

KOKUA HAWAII ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW WITH
Alfred G. Abreu



Alfred Abreu
Photo courtesy Gary T. Kubota

Alfred G. Abreu was 20 and a University of Hawaii student, when he was arrested in Kalama Valley with 31 other people on May 11, 1971, protesting the eviction of farmers and Native Hawaiians. As a member of Kokua Hawaii, Abreu helped to organize Hawaiian concerts to benefit Kalama Valley residents—events that helped to introduce Hawaiian music to a younger generation of listeners. He also was the narrator and interviewer of the award-winning independent documentary TH-3: A Question Of Direction, which aired in prime time on

Hawaii Public Television in 1975. He later became a radio announcer on the Big Island promoting Hawaiian music on a program known as Alapai's Porch. He was interviewed at his home in Kona by telephone by Gary T. Kubota on March 12, 2017.

GK: Good morning, Alfred. When were you born and where were you raised?

AA: I was born in 1950 and raised in Kalihi Valley. I was probably about 12-13 years old when my dad died, and my mom shortly thereafter bought us a place in Kalihi Valley.

GK: Where were you educated?

AA: I attended Kapalama Elementary, Dole Intermediate, and Farrington High School, then the University of Hawaii at Manoa.

GK: How did you find out about Kalama Valley and what made you go to the valley?

AA: I was attending the University of Hawaii-Manoa at the time and there was a lot of talk on the news about it. I was kind of involved with people with leftist politics and my sympathies were with local working-class people. So I decided to go to the valley and check it out a couple of months before the arrest in May 1971.

GK: What do you recall?

AA: I remember going in and out, spending nights there, bringing in supplies, and coming in through various trails through the bushes because the guard service was blocking the

road. I still attended classes. When it got closer to the arrest, I spent most of my time in the valley.

GK: What were you studying?

AA: Ah, what was I studying? Wahines and partying.

GK: (Laughter)

AA: I would say, um, Liberal Studies with an emphasis on Broadcasting and Sociology.

GK: Okay. Were you working at the University of Hawaii radio station KTUH FM?

AA: Yeah. Sometimes, Kokua Hawaii members Kalani Ohelo and Ed Ching would accompany me to my once-a-week, four-hour radio program.

GK: So what did. . . what did you play there, usually?

AA: When I first started, I wasn't Hawaiianized yet, so when I first started, I was playing rock 'n roll—Hendrix and the Doors. I think after a year of being at KTUH, I initiated what became weekly Hawaiian programs on Saturday and Sunday.

GK: Why?

AA: Well. There wasn't any Hawaiian music program. More importantly, I found Hawaiian music spoke to my soul.

GK: How'd you start building the Hawaiian programs?

AA: I contacted the distributors of Hawaiian music and got a sampling of their catalog. In those days, there weren't cassettes or CDs. Everything was on vinyl. I had a collection of Hawaiian material on vinyl and played Hawaiian music Sunday or Monday mornings from 6 a.m. to 10 a.m.

GK: Can you describe the valley?

AA: It reminded me of my community. There weren't any high-end residences. People lived in basic homes. It was pretty well-kept. Everybody had pretty much well-kept yards and a lot of space in between homes. I guess at that time, a lot of people had moved out already because of the threat of eviction, so there weren't that many families.

GK: How were the residents who were there?

AA: As far as the vibe, it was very welcoming. You felt where you were someplace where you belonged. You were accepted, and you were needed.

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GK: Do you remember any residents?

AA: Oh, the Richards family, and George Santos and his wife. I remember her being a very strong woman. Sometimes, they seemed to be butting heads, but in a kind, not a serious manner. That was part of their dynamics as a married couple. I primarily stayed at George's place or adjacent to his place in tents or whatever we erected for shelter and food.

GK: Right.

AA: I just remember George pretty much because I was Portuguese, and George was Portuguese. We kind of bonded in that way. We're just two Portuguese fighting the system?

GK: So what kind of guy was George?

AA: George was strong, opinionated, and a hard worker. He's the kind of guy who will "give you the shirt off his back." That's how George was. He wasn't afraid to speak his mind even if it would offend somebody.

GK: What did you and other supporters do while you were in Kalama Valley?

AA: We'd go help him slop his pigs. We'd pick up the slop at the University of Hawaii-Manoa dormitories and the restaurants. Even after the eviction, Kokua Hawaii members helped out with his route early in the morning. I remember working at about 3 a.m. and going to his piggery up Waimanu Home Road in Pearl City. It's way way early for someone who is used to partying until 2 a.m. or 3 a.m. in the morning.

