

Neighbors: Taking a 'leap of faith'

After years behind scenes in isle's music community, Halemanu ready to be heard

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For as long as he can remember, Halemanu was surrounded by music. He grew up with an ukulele in his hand.

Instead of watching TV, his family relaxed by listening to music. He tagged along while his musician dad performed at parties all over Maui - his young voice can still be heard singing along in decades-old family recordings of those kanikapila sessions.

Article Photos



Local musician Halemanu performs.
Photo courtesy of Halemanu

"They really gave us a good foundation," he recalls, referring partly to his parents' loving marriage, sense of civic responsibility and personal discipline, and partly to his solid grounding in a musical education.

And after his father died of a longtime heart condition when Halemanu was just 11 years old, he still had music.

"That really helped me get through those years," he says.

Today, Halemanu Villiarimo, who goes by one name, Halemanu, is still surrounded by music - performing with his group, Halemanu and the Hui; operating a successful recording studio in Kahului; and putting the finishing touches on his first album of original songs.

"Music has always been my passion," he says. "I'm just fortunate it can be my occupation too."

Halemanu says he was in high school when he first realized he could get paid for doing what he loved. After his father died, veteran Maui composer, chanter and performer Keli'i Taua took him under his wing. Recognizing his passion and talent, Taua was the first to suggest that Halemanu could make his living from music. In addition to playing at friends' parties and school events, Taua brought Halemanu along to perform with him at his regular hotel gig.

"I knew music was always going to be in my life, but it dawned on me that I could actually make some money," he says. "Well," he adds, laughing, "it was about the chicks, too."

As a young man, Halemanu worked as an auto mechanic by day, while performing music at night. Finally, he realized he had to choose, and he ended up taking a "leap of faith" and leaving behind a steady paycheck to pursue his dream of making music full time.

"It was scary," he recalls. "I took one chance. But when I think back on it now, I think, 'I should have done it sooner.' "

In addition to playing traditional Hawaiian music and slack-key guitar, Halemanu had an enduring fondness for rock 'n' roll from the '50s, '60s and '70s - the classic oldies that his parents loved. But he was a student of music history as well, reading about and listening widely to genres as diverse as the blues, Brazilian bossa nova and jazz.

Craving more formal training, he spent a year in Los Angeles at the Musician's Institute, where he studied music and the guitar, but, thinking that the recording studio was an equally important tool for any musician, also enrolled in classes on recording and sound

engineering.

That experience inspired him to open his own studio when he returned to Maui in 2001. Through his Kahului business, Sounds Like Hale, Halemanu has worked with local recording artists like Amy Hanaiali'i Gilliom, Keli'i Taua and Napua Makua, as well as celebrities like Willie Nelson, Aerosmith's Steven Tyler and Joe Perry, and Oprah Winfrey, whose work he had never followed but who was so nice, he said, that he's since become a fan.

Halemanu attributes his success to both his formal training in Los Angeles and his experience as a working musician. "I've had the luxury of working on both sides of the glass," he says. Knowing how vulnerable a performer can feel in the studio ("it's like you're under a microscope"), he might offer to soften the lights, or position a performer away from the window for a greater sense of privacy.

In addition to his professional success, Halemanu and his wife, Lisa Villiarimo, a wedding planner, regularly donate their services by providing entertainment or sound systems to events for groups like Maui United Way, the Maui Farm and Camp Imua. It all comes back to the values he learned from his parents, he says. "We believe in giving back in your community."

Lately, Halemanu has been yearning to get back to the creative side of the music business, and he now performs every Tuesday night with Halemanu and the Hui at Stella Blues. He's also working on his first original album, which he plans to release later this year.

"I've been so behind the scenes for a long time," he says. "I'm ready to come out as an artist."

He describes his sound as "jazz-infused rock 'n' roll with a Hawaiian soul," and the album features his own original compositions inspired by island life - one tune, "Kauila Ride," is a lighthearted lamentation of Lahaina traffic.

"My music is pretty positive - no more dark stuff," he says. "I move

away from negativity. That's one more thing I learned from Oprah."

* Formerly a reporter for The Maui News, Ilima Loomis is a writer on Maui. "Neighbors: Profiles of Our Community" is a periodical feature about everyday people who make the Maui community unique. To nominate someone for a "Neighbors" feature, email The Maui News at citydesk@mauinews.com.