

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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Yes, I want to go as far as I can, while I can, um, just as long as I stay healthy, mentally and physically, doing that. So, that's...that's my life's path. That's what I'm trying to do.

From dazzling passers-by on the streets of Waikīkī to.... large audiences around the world. Meet this fiery 'ukulele virtuoso 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 mai kākou, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Some call it the instrument of aloha. The 'ukulele dates back to the late 1800s when Portuguese immigrants brought the small guitar-like instrument to Hawai'i. Quite a few Islanders have learned to pull music magic from the 'ukulele, and performers including Ohta-San, Braddah Iz and Jake Shimabukuro have taken the sound of their strings well beyond our shores. Now there's a new generation with 'ukulele in hand. A leading young talent, Taimane Gardner from Honolulu, is blazing her own trail to see how far she can go.

So, uh, you're an east Honolulu girl by birth.

I am. I'm born and raised from 'Āina Haina.

What was growing up like?

Uh, growing up was fun. I loved being on stage, even since I was a young child. Uh, my mom put me in ballet classes, and I remember we had a recital and I was, I was telling everyone what to do, even at that age and, um, my dad gave me my first 'uke when I was five.

Were your parents in show biz?

Um, my mother ran in the Miss Universe Pageant as Miss Samoa, so she was very talented. She was a singer. She was a dancer. She was very beautiful. Um, and then my dad is more of the business side. He didn't really have much of, uh, a musical side, but

taught me more about the business side. But my mom's side, the Samoan side, they're all musicians. So, we-it's just in, in our blood.

Do you have brothers and sisters?

I do. I have one little sister. She is 23 now, so, eight-year difference, um, and she goes to UH, and she's a track runner. She got uh, a scholarship, uh, as a track runner, so she's doing that, and she's-she's like five seven. She's really tall and she's blonde, so she took from my-from my dad's side. So, she's blonde and then I'm brunette.

What kind of business, uh, is your dad in?

When I was younger, he worked at Punahou. Uh, so I got to go to Punahou, which was awesome. And then, uh, his mother passed, and so we decided to move to New Zealand for a couple years, and then we missed Hawai'i, so we came back. And then he runs his own business called, uh, Visiting Angels. It's in-home care for seniors. So, he gets care-givers and people who need help, and he puts them together.

Oh, it sounds like a public service and a business.

Yup.

Yeah.

Yeah.

So, I'm-I'm just trying to imagine you as you grew up because I know that at a very young age, you were this young girl, uh, on the streets of Waikiki with homeless boys playing music for money while your dad watched. So how did all that happen?

So, um, I loved performing. I was, I was doing shows for my dog and my parents at the time, and so my dad decided, um, you know, maybe take me out. Take me out to Waikiki, see how that was. I was very young at the time. I was seven, so I started playing 'uke when I was five. Um-

And why 'ukulele?

I think just because it's so, uh, common here in the islands. It's kind of like a guitar in the mainland, and, you know, I was five, so I was very small. So, the 'ukulele was also very small and easy to, easy to pick up. So, my dad gave me that instrument, and, uh, put me in, uh, to Roy Sakuma School, and, uh, I would go all around, like, we would

play at coffee shops and play, you know, in hotels. And so, um, I loved performing, so my dad decided to take me out to Waikiki. I was seven, barely remember it. And um, I started playing on the streets then.

but you seem to have acquired a, a backup band or fellow players.

Yeah, so we were walking down the street, Kalākaua, and saw these guys, and they were just having the best time jamming out, either as a couple guitarists, a guy planning a bongo. And my dad asked if they would allow me to jam with them, and they were like, "Of course, come on." And so, this was in front of the Pacific Beach Hotel, and this kind of became my hub where I used to play every Friday. And it just worked really well. They, you know, they loved jamming with me, and it just became a normal Friday night. And we didn't know that they were-they were homeless, um, until we saw them, you know-after the show they just went across the street and you know, went to sleep on the beach. Um, so we just allowed them to do with-whatever they wanted to do with the money, and, uh, it was great practice for us, and we, we had a good time. You know, we started having a, a crowd come every Friday.

