

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



TITLE: 'UKULELE MASTERS

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ROY SAKUMA: The 'ukulele, to me, is one of the easiest instruments to learn in the world; it's perfect for anyone. And you know, like I've seen so many people that say—tell me, I cannot play, I am tone deaf. And you know, I can prove them wrong. There is not a person in the world that I don't think I cannot teach.

JAKE SHIMABUKURO: I guess I've always had this vision from the time I was a kid. I would watch rock bands, people like Van Halen, or guitar players like Yngwie Malmsteen. And you'd see these guys, they're playing their instruments, and they're like running all across the stage, and jumping into the audience, stage-diving, and just yelling and screaming. And I always thought to myself, why can't an 'ukulele concert be like that?

TAIMANE: I feel more comfortable on stage than off stage, if that makes sense. Um, I remember the first time I performed, I was five and it was at my grandma's church at the Ilikai, and my dad was so nervous. I guess I started playing even before I was getting on stage, so they announced me and then I started playing while walking to the stage, and I just feel so comfortable.

This small, four-stringed instrument has grown in worldwide popularity with musicians and audiences of all ages. Meet three of Hawai'i's 'ukulele masters 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.

Each has elevated the perception and popularity of the 'ukulele on an international level. 'Ukulele teacher Roy Sakuma and 'ukulele virtuosos Jake Shimabukuro and Taimane Gardner.

Let's turn to my 2008 conversation with Roy Sakuma who described himself as, "a terrible student." He said he was smoking by age six and drinking by the sixth grade.

He spent time in Juvenile Detention and dropped out of high school. At age 16, Roy wanted to learn the 'ukulele, so he reached out to Herb Ohta Sr., also known as Ohta-San, who had hit songs in the 1960s and 70s. It was a meeting that would shape Roy's future.

What were your growing-up years like?

It was difficult. You know, I went through a lot of pain, and I didn't realize it 'til years later, but you know, when I was born, my mother was diagnosed as—you know, she had paranoia, schizophrenia. And she had it severe. So I didn't have a normal childhood. And as the years went by, it only got worse, because my brother at nine years old also had a mental breakdown. So you know, our home was filled with a lot of difficulty.

Was your dad in the home?

My dad was home, but because my mother and brother were both mentally ill, it was hard for him. You know, there was never any logical communication, so my father would go out every night and, naturally he enjoyed drinking, so he'd be drinking seven nights a week. You know, a lot of people thought I was such an outgoing, friendly guy. But uh, they didn't know that inside, I was really hurting. And I think this was right after when I got kicked out of school, um you know, I heard a song; I heard a song on the radio. And it was a song recorded by Ohta-san. And that song was the turning point in my life. Because what happened is that I went to see him to learn a little about the 'ukulele, and that took away a lot of my pain. 'Cause now, I was focusing on something that made me happy.

Why did you go to see him based on a song? What was the song?

The song was called *Sushi*. I don't know if you recall this; it was recorded in 1963. It became the number one hit in Hawai'i; was for the Tom Moffat Show.

How did it go? I vaguely remember.

Oh, are you gonna ask me to sing? [chuckle] Oh, no. [chuckle] [HUMS]

That's right.

And it was an instrumental. And I went to see him; I was 16 years old at this time. And the wonderful thing is that—I want to share this with everyone; is you know how they say never give up your dreams? Well, at 10 years old, I tried learning the 'ukulele,

Leslie; I couldn't. At 12, I tried again; I couldn't. At 14, my sister tried to teach me to hold G; I couldn't hold the chord, I couldn't strum. I had no sense of rhythm; because as I mentioned earlier to you, I never listened to the radio. So I couldn't do it. So she told me, Give up. But when I heard that song, I was 16; I decided to seek out Ohta-san. I asked him to teach me; he started teaching me. And so I think I wouldn't be teaching the 'ukulele today, had it not been for that song, *Sushi*.

Well, that took guts; a 16-year-old kid who'd been kicked out of school going to this 'ukulele virtuoso.

Uh-huh. One thing that I had, I was never afraid, though, to approach people, as much as I was insecure inside. 'Cause that's how I survived.

M-m.

By not being afraid to talk to people, reach out and ask people questions. And yet, inside, I was just so nervous, you know. But I learned to deal with that and it's been a blessing for me today, 'cause I can help children.

When you started playing 'ukulele, I understand you practiced so much, you wore out the frets?

I wore out the frets. I practiced. This is like when I was 16, 17, 18 years old; I practiced eight hours a day, sometimes 10 hours a day. Now, people think, Now, how can you do that? I could do that; I would practice and practice, and practice. And my goal was to beat Ohta-san; I was gonna become the best player in the world. But the funny thing is; the better I got, the more I realized how great the master was.

M-m.