GK: (Laughter) Do you recall any conversations with the Richards family?

AA: With the Richards family, my communication was primarily with Black. He appeared to me to be a person that was really deep. He presented himself as being calm, cool, and collected. He would sit down and express himself very deliberately. He wasn't one for fits of rage.

GK: Now that you mention it, I never recalled him bursting out in anger about the eviction.

AA: Well, it was like this. Back then, evictions were a part of history in our community, especially the farmers and pig farmers. The Richards salvaged automobiles, and they along with farmers just kept on being pushed out of one neighborhood to another neighborhood as Honolulu expanded. Riches and wealth and power rule. There was no consideration for the Hawaiian lifestyle or any tenant's life.

GK: How did you feel about that?

AA: Coming from a working-class community, I understand their predicament. It affected me. I felt like I had to do something, maybe in some kind of small way.

GK: Was there any talk about Hawaiian sovereignty?

AA: I don't remember any conversations of that nature. What I remember is the steering committee of Kokua Hawaii was predominantly Hawaiian, and I felt that was right. That it was a Hawaiian issue, and Hawaiians should be in the forefront.

GK: What do you recall about the arrest on the morning of May 11, 1971?

AA: I remember when the police came in, they had the whole bullet-proof vest thing. We used a ladder to climb up on the roof of George's house and we pulled the ladder up behind us. Some said they saw snipers on the ridges. Somebody suggested we should take off our shirts so that nobody would think we had weapons. So some of us took off our shirts. When the cops came, I noticed many of them were Hawaiians and part Hawaiians.

GK: What happened then?

AA: I forget who the individual from Bishop Estate was, but he made an announcement that he was giving us our last notice to leave. Otherwise, we'd be charged with trespassing and arrested, blah, blah, blah. I don't think anybody left. The cops brought their ladders, and they went up on the roof. They took us two or three to a squad car and later booked us, put us in a cell. . . I guess everybody's bail was met. There was already some kind of fund for bail. It was a beautiful sunny day in Kalama Valley—a good day to get arrested for the cause.

GK: Did you know the leaders organizing against the eviction?

AA: A group of us weren't really in the steering committee. I was a political neophyte. I didn't know Karl Marx from Groucho Marx. There was some lack of respect going on by certain individuals who told us, "Hey, go get this. Go get that. Go bring this. Go fetch that." It wasn't from everybody. I think even amongst the core group of individuals who were leading the struggle, I think they were learning as they were going along. We had strong, dynamic personalities who were at the forefront. And it wasn't for me at that time to question what was going on.

GK: After the Kalama Valley arrests, you remained a member of Kokua Hawaii and continued your studies at the University of Hawaii. Do you recall participating with Kokua Hawaii in the sit-in at the university to keep the Ethnic Studies Program in 1972?

AA: The organizers wanted someone from Kokua Hawaii who was a student to speak at the gathering. They picked me. I don't recall what I said. But I recall it was some kind of joint effort between Kokua Hawaii and student activists living at a house in Kaimuki. . . When it came to the occupation of the University of Hawaii administration building, Kokua Hawaii was the primary moving force because members of the house in Kaimuki didn't want to move in that direction. Our position was let's march into the administration office and occupy it.

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GK: You were part of the Kokua Hawaii leadership, when it came to Hawaiian music and helping to organize benefit Hawaiian concerts. You were one of the organizers of Kokua Hawaii's Huli Kakou concerts at the University of Hawaii's Andrews Amphitheater and the next year, at the Waikiki Shell?

AA: Right.

GK: How was the music changing back then?

AA: Let me preface my remarks by saying what really enticed me to immerse myself in Hawaiian music and get to know as much as I could happened when I was in Kalama Valley. I was listening to Liko Martin pick up his guitar and sing his mele in the valley. I was just captivated by the guy's mana, his poetry and what he was saying through his music. At that particular point in time, I was just getting started with immersing myself in Hawaiian music.

GK: What was the creative atmosphere at the time?

AA: Hawaiian music was different. I think at that time, there was a lot of originality. Sunday Manoa was different from Hui Ohana, and Hui Ohana was different from Genoa Keawe. And Genoa Keawe was different from the Kahauanu Lake Trio. And there were the traditionalists, and there were people like Sunday Manoa breaking new ground and adding different rhythms and different instruments or something. The traditionalists didn't pretty much particularly care for it, but I've always felt that if you don't add new blood to traditional music, then you don't attract the younger people to experience it, and then, that's an avenue for them to experience the traditional.