It was on one of those nights in Waikīkī when Taimane Gardner's life would change forever. She was discovered by a Hawai'i entertainment icon known for those Tiny Bubbles.

Yeah, so I was playing on the streets of Waikīkī, and then Uncle Don saw me, and he invited me. I was about 13-

This is Uncle Don Ho?

Yeah, Uncle Don-Uncle Don Ho, and, uh, he gave me my very first job at the age of 13.

So, you would go to his show, obviously at night, when you were 13. At what time-what, what were your work hours?

He had a show, I think, at eight, and I would-I would get there pretty early and I would just practice in front of his showroom, like outside, just practice, practice, practice, warm up. And I went on, I think, around eight, 8:15. And I played one or two songs. Um, so that's how it all started. That was my first job as a professional musician was with Uncle Don and Haumea.

That's quite a start. And, and, and it was most nights, then. I mean, this is the-not the usual, uh, schedule for a student in school.

No, it wasn't. It started with one night a week, and then it went to two nights a week, and then three nights a week. I think he only went up to three nights a week, and I was with him, yeah, until he passed. I was about 18 when he passed, so five years I was with-with them, and I-I got to learn how a show is run, 'cause as an audience member you only see the front, but behind the scenes, you see who's running it, and-

Who was running it?

Haumea.

And, uh, did he ever give you any musical advice?

No, he didn't. and I appreciated that because I don't like to be told what to do. I've always been like that, and so he gave me pointers on connecting with the audience. Um, he gave me jokes to-to say, and he loved to put me on the spot where he's like, "Ok, honey. Ok, we're gonna sing this song together." And, um, it was great training for me, and, uh...he gave me-he gave me pointers in that way but never about the music.

Well, that's quite an introduction. And, you know, the, the humble 'ukulele was the beginning of it. You know, uh, it is true that people tend to mock the 'ukulele, to-to under-underrate it. I've heard it called a shrunken guitar. Tell me about that, 'cause that's your instrument.

I've learned to use that to my advantage. Um, because when you say you play 'ukulele, it's-they're always like, "Oh, that's cute, but what do you actually do?" And that's also the beauty of what the 'ukulele brings because, um, people don't expect anything from you. And then when they see what I do, their perspectives are completely changed, um, about the 'ukulele. But it's also nice that it's underrated because young children, or anyone who wants to try and be a musician, it's very easy to pick up. You know, it's not-

It's accessible.

Yeah, it's not scary like a guitar or a piano, you know, such a serious instrument. So, it, it has a beauty in that way.

It seems like your dad's been instrumental-that's kind of a pun, because he put the 'ukulele in your, your hand, and then he, he took you to these venues, very different ones, and made sure, you know, he stood by but encouraged you, and,

uh...and you were so, um, eager and happy, right? He, he, he, he gauged you correctly.

Yes, he made it very fun, uh, at that age. I, I loved making him happy. I loved seeing other people happy. So, um, yeah. He very much supported me. My mother did, too, but my mother was a flight attendant, so she was gone a lot. But whenever she was home, she would always come, too, and-

And, and, uh, and you, you had seen her perform as well, right?

Yes.

Because you say her-the whole family was a perform-were, were performers?

Yes, yes. I, I remember her dancing. She was a beautiful dancer, and even before I had the 'ukulele, I was around two or three, and we just danced. I think it was at a birthday party, and I danced for, like, an hour. And it was, it was fun. So, I've seen her sing. She sings as well, and um, comes from a very musical family.

And I'm so sorry because I believe she passed away in 2018.

Yes, she did.

That-you're young to use- lose your mom.

Yeah.

Yeah, I'm sorry about that.

Sorry.

Um...Sometimes when, um...when somebody close to us dies, especially a wonderful mother like yours, you make different decisions with your life. It, it causes changes in you. Did that happen?

Definitely. Um, so sorry. No, but my next album is definitely, um...is about her.