And I thought, Well, you know, he really is something special. And he told me one day; he says, Roy, do you want to come to the studio and just help me? I'm gonna teach this adult class. I said, What do I have to do? He said, Oh, just tune the 'ukuleles. And he comes in, teaches the adults lesson number one. And then he tells me, Oh, by the way, I'm going to Japan next week; you're teaching. And I was petrified. I said, I don't know how to teach. He says, No, just da-da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da-da. Leslie, I went home and I applied the same technique that I used to learn the 'ukulele, and practiced for hours and hours every day. I would talk to the walls, I would talk to the kitchen, I would talk to the carpet, I would talk to the mirror, as if I'm talking to those adults. And you know, by the time I went in front of them, I was totally comfortable; and I taught them. And the interesting thing is when Ohta-san returned, Ohta-san asked

me, Would you like to continue teaching those students? And I was so happy. And the students were happy, because they were comfortable with me too; so it was a win-win situation. That's how I got into teaching. And the love for teaching was getting stronger, and stronger in me; and that's why I wanted to put on this event called The 'Ukulele Festival. Because people don't realize, back in the 1960s, you know, if you asked people about the 'ukulele, they would say, Oh, that's a toy. I mean—

Yeah; it didn't get much respect, did it?

No. Ninety percent of the people thought it was a toy. And that hurt me, because Ohta-san was such a master.

M-hm.

And so the only thing I could do, and I thought was the best thing to do, was to put on an 'ukulele festival where we showcased the instrument. Little did I realize that now, the 'ukulele festival today is a big event; it's an annual event and it's been going on for years, and years and years.

It started in '71. And how many performers did you have then?

I had about fifty.

M-m. And how many today?

Last year we had over nine hundred performers.

Wow.

And a lot of students, lot of people from all over the world that come and perform in the event. And you know the beautiful thing; it's free. So it doesn't cost a cent to come down to Kapi'olani Park and see the festival. And that, again, was a dream that eventually, when my wife started helping me in 1974, the dream was to keep the festival free. And 'til today, it is a free event; and that is something that we are both so very, very happy.

In the summer of 2020, the acclaimed 'ukulele teacher and his wife Kathy had four O'ahu locations for the school and had taught several generations of students.

Our next 'ukulele master started out taking lessons at Roy Sakuma's school. He rose from humble beginnings in Kaimukī, raised by a hard-working single mom, to a

become an international sensation. He's performed on national television programs like Jimmy Kimmel Live, and Late Night with Conan O'Brien, and even for Queen Elizabeth the Second of England. From our conversation in 2013, here is 'ukulele virtuoso Jake Shimabukuro.

My first 'ukulele teacher after my mom was a girl named Tami Akiyama. She's now Tami Omuro. But she was an instructor for Roy Sakuma's 'ukulele school, and I think I studied with her for about five or six years. And she always made music fun for me, and she made me want to go home and play, and practice. Not necessarily try to ... she wouldn't put any pressure on me, to learn something. But she always inspired me and encouraged me to just play all the time.

And you played for hours sometimes, right?

Yeah.

Just hours, and hours.

I loved it. I remember just coming home from school, I would rush home from school just so I could play my 'ukulele. My mom wouldn't let me take my 'ukulele to school, because she had a Kamaka, and back then, Kamakas were -- I mean, 'til this day, they're still -- I mean, it's ...

They're heirlooms.

Yeah; exactly. Right. I still have the one that my mom taught me on, the 'ukulele that she had when she was a teenager.

So, you were conscious you were parted from your 'ukulele, and you'd rush home.

Yeah, I'd rush home, and take it out, and I'd strum the three chords that I knew. The D7, G7, C chord. I didn't think that I'd have a future, playing the 'ukulele. So, early on, when I would perform and play with people, I would always accompany singers. I would find people who could sing, and I would play with them. So, even throughout my high school years, I always found other musicians and I would gravitate toward musicians that were amazing singers, or were songwriters, and I would learn from them. I would try to figure out how I can accompany them, or what I can do to contribute to the song.

And you liked the idea of ensemble and team. You didn't see yourself as a solo act.

Oh, yeah. I was deathly afraid to go up on stage by myself and just perform. Probably, it wasn't until maybe ... was it my junior? Wait. Sophomore. Okay; anyway, my junior year, I entered. And what I did was, I was gonna play a song, and I got so flustered, 'cause I was so nervous, and I just completely blanked out. And there I was, standing on stage, and everyone's just quiet and watching. And I'm like, Oh, what am I gonna do? So without thinking, I started just strumming, and I started singing La Bamba.

[CHUCKLE]

And everyone just started yelling and screaming, and laughing. Whatever, right? And I just started having fun with it. That's probably the day I realized that I enjoy performing on stage for people.

Jake Shimabukuro first gained popularity in 1998 as a member of the local band, Pure Heart. The group's first of two albums won four Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards and one was named one of the top 50 Hawaiian albums of all time by Honolulu Magazine. When Jake embarked on a solo career, it took him to Japan and across the U.S. mainland. A chance appearance on a small New York television show and the rise of the Internet video service YouTube helped launch Jake's career to new heights.

