

HAWAIIAN SOUL

IN TWO SHORT YEARS, KALANI PE'A WENT FROM SINGING KARAOKE
TO WINNING A GRAMMY

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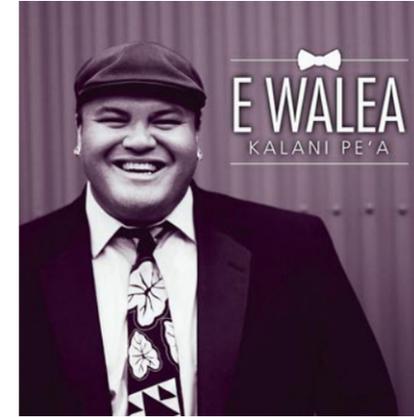
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Hawaiian Soul

Two years ago, the only time Kalani Pe'a sang in public was in karaoke bars. His favorite songs were "Me and Mrs. Jones" and "You Are So Beautiful," which he sang partly in English and partly in Hawaiian. Then he recorded an album, *E Walea*, which featured mostly original Hawaiian songs plus a couple of karaoke classics. The recording surprised everyone—including Pe'a—when earlier this year it earned a Grammy nomination for Best American Regional Roots album. Then came an even bigger surprise: It won.

"My 'uhane [spirit] jumped out of my kino [body] and then jumped back in," says Pe'a, recalling the moment at the Grammys that he was named the winner. Standing onstage with his manager and partner, Allan B. Cool, by his side, Pe'a delivered an extemporaneous acceptance speech full of heartfelt gratitude. He spoke partly in English and partly in Hawaiian, the way he ordinarily talks and sings. "I mahalo everyone who participated, everyone who believed *in my debut album!*" he said.



In just two short years, Pe'a had gone from unknown karaoke singer to Grammy winner. It's an incredible story that began long ago in a hot-pink mobile home on a guava farm outside of Hilo. This is where Pe'a grew up, in the Pana'ewa Hawaiian homesteads community, with a loving family, amid cats, dogs and farm animals, and without electricity.

"We used large coolers and blocks of ice because we had no refrigerator," he

says. "I grew up filling up propane for hot water and for cooking. I grew up with lanterns and candles."

Pe'a started singing when he was four, with encouragement from his parents, who believed it would help him overcome a stuttering problem. Mostly he sang Disney songs, but because his father was a bass player who played soul and R&B, those became Pe'a's loves. His father soon started entering him in statewide talent contests and karaoke competitions, many of which he won.

When he was halfway through third grade, Pe'a (who in those days was known as "Traz," short for Trazarra, his mother's favorite Avon men's cologne) announced to his parents that he wanted to attend Hawaiian-language immersion school. His two younger siblings had been in immersion school since preschool, and he decided that it was time for him to be there as well. He didn't speak any Hawaiian and knew his classmates would already be fluent, but he had overcome his speech impediment and figured if he could do that, he could



"My 'uhane [spirit] jumped out of my kino [body] and then jumped back in," Kalani Pe'a says of the moment he learned he won the 2017 Grammy Award for Best American Regional Roots Album. Fluent in Hawaiian and English, Pe'a (seen above) blends the languages seamlessly in both his conversation and his music. At top, *E Walea*, Pe'a's Grammy-winning debut album.

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learn Hawaiian, too. His determination got him through the interview and accepted at Ke Kula Kaiapuni 'o Keaukaha school in Hilo.

“At the beginning I was so hemahema [awkward], I confused my adjectives and verbs, and the kids would all laugh,” Pe’a says. “But I ended up learning and learning, and then I became fluent and was one of the lead speakers when we had visitors.” It wasn’t until sixth grade, when he entered Ke Kula 'o Nāwahīokalani'ōpu'u Hawaiian-language immersion school in the Puna district, that Pe’a began chanting and singing in Hawaiian. But his first loves remained soul and R&B.

After graduating from high school in 2001, Pe’a headed to Mesa State College in Grand Junction, Colorado. “I wanted to go snowboarding and try something different,” he says. “My music entertainment icon, David Kalākaua,”—the last Hawaiian king—“traveled the world, and if he could travel, I could travel, too.” Yet what Pe’a ended up liking most about Mesa State and Colorado was that there were plenty of Hawaiians there.

After graduating with a degree in mass communications, Pe’a stayed in Grand Junction for the next two years, working as an assignment editor for the local ABC television affiliate. He returned to Hawai'i in 2008. “I just had this calling that I had to come home and serve my lāhui [the Hawaiian nation]. The question I was asking myself was, As a Hawaiian immersion graduate, how can I contribute?” Pe’a found work teaching preschool and later serving as a resource coordinator for Kamehameha Schools, first on Hawai'i Island and then on Maui.

In college Pe’a trained as a tenor and learned about classical music, but he never intended to make a career out of it. Before returning to Hawai'i he had long since quit singing other than an occasional turn at the mic in a karaoke bar, where he would sing his favorite R&B and soul songs, translating the verses into Hawaiian as he sang. “I had accepted that I’m just a karaoke singer, that I wasn’t qualified to record,” he says. “That was my mindset.” No one, other than his mother, told him differently until one night in 2015.

Pe’a and Cool were with some friends at Ray’s Deli and Lounge in Wailuku. Ray’s is located right on the edge of the Paukūkalo Hawaiian homesteads community, making it a popular watering hole and karaoke spot for the local Hawaiians. The bartender,



Seen here and at top, Pe’a rehearses in his condo on Maui, which he shares with his partner and manager, Allan B. Cool. It was Cool who urged Pe’a to make an album. “You have got to stop giving free concerts,” Cool insisted after one particularly dazzling karaoke performance by Pe’a. On the opening page, Pe’a performs on O’ahu.



