 80, and I went, "Wow." But that was at, uh, Hawaiian music boom just came from nowhere.

**And you were going to join that boom very shortly.**

Exactly, yeah, we were a part of it.

**So how, so how did that happen? First of all, did marriage come after that music group? How, how-what was the order with the, with, um, your, your wife, Lydia?**

Yeah, we got to, we, we started rehearsing more...and more, and then that's how I met my, my wife Lydia. When we were Skippy, Iz-we had a bigger group then. We had Skippy, Israel. we had Melvin Amina, Jerome Koko. We-and later on we brought in, uh, Sonny Lim, and then we had some, some other musicians. We'd just sit around and just play on-under the banyan tree. Then we started recording. We recorded with five.

**Who were?**

Skippy Kamakawiwa'ole, Israel Kamakawiwa'ole-everybody knows him as Bruddah Iz. Uh, myself, Jerome Koko, Sam Gray. We recorded the first two albums. The second album was with Sonny Lim, who was on steel guitar. The third album we picked up Melvin Amina and Abraham Nahulu on bass, and Melvin on twelve-string guitar. So, we still had five members. And then a fourth album, we were the four of us: Skippy, Is, Mel, and myself, for a while, for a long time. And then Skippy passed away, then Mel formed his own group, and...and so, it was myself, Israel, and that's when John and Jerome came in.

**You settled into the role of business manager, I think, right?**

Skippy was, uh, back then, he was the...spokesperson. Israel, I know Israel just wanted to jump in there and take that role, but we, we respected Skippy, and he was the leader.

**Was he the older-**

He was the oldest, yeah. And, um, Israel was the clown. Um, myself, I was the arranger. Um...um, yeah. Basically, back then, and Jerome, he was on twelve-string and then 'ukulele. And then as the group got smaller, so we each had a role. And my role basically stayed the same, as arranger-composer.

**So, Skippy was, uh-as long as he was there, he was the front person?**

Yeah.

**And then how did the roles evolve after he passed away?**

After he passed away then, uh, I took over the leadership, the leadership of the group. We were just about to open up again for a five-week performance at The Ranch House over in 'Āina Haina-no longer there.

**I remember that well.**

So, we, we're-ready or not, here we come. We-the, the-in five weeks we gotta start.

**Did you practice?**

Uh...not then. I said, "Okay, how do we do this?" They said, "We follow Israel's lead." You know, and, and, and that-for, for that night, we just did, you know, basic songs that everybody knew because we didn't quite, uh, get the sound, what we wanted. So, we stayed there for five weeks. After that, we disappeared. And then they said, "Oh, we want to sign you folks up for another five weeks." I said, "That's not, that's not gonna

happen." They said, "Why?" I said, "Because we need to put together a sound." So we, we got out of the public's eye for about a year, and that's all we did. We rehearse and practice and rehearse, every chance we had. We came back about a year later. Well, in, in the meantime, the entertainment director for The Ranch House kept calling me periodically, "Are you folks ready to come back?" I said, "No, we're not ready." Because we had a rotating schedule between us, Peter Moon band, and Olomana. Each only had five, five weeks. And they kept calling, "Are you folks ready?" "Not yet." "Are you folks ready?" "Not yet." And finally the day came, "Are you ready?" "I think we're ready." So, we went back on the scene, they went, "Oh my gosh." The sound was tight, was together, and the song and everything else, and they said, "Oh my gosh, are you folks ever ready." And I said, "Yeah, it took us a year to put together." And we, we just went from there.

**The Mākaha Sons of Ni'ihau music group took off, figuratively and literally, performing around the world and producing numerous CD's. And yet there were personal struggles behind the scenes, and there was great sadness with each untimely death of members of the Kamakawiwa'ole family, and later, John Koko.**

**I think nowadays, uh, when younger people look at the Mākaha Sons and what was accomplished, I think they see this extremely successful, together group, and probably don't know that you guys really faced a lot of hardships. And, I mean, there was poverty.**

Yeah.

**There was drug abuse.**

Transportation.