There's a local television show in New York called Ukulele Disco, and they feature all these different 'ukulele players. So, since I was in town, I guess somehow, they knew of me, so they contacted me and they said, Hey, you want to be on our show? I said, Yeah, sure, right. So, he took me to Central Park, and I sat on this rock, and he just had a little handheld video camera. And he asked me a few questions, and I played a song. And it just so happened I was working on an arrangement of While My Guitar Gently Weeps, so I played that, and it aired on TV. And it's just a small local station in New York. And then, I came back home to Hawai'i. So, this was about seven years ago. And about six or seven years ago, YouTube had just started out. So, I was back home in Hawai'i and just minding my own business. A few months later, I get some emails and calls from friends, 'cause lot of my friends were on the mainland and they were going to school, and all that. So they called me up and they said, Hey, people have been sending me this video of you performing, you know, playing in Central Park. So I was like, What are you talking about? So they forwarded the email to me, and there was this link, and I clicked on, and there I was. I thought, Hey, that's the thing I did for that Ukulele Disco show. I was like, How did it get on this site?

In a matter of weeks, millions, and millions, and millions of views. Millions, and millions, and millions of downloads, and I couldn't believe it. I started getting calls from other bands and artists, and venues, people saying like, Hey, we want you to

come play at our venue, or we want you to come open for our band, or record with us on our next record. And it was just incredible. I mean, since that video hit, I've been able to collaborate with people like Yo-Yo Ma, Jimmy Buffett, Bela Fleck and the Flecktones, John Hiatt, Cyndi Lauper, Bette Midler. In fact, couple years ago, I went with Bette Midler to England, and we performed for Queen Elizabeth. I mean, it all just stemmed from this YouTube.

Our final featured 'ukulele master once studied at both Roy Sakuma Ukulele Studios and with Jake Shimabukuro. She took to the 'ukulele at a young age and first started performing on the streets of Waikīkī at age 7 and then professionally at the Don Ho Show at age 13. She has gone on to become an accomplished international artist and won her first Nā Hōkū Hanohano award for Favorite Entertainer of the Year in 2019. From our conversation in early 2020, here is Taimane Gardner from East Honolulu.

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. And I loved performing, so my dad decided to take me out to Waikīkī. I was seven, barely remember it. And um, I started playing on the streets then, and-

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

Yes, so I-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. 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?

Um, 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. 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.

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, Auntie 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.

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 compliment: you're the female Jake Shimabukuro. But does that feel like a compliment 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.

The the virtuosos and the teacher; three masters of the 'ukulele who have elevated this little, four-stringed, two-octave instrument from the shores of Hawai'i to international fame.

We thank Taimane Gardner of 'Āina Haina in East Honolulu, Jake Shimabukuro of Kaimukī', East Honolulu, and Roy Sakuma of 'Aiea, Central O'ahu for sharing their stories. And mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha Nui.

ROY: In 1970, as I was mentioning earlier, when I was hurting a lot, I was struggling, and I picked up my 'ukulele. And I started—this song came out of me, and it was you know, I'm not a singer, but it was something like—wait, now. [SINGS] *I am what I am; I'll be what I'll be; look, can't you see that it's me, all of me.* And it just poured out of me. That was 1970. And that song became a song that every single child in the '70s sang as an elementary school child. So you know, that was *I Am What I Am*. Little did I realize, this year as I go to elementary schools and teach that song, that the song has been a

powerful tool for me to help children. 'Cause it's been my whole life to help kids; to help kids through their struggles. But it's more powerful this year than ever, because as I go to these schools and I ask these children, What does, I am what I am, I'll be what I'll be, mean to you? This is what I get from children. One child will say, It means it's okay who I am. Another will say, I'm special. But a lot of children will tell me this; It means that it's okay to be who I am, and I don't have to be who I'm not. And that is so powerful. And I realized that this song was meant for all—to share with everybody.

*I am what I am. I'll be what I'll be.
Look can't you see that it's me, all of me.
I am what I am. I'll be what I'll be.*

JAKE: You know the expression, music is the universal language. And I remember thinking to myself, I think that statement falls a little short. I mean, I used to tell people that I think that music is the language of the universe, and I think everyone is born with the ability to speak that language. Because music is really just the language of human emotion.

LESLIE: Now I've seen you perform. Recently you were at the Monarch Room of the Royal Hawaiian, and you were-I mean, you're-I would say, you're fierce, you're almost ferocious. Did you do that with Hawaiian? You weren't playing Hawaiian music that night, but with Hawaiian music, was your style different?

TAIMANE: I've recently started playing Hawaiian, and I've had to find a way where I connected with it because, to be honest, I wasn't really connecting with it at a young age. I think it was just because I was constantly surrounded by it. I'm coming back now. I'm making a 180 now, and I'm finding my roots, and finding how I connect with Hawaiian music, how I connect with Samoan music. Um, so it's really beautiful. It's exciting.

[ukulele music]

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