After her mom passed away, Taimane Gardner returned to her mother's home country of Samoa. It was a chance for Taimane to reconnect with her family and roots and to seek new inspiration.

I had to find my own connection in a fresh way 'cause it, it was always with my mom, and so I needed to find it as myself.

How did you do that?

Um, I went down there for my birthday a couple weeks-a couple months ago, um, and I have a pretty strong connection with my cousins down there, and so, uh, they made sure I was ok. And I was fine. I-I went to focus on my new music, 'cause I want my new music to reflect what I'm going through, which is, um, finding my roots, finding my own mana. Um, so I, I, I went to focus on music but also to reconnect with my family, so I think it was easier for me to go down there with that in mind.

Does that mean, uh, Samoan music will be part of what you do now?

It's going to be Polynesian in a way where I'm going to use Polynesian instruments, such as to'eres, which is from Tahiti; maybe Samoan chanting, maybe Hawaiian chanting. But whenever I write music, I try to have a concept in mind before I write the music. So, I create a story or a concept first, and so this concept is all about Polynesian mythology. And then from there, I write music about a certain mood, or a certain god or goddess.

You didn't always write your own music. You started with covers-

I did.

And contemporary music.

Yes.

How did this evolve?

Playing on the streets, I was just doing only covers. Um, it's a great way to get tourists. It's a great way to hone your skills. You learn from the greats. They always say, you know, the best form of flattery is imitation. So, I-I learned from the greats first, and then I think around 18 years old, I was getting a little burnt out.

That's-to be burnt out at that age is kind of surprising, but, but you really mastered a, uh, a wide range of, uh, music. You did classical, right?

Yes.

And you, and, and I was amazed you were doing Pink Floyd one day.

Yes.

How did you-I mean, that was way before your time.

My-well, my dad in-introduced me to Led Zeppelin. I think I was 15, and I just-once I found Led Zeppelin, it just opened doors. That's how I found Pink Floyd and The Doors, and, um...you know, I, I learned some of their songs.

How did you learn them? Did you figure out-you, you, you figured out how to replicate on the 'ukulele?

I did. Yep, I play by ear. So, I don't read music. I'm not, I-I just do it by ear. So, I hear something, and then I can transfer it to the 'ukulele.

You said you went to, uh, Roy Sakuma's classes. Anybody else teach you?

Oh yes, I've had many 'ukulele player-uh, 'ukulele teachers. I'm blessed...I think the best 'ukulele teachers are here in Hawai'i. Um, so I've had Jake Shimabukuro, of course; his brother, Bruce Shimabukuro, Aunty Genoa, Brother Noland. Um, all of the greats have been my-my teachers. I'm so thankful. And each of them taught a different style, which I think is why I play many different types of genres. And, um, around 15, uh, I started just learning for myself and trying to find my own voice or playing things that I enjoyed listening to. So-

And it seems like you're very influenced by Flamenco music, or a Spanish sound.

Yes, uh, it was something so new and foreign to me at that age, um, because I grew up surrounded by Hawaiian music. Uh, and so, when I heard these different melodies, it was so exciting to hear. You know, middle eastern, Indian scales are so different. So, I just latched onto Spanish, and I, I'm more-and I'm very attracted to the passion that they express.

The English translation of 'ukulele is jumping flea. Some say it's because of the players' nimble, fast-moving fingers. But when all the action is in such a small area, it can be difficult to command a stage. Not for Taimane Gardner.

Yes, I am a huge showmanship-I, I-I'm a huge ham, and, um, I love to dance and express myself through-through the music as well. It's very hard for me to just stand still. Um, and so I don't know, I feel the music a lot, and so I need to express it.

Do you ever have to sacrifice your finger work because you're moving your body?

Maybe a little bit. Maybe a little bit if I'm really feeling it. But, yeah, I-I need to make sure I-I get both, and I would actually practice blindfolded as well, um, because it's easier if you don't have to look at what you're doing. So, I would practice blindfolded so I would be able to stare at people or, you know, focus on other things while playing.