**Transportation issues. I recall being at City Hall once where you guys were playing and, I believe Iz was, uh, lifted on stage by a cherry picker.**

Yeah, a lot of times in that-that's why he rarely went on, um, performances outer island. Or, you know, farther than that.

**Because same thing, right? The-**

Same thing.

**-going up the steps, he had to be lifted up.**

Yeah. He, he was...when it came to parts, uh, music, he was the easiest person for me to work with because he could remember parts and, and he was always on key. He

was-he could come up with something in the spur of the moment. He was a comedian's nightmare, trust me.

**What do you mean?**

If, if Frank De Lima's on stage and Israel walks in, Frank freezes because he knows that if...as long as Frank would do his own show, and, you know, and, and the audience, he would be fine. If he even as much turns to Israel and says something, the battle is on.

**He will heckle him back.**

Oh, he was quick. Israel was quick, and that's what Frank was nervous about because he's-his comeback would be so quick, and he wouldn't know sometimes-so, on his breaks, he would come and say, "Please, Iz, please don't, don't do this." "You started it." Frank, I mean, yeah, Frank De Lima, even Mel Veen. When he, he and Mel Veen would get into this, oh, it would be hilarious. It would be so much fun. I said, "Is somebody taping this?"

**You know, all this time, you're working full-time.**

Yes.

**John and Jerome, were they working full-time?**

John was working full-time as well. Well, both of them.

**So, so these were pretty much eight to five jobs, right? And, and music? Skippy and, and, uh, when he was alive, and then Iz, they did not do that.**

They were more music. So, they relied more on, on what the performances, you know, we had.

**So that was a harder way to make a living then-**

Yeah, exactly.

**'Cause they only relied on that?**

Yeah, so most of the times we would have to try and find something, you know, some, some place to play or some performance.

**Iz was, was very transparent about drug abuse and how he finally stopped it, but it was a part of his life, and it affected the group, too.**

You know, well actually, back then, it was, not looked upon, but it was, uh, more or less...if you were, you were playing music, then you had to be doing something like that.

**I see.**

If you're a musician. Well, you didn't have to be, you can do something like...I tried it one time, I got sick, threw up and everything. I said, "Never again." And I went, "That's not for me." And I went, "Blech." Even to-I can, I, I can smell the thing and I'm looking around. If somebody has a chicken coop around here, that's what it smells like. And I, I just never went back. I said, "Yuck."

**But you, you all had to be kind of forgiving of each other in the sense that there were limitations. I mean-**

Yeah.

**-Drug abuse, and, uh, illness, and um, I, I mean...and in between soaring music. I mean, it's...you really had-it was, it was so much give and take there.**

It's not something that we looked forward to, but we, we, we somehow had to prepare for, you know, back of our minds. Especially when we had the four, um, well, the four, uh, with, with-the first quartet was with Skippy, Israel, myself, and Mel. And if one or the other, Skippy, uh, if Skippy would get sick, we, we could handle. If Israel gets sick, I said, "Well, we gotta find out who's gonna be doing the talking." Uh, so on and so forth. And then when we had myself, Israel, John, and Jerry, you know-when the four of us were together, it was great. Now, if we-if Israel was gone, then we had to prepare for it, you know. So now we are a trio again, and then we, just before we'd go on stage, "Okay, you just do-okay, this-you do all this parts and everything else." And, and we-I already knew who, who was strong in what part. I said, "You just do your part and I'll, I'll fill in the pukas." Then now, the, the, the thing-the situation was okay, who's gonna do the narration? Who's gonna be talking up there? So evidently, uh, Jerome decided to do that. I said, "Great. You know, if you do that, we can cover with the music." But it's not something we really looked forward to but we had to prepare for.

**And, of course, there were deaths.**

Yeah. Numerous deaths. You know, and, um, it started, you know, with my-my father in law passed away, and then immediately after, about, uh, when was it, about a year after, then Skippy passed away. Then after Skippy, and then my mother in law passed away. And then my sister in law passed away. She was the baby of the family. And she

passed away, and then Iz, and then my wife. So, I lost the whole family. You know, so...it was tragic, but...