E Walea earned its Grammy (seen here) with a soulful lineup of ten Hawaiian songs and two karaoke classics, “Always and Forever” and “You Are So Beautiful.”

who knew that “Me and Mrs. Jones” was one of Pe’a’s signature songs, put it on and handed him the microphone. He sang in Hawaiian and English and in high falsettos, as he often does, and when he finished the crowd went wild.

Everyone was cheering except for Cool. “You have got to stop giving free concerts,” Cool said. “You need to record!” Pe’a dismissed the idea. “I’m not qualified,” he said. “And I’m 32—I’m too old.” The next time they were at a karaoke bar, L’AVA’s Sportsbar & Karaoke in Wailuku, an appreciative bar patron declared, “I would *pay* to hear Kalani sing!” That was the turning point. “It finally dawned on me that maybe I really should record,” Pe’a says. From there the two saved their money while searching for the best music producer and recording engineer in Hawai‘i, whom they determined to be Dave Tucciarone, a fourteen-time winner of the Nā Hōkū Hanohano Award, Hawai‘i’s homegrown version of the Grammys.

Pe’a described himself to Tucciarone over the phone as a Hawaiian contemporary soul singer and a cultural educator who translated the velvety-smooth hits of romantic R&B crooners like Luther Vandross into Hawaiian. A long silence followed before Tucciarone said, “OK, let’s talk story.” A little over a year later, *E Walea* was finished. “Kalani was an amateur, but I thought he had pretty good talent,” says Tucciarone. “He definitely had a big voice,

and he certainly had the personality to project that voice.” Indeed, Pe’a’s powerful tenor voice is the first thing that comes through on *E Walea*.

The songs, most of which Pe’a wrote, are a celebration of beauty and love between the natural elements and the land, the Hawaiian people and their lāhui, and, at the heart of it all, between two lovers. There are soul and R&B undertones throughout the album, as well as two covers, “You Are So Beautiful” and “Always and Forever.” The latter stands out as the only song he sings predominantly in English. Despite it being a Hawaiian album, this song had to be on it, Pe’a says, “because it’s who I am, it’s where I come from.” Pe’a named *E Walea* after his eldest nephew, Kamāli-‘ikānekūikekaipū‘oluwaleaokalani Pe’a-Whitney. Walea means “accustomed to” or “so familiar one does a thing without effort,” and Pe’a says the album title also speaks to the lighthearted yet lively mood in a gathering of family or friends.

After releasing *E Walea*, Pe’a and Cool submitted it for nomination to the Grammys in the American Regional Roots category, which includes Cajun, zydeco, polka, Native American and Hawaiian music. A screening committee comprised of the Recording Academy’s voting members picks the nominees for each category, then ballots are sent to all voting members to determine the winners. Hawaiian albums



Seen here and on the opening page, Pe'a performs at the Makapu'u Twilight Concert Series at Sea Life Park on O'ahu.

Matt Mallams

have never done well in the American Regional Roots category, which is usually dominated by Cajun recordings. Not coincidentally, Pe'a and Cool surmised, Cajun music has the Recording Academy's largest contingent of voters, while Hawaiian music has the smallest. After joining the Academy themselves, Pe'a and Cool set out to woo the voting members using what they call their "Millennial skills."

"Social media, marketing, public relations campaigns and music video content played an important role in the success of this album," says Cool, who has a background in digital marketing. "We worked night and day to build relationships," Pe'a says. "Every day after I got home from my job at Kamehameha, we would strategize. From a PR perspective I had to question myself every day, 'Where are we now? What's holding me back? What is our brand? What would build our brand?' Then we would get to work on the computer, from 8 p.m. to midnight." The two also made music videos and posted them on YouTube.

"We couldn't sit around and think the music was going to sell itself," says Cool. "As Millennial and modern Hawaiians who think globally, we know that music videos, sponsored advertisements and creating dialog on social media through e-blast newsletters, e-mails, et cetera, are key components to a successful music business." Their hard work paid off, and for the first time ever a Hawaiian album won the American Regional Roots category. "I will never

forget that moment," Pe'a says. "The roaring applause, the high fives, my mom crying. I had told Allan that I didn't want to write an acceptance speech beforehand, I should just speak from the heart, as our kūpuna [ancestors] would have done." And that's what he did, with Hawaiian and English pouring forth in an exuberant speech filled with gratitude and pride.

Three months after winning the Grammy, Pe'a went on to win a Na Hōkū Hanohano award for Contemporary Hawaiian Album of the year. For this acceptance speech he spoke completely in Hawaiian, acknowledging his people, his lāhui Hawai'i. He was effusive in his praise of the culture and in encouraging Hawaiians to believe that they can be whatever they want to be.

Pe'a has put his job on hold while he rides the wave of his Grammy success. His calendar for the next year is full of engagements—local, national and international. He plans to start work on his second album next year.

"I don't think there could have been a better ambassador of aloha," says Tucciarone, reflecting on Pe'a's Grammy win and what it means for Hawai'i. "He is Hawaiian, he speaks fluent Hawaiian, he teaches Hawaiian and he's immersed in the culture. His first love may be soul and R&B, but he is a Hawaiian music artist ... [and] the people on the Mainland saw his spirit shining through." **HH**