We've had some, um, uh, male 'ukulele impresarios, but you're the first female, and I wonder how you feel about what is meant as a complete complement: you're the female Jake Shimabukuro. But does that feel like a complement to you?

Definitely. For me, Jake is the king. He is the pioneer of the 'ukulele, so that is a huge complement, um, to me. And, you know, I didn't mean to be the first, you know, 'ukulele woman player. I just-I love what I do, and it's just grown into this amazing thing. And I'm-I'm happy to see little girls, you know-they come up to me and they give me that same look whenever I would go to Disneyland and look at the Disney princesses, with that sparkle. You're just so amazed by them. And so, they're giving me that look, and so it, it's wonderful to, to be able to be that for them.

And even though you can sing, that's not something you've, um, hung your hat on. That's not something you lead with.

Yes, I've always been very self-conscious about my singing. Uh, at first, I was starting with just singing as a young child, as-around seven, I was just singing. And then, um, the picking came a little bit later and the picking got really, really good, and really, really good. And then I was feeling a little...the levels were different, and so I've always felt a little self-conscious, you know. And then I'd say recently I'm starting to find a sound that I like from my voice. I'm-I'm seeing what works.

[Taimane performing]

It's self-conscious because it's-it's from you. When you make a, uh, mistake on your instrument, it's just a little, you know-psh. But when, when it comes from you, it's so much more personal.

When you have a big stage, how do you fill it up?

Physically moving around, but I think there's more to it in your presence, and so you need to find that goddess, or that, you can call it your other-alter ego...because I feel

like your presence needs to fill up that stage as well. I've been dancing with, uh, IONA Dance Company, and-

Which is very contemporary, very modern.

Very modern, and all about presence. The presence that you give off. And so, it's-it's that type of energy that needs to be out. You can dance around, but you need to be able to hold the audience.

And you know I would call that? I would call it gravitas. And I-I felt that when I-when I've watched you.

Thank you. Gravitas, I like that.

Yeah, you're-you're there. You're fully there.

Yes. I need to command the audience. I think it's because of all of the years and years of playing on the streets. You're dealing with drunk people. You're dealing with cars behind you. So, you learn how to keep that audience. You learn how to grab an audience, and then you also need to learn how to keep that audience there.

How do you do it? How do you do it?

I guess I stare people down a lot. Um...I don't know. I feel so comfortable on stage, and it doesn't happen every time. Um, so you need to be ok with that. I-I just need to express whatever is in me, and it just comes out in this very ferocious energy and people seem to be drawn to it, um, and inspired by it. So, I really am so happy I found my life path at a very young age, and I love-I love what I do.

You know, there was some comment you made once, which made me think you'd been through something, and, uh, you talked about how you want to use your music to heal others, too. Am I reading too much into that?

Um...everyone goes through stuff, but the reason why I'm saying that is after my shows, people would come up to me and they would say, "I went through a divorce," or, "I have health issues, and your music is what gets me through." And that is the reason why I can start saying and start seeing that my music is healing people, and I want to continue doing that.

So, you actually get to know, in-in some way or, maybe in a short but deep way, the members of the audience?

Yes, that's my favorite part. Uh, after the show I do a meet and greet, and, um, my fans come up to me, and they each tell me about their stories and why they came, how far they drove to get here, and that's what I love most about my shows.

Taimane Gardner has played in front of thousands of fans. But it was an intimate performance that had her feeling the pressure. She became the first Hawaii artist to stage a National Public Radio Tiny Desk Concert, which has a cult-like following and a huge reach online.

Yeah, I, you know-I saw them on YouTube and I, I've always tuned into them, just because they have well-known: Taylor Swift, Lizzo, Coldplay, uh, Sting. And then they also have unknowns, and they're amazing. So, I've always followed them on YouTube, and I do agree with you. I think, um, streaming and online content is becoming a bigger and bigger platform, um, for the entertainment. And so, I played at South by Southwest last year, and I had no idea that Bob Boylan, the owner, the maker of Tiny Desk was in the room. And so, after I performed, uh, they asked me to go on Tiny Desk, and I was like, "Oh my goodness, of course. I would love to." So, I, I went to Washington, D.C., and went to the NPR, uh, headquarters, and that was very-I was, I was-I normally don't get nervous, but I was a little nervous.