**Any advice how to get through something like that?**

You know, how do you...how do you explain something where...you know, how do you get beyond the, the hurt? How do you get around it? How do you...and each person is very unique in that sense, you know. So-

**But, but you were used to doing something. Did you keep doing something?**

I kept doing something.

**Or did you take time to decompress?**

I, I couldn't decompress because then they would all come back, yeah. So, I had to, and in my doing numerous things, I managed to decompress. Yeah.

**And now you're remarried.**

Yes.

**So much, so much has changed. I mean, now you live in 'Ewa Beach.**

Yes.

**You, you hold down a-well, you've always held down a, a full-time job, but now you're not rushing off to do music every night.**

Yes, I retired twice but I work hard now, even after two retirements. My gosh, I'm thinking. Uh, and a lot of times, you know, friends would ask me, "Can you, you know, can you perform with us?" I said, "Sure." "Can you do it, like, every week?" I went, "Uh, then I wouldn't be in retirement, now, would I?"

**And what was it like when you left the Mākaha Sons? Because there came a time when you said, "Hey guys, I'm pau." And, and, and, and so the group had to regroup again.**

It was one of the hardest decisions for me because I've been, I was in the group, with the group from before it started, you know. Of course, I was really overwhelmed with so many things going on, and there wasn't, um...there were times where something would occur right at the spur of the moment, and I would have to fly off somewhere and I had to tell my boss, "I got to fly off." I just started here, this work. I'm on six-month probation, yeah, they could give me the boot at any time. But they were understanding. And

then, so I said, "I can't be doing this." So that's why I, I, I said, "I gotta retire." I said, "I gotta leave the group." I didn't say, "I'm, I'm gonna quit the group." I just said I'm retiring from being a full-time musician, which, which I did. And then, you know, and you know, I said, "I don't want to leave, but I need to. I have to."

**That was a long time, a long time in the business, very long time.**

My plan wasn't to become a professional musician, it was never-I just wanted to play music and I wanted to sound like-I wanted to create a sound that would be approved, not enjoyed, approved by those who were already performing it live, you know, the legends, that they would approve of what we were doing.

**You weren't looking to outshine, you were looking to-**

Find approval. Am I doing the right thing? You know, is it enjoyable? Will it be-will I be able...will what we're doing-uh...will we be able to please the majority? You know, most likely-most of the time we wanted to please the older ones, because if we can get past the older ones, we didn't care what the young ones said.

**The Mākaha Sons won numerous Nā Hōkū Hanohano awards for their many CD's, including lifetime achievement, and were also inducted into the Hawaiian Music Hall of Fame. We close with a performance of the Mākaha Sons recorded in 2004 for PBS Hawaii's program Nā Mele: Traditions in Hawaiian Song. Mahalo to Louis Robert "Moon" Kauakahi of 'Ewa Beach for sharing your story and your music with us. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.**

'Round in Waikīkī/Tahaua by Mākaha Sons

Out across the sand down by the sea  
Tourist wading in the water up past their knees  
Bathing beauties soaking sun 'til their skin turns red  
Sight seers riding by on their rented mopeds  
Going 'round and 'round in Waikīkī.

Up Monsarrat around Diamond Head  
Bright and early all the surfers are out bed  
On the beach, with their boards, oh, who can tell  
All we know they're in the water waiting for that swell  
Going 'round and 'round in Waikīkī.

The old band stand down by the park  
And the Waikīkī shell, indeed, a true landmark  
The Kodak Hula Show invites one and all

Singing old songs like Hawai'i Calls  
Going 'round and 'round in Waikīkī.

Ta ha ua lā i ta huahua'i lā, 'uhē'uhene  
E 'uhene lā i pili ko 'olua lā, 'uhē'uhene  
E 'uhene lā, e 'uhene lā, e 'uhene lā, e 'uhene lā  
E 'uhene lā i pili ko 'olua lā.

The Hawaiians never let a bit of worry, worry them, they never worry  
And they will surely never let a bit of hurry, hurry they, they never hurry  
They take it easy, easy, easy; they never worry; they never hurry  
And you will find it is better if you take it easy.  
E 'uhene lā i pili ko 'olua lā, 'uhē'uhene

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