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Connecting Through Music: Talking

story with Na Hoku Hanohano Award-winner Halemanu

AUGUST 22, 2019 BY [JEN RUSSO](#) — [0 COMMENTS](#)



When you listen to original Hawaiian music you are supporting Indigenous arts. I never thought

of it that way until I met Halemanu Villiarimo. While I've viewed Hawaiian music as a genre, I've taken for granted its dimension as a native people's art.

Halemanu grew up on Maui in Hana and Kahului, and has been playing music on the island since his small-kine kid days. He's a fixture on the Maui music scene, and recently won Island Music Album of the Year with his first release, *So the Story Goes*, in the 2018 Na Hoku Hanohano awards. He and his wife Lisa are currently producing his upcoming debut Maui show on September 6 at the Maui Arts and Cultural Center McCoy Theater. I met with the couple at Koho's to find out more about their upcoming show and his music.

"With my Na Hoku Hanohano-winning album, *So the Story Goes*, it was work I did that spread out over nearly 10 years," says Halemanu. "There are some songs I did back in the 2000s when we had a recording studio that we were running. I was doing a lot of engineering and producing. I did a thank-you CD for our wedding. I was recording all along the way. Some of these originals made it into my album. Some songs were from 2008, 2007, and so on. I knew I was going to come to this point in my career because I have been producing all these years. I have been a musician for a really long time. It's just an urge to get out from the corporate field — to be more public and more expressive."

Although he's been playing music for many years, Halemanu doesn't have a lot of public gigs at local resorts or restaurants. Instead, he's done more corporate appearances.

"On the convention side, they like cover bands, but I not one cover band," says Halemanu. "If you like one cover band go hire those guys; I'm playing what I am playing. A lot of times they pair me with Willie K, or Henry Kaponu. We each do our thing. So I knew it would come to a time when I need to build my own brand, and just come out as Halemanu."

Producing his award-winning album and then putting on a show for Maui has been his plan all along.



"I mapped it out during my studio era," says Halemanu. "It was impossible for me to do both: Run the studio and make my album. When we closed the studio in 2013, we slowly ramped up

and built up to this — building our brand, making our connections. Winning the Hoku leveled us up. Last year it was such an honor when we were nominated for Island Music Album of the Year, and then for Most Promising Artist also. We won Island Music Album of the Year."

After that they did a few shows off island and got recognized by the County of Maui.

"We did the Blue Note Theater," says Halemanu. "I got recognized by the county here, I got a ceremony. That's the thing, I always had a vision and a plan. This is good because this kind of attention, we can build up on it. I don't want to be just a regular musician. I have a goal. I want something that we can have together, and we can make a living."

Then, in 2018, Halemanu became an Advancing Indigenous Performances Fellow through the Western Arts Alliance, a program that recognizes Indigenous artists and puts together conferences and webinars for the cohort group of fellows that he's a part of.

"Basically it's a First Nations collection of artists made up of dancers, actors, musicians, poets, even visual artists," says Halemanu. "It's a cohort put on by a regional arts alliance. What they do is go throughout the country and pick certain artists to be a part of the cohort, and we collectively talk about our issues; we share a lot of the same social issues. We share our experiences, and we try to help our cohorts. When they go back to where they are from they take that information. We also have webinars every couple of weeks where we have discussions. It's a really good collective of Indigenous creative people. I am so honored to be a part of that."

Halemanu and Lisa will be packing up and heading to LA for the Western Arts Alliance convention right before their show.

"We attend the annual conference where entertainment buyers come to see the artists," says

Halemanu. "They have this special cohort for advancing Indigenous arts. They try to give us a boost in whatever direction we want to go. Whether it's touring or you want to have a residency. They cannot give us money but they make the connections for us, and that is what we are going to LA for. I get to do a small showcase for these potential agents and agencies."

Once they get back it's showtime. This is the first show on Maui for Halemanu as a headliner since his Na Hoku Hanohano award.

It's going to be a really different show," says Halemanu. This will be a power trio with James Somero on drums, Eddie Aviles on bass, and myself on guitar, 'ukulele, and slack key. I have my double neck that is a guitar and 'ukulele. It's going to be fun. I really look forward to it. I'm really in my element with something like this. There is a lot of improv with what we do. I tell them, I need musicians that have that rock and jazz sensibilities. I love to rock, but then the jazz comes in because there's improvisation — you have to listen to each other. That is the school that I come from."

Halemanu's inspiration comes from his heritage and appreciation for all kinds of music.

"I always try to include my Hawaiian heritage because I grew up with that," says Halemanu. "I always wanted to merge that — the Hawaiian, the jazz, the rock. Those are some of the motivations. A connection to a place, or growing up with the song. I call it danceable Hawaiian music, but you don't need to know the hula. There are certain traditions that get passed down, a certain way my family strummed. That language that comes from my family transforms into being an artist now. I got a lot of road songs, because growing up we would be driving between Hana and Kahului. Going into Hana, that road was just so terrible. It's bumpy, curvy. 'Ala Kahikio' is what I wrote about that. It's got that '60s Ventures-style rock flavor, which is what I was thinking about when I wrote that. Yeah, KPOA loves it! People call in and ask for 'the boom boom song'"

The Villiarimos have a reputation for giving back to the community as well. Last year they

poured heart and soul into the Project Kookua which raised \$40,000 for Kaua'i and Big Island disasters.



"We have a long history with philanthropy," says Halemanu. "We have played and given our talents to all these social services. We are always giving attention to their cause or giving a portion of what we are doing to those causes. This particular show is going to be for The Maui Farm, Imua Family Services, and the Aloha House. I love the fact that I can use my recognition from my awards to bring awareness to what these organizations are doing. We really believe in those kind of services, it's really needed on Maui."

Some of his songs touch on where we are at as a society.

"I spent a lot of time on the East Side," says Halemanu. "I remember there were some songs that remind me of looking toward the mountains from Hamoa, the mauka side and its all dark. But now when I look mauka in the dark I see lights. I don't like that. It's not a protest song, it's just a song about some places no need that kine progress."

Halemanu says his music is his expression, and that's what makes him so excited to perform.

"People are going to hear some local favorites, but with my own style. There is a song I played recently, a Hawaiian song; most of the time it's played as a ballad, but I put a beat to it. Someone came up to me and said, 'That was my Dad's favorite song!' She was just moved by it. That is what I love — it's that universal connection that people feel. Whatever it is, it has to move me. We cannot please everybody, but it is my expression, my interpretation. As an artist you have to stand by that. The other thing too, is the message of the stories, and why I do these songs and why they matter to me. Whether it be my upbringing or current issues that Indigenous people face, especially here in Hawai'i. It really revolves around that."

Halemanu performs at the Maui Arts and Cultural Center's McCoy Studio Theater on Friday, September 6, 2019. The concert starts at 7:30pm and there is no opening act. Pre-show entertainment in the courtyard starts at 6pm with food and beverages. Tickets are \$28 for general admission, \$43 for VIP, and \$23 for kupuna. For more information visit MauiArts.org or call 808-242-SHOW. For more on Halemanu, go to HalemanuMusic.com or follow

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