[Taimane performing]

I think they pack 80 people in this tiny space next to the tiny desk, so you've got a really close audience, right?

Yes.

And then you've got this huge internet audience, as well.

Yes, there's a lot-there's a lot going on there, and-

So, what did you decide to provide for them. I mean, when you, when you can craft your own performance for that venue, what did you decide to do?

So, they, they said, "You have fifteen minutes, do whatever you want." And I was like, "Oh." So, I had months and months and months trying to figure out how to express myself, where I'm from, who I am in these fifteen minutes. And then the funny part was when I got there, they said it has to be acoustic, and that completely changed my set because I brought, um, some pedals that I normally use. But they said, "Oh, no, no, no, no. It's supposed to be acoustic." And so, I was like, "Oh, no. What do I do?" So, in

ten minutes I had to change the set, figure out what I was doing, tell the band, “Look, what-this is what we’re doing now.” And, um, it just made it more exciting, honestly. And-

Did you have to change what music-

I did.

-Pieces you were going to perform on the-oh, my goodness.

Yes, because one song that I planned was all about effects, and so since I couldn’t play effects, I had to take that one out and, uh, replace it with another one. So, it made it exciting, and, uh, that’s what Uncle Don taught me, was improvising. And so, um, they sent us the audio after, and it sounded great, and I’m so happy that it’s doing, doing well now.

When you’re on stage and you, and you are ferocious, uh, in a fluid, elegant way, but you are-you are very intense. Um, and you mentioned an alter ego, who is your alter ego? Do you think of your alter ego as someone else? Or someone deep inside?

I think someone deep inside. I don’t have a name for it, but I don’t know if it’s a channel of something, but I feel like it’s maybe an ancient energy that possibly I was in a past life.

Samoan?

I don’t think so. I don’t think Samoan. Honestly, I think it’s Egyptian, I don’t know.

[Taimane performing]

I don’t know where that comes from, but it’s just some sort of priestess or goddess energy comes out. Kind of like Pele, in a way, if that makes sense. Ferocious and a little temperamental.

Fiery. Literally, Pele is fiery.

Yes, something like that.

But something very...um, beyond yourself. Bigger and with superpowers.

Yes, maybe it’s the universe talking through me.

Is that why you picked, um, stars as, uh, one of your themes? Planets, stars?

Yeah, I've, I've always been inspired by the planets. I remember in fourth grade, I, you know, my science was always about the stars and the planets and the solar system. So, I've always had an affinity to, to the universe. So that's why I wrote that, we are made of stars album. And then from there it just felt natural to go through the elements because the, you know, the planets and, and the elements also connect as well. You know, like, I think Neptune is watery and then Mars is fiery, so I thought it's just natural.

And you're moved by that, uh, Serbian proverb that I had never heard of until you brought it up. What, what is it?

Be humble, for you are made of earth. Be noble, for you are made of stars.

That's very nice. So that, that, uh, rings true for you.

Yes, I thought that was a beautiful concept, um, of the whole album, that whole album.

What about as an approach to life?

I think it's a great way to approach life, definitely.

Mahalo to 'ukulele master Taimane Gardner of 'Āina Haina in East Honolulu for sharing your story with us. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

Tell me about your first name.

Oh, Taimane. It's a Samoan name my mother-my mom named me, and it means diamond. My sister's name is Teiwila, which means, uh, ginger blossom. Yeah, so she gave us both Samoan names.

Did your mom, uh, elaborate on why diamond?

She told me that it was either Taimane or Peinina, and peinina means, um, gem, jewel. So, I think she just wanted something that was sparkly, jewel-like. And, uh, I loved the name that she gave me, diamond. I think it's a good fit for me.

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