But if they're not attracted by new blood, they don't have anything from their generation to get themselves into the music, then you kinda lose them. . . . Certain people set the mold, like Peter Moon and Gabby Pahinui and other individuals, like Palani Vaughan. . . . Forty, 50 years later, people are still playing music the way these individuals did. There are certain individuals that are doing new and interesting things, but actually, a lot of it is just a rehash of what happened 30, 40 years ago.

GK: Yeah. How were the concerts?

AA: I think one of the best trios I've ever heard performing Hawaiian music was at the concert at the university's Andrews Amphitheater. It was Moe Keale, Manu Kahaialii, who is Willie K's dad, and Palani Vaughan. The trio and the blend of their instruments and the blend of their voices was just magic, man. They were just singing all these traditional, long-time Hawaiian music. They did a half an hour or 20 minutes or whatever they were allotted.

GK: What were the sentiments of the entertainers and musicians who volunteered to participate in the concerts?

AA: I think a segment of the Hawaiian musicians that came up to support us weren't really aware of the details of our politics. They were supporting the families of Kalama Valley and what they heard on the news.

GK: Right. What other benefit concerts did you help to organize?

AA: Prior to me leaving Oahu and moving to Kona, I was working at KCCN, and they (Kokua Hawaii and other supporters) had a Waiahole-Waikane benefit concert for residents facing eviction. I coordinated the music and emceed the event.

I remember the traffic was backed up through the tunnel coming down the Windward side. I think there was some kind of activity also happening down in Haleiwa and then our concert up in Waiahole-Waikane.

GK: I guess no one expected such a large turnout?

AA: They're thinking of a mini event.

GK: So how many people came to the Waiahole-Waikane concert?

AA: Thousands.

GK: Wow. So, they made a chunk of change to support the struggle there, huh?

AA: I think the number of supporters at that time following Kalama Valley and then the fight for Sandy Beach and Waiahole-Waikane had grown. These were local people who were political, who were realizing that, the Hawaii they grew up with was slipping away.

GK: While a student, you also were the narrator and interviewer for the documentary *TH-3: A Question Of Direction* about the H-3 freeway through Moanalua Valley and proposed urban development in Windward Oahu. It aired on prime time on Hawaii Public Television. What were your thoughts at that time about the work?

AA: The documentary was important because it dealt with uncontrolled growth on Oahu and, of course, the need to preserve historic sites along the Moanalua corridor. I've always had an interest in following politics and the money involved with it.

GK: What did you do when you moved to Kona?

AA: I worked at KKON in Kealahou from 1977 through 1991. At one point, I was the station manager. When I first got there, there was Jonathan Twidwell whose on-air name was "Billy Bulla" and had a persona kind of like a Hawaiian Wolfman Jack. Then there was Miles Takaze, who went by the radio name "Shaka Taka." I had a Hawaiian music program called *Alapai's Porch*. It was quite enjoyable. All of us had come from radio station

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in a larger market, so we all pulled our manao and our talents together. We were the only radio station in Kona at the time and didn't have our FM until the early 1980s.

GK: How did your Hawaiian music program develop?

AA: I did four hours of Hawaiian music every day. It was the only Hawaiian music in the region. It was an opportune monopoly. The local talent came in that was presenting Hawaiian music to only one program. And that was mine.

GK: (Laughter) Did you host concerts in Kona?

AA: I was attending a benefit concert at the King Kamehameha Hotel in Kona. I remember Ernie Cruz, Sr. was performing. There was someone who was supposed to be the emcee who didn't show up. So the concert organizers pulled me from the audience to go up and welcome people to the event and speak.

GK: Wow. That was nice of you. How'd it go?

AA: With all the public speaking experience, I was a little more fluid and sure of myself at that time. . . Eventually, I emceed dozens of concerts, served as host/emcee for various community and nonprofit events, and, of course, represented the radio stations at our clients' events.

GK: What's your best memory?

AA: One of my fondest musical memories is spending a weekend with Gabby Pahinui, Atta Isaacs, Joe "Gana" Kupahu, and Peter Moon in Hilo as they were promoting a recent CD release. I got to hang out with the musicians in their hotel rooms as they would jam lots of old jazz tunes. Boy, Gabby and Atta could jam and not just only in Hawaiian. Thinking about those times still gives me chicken skin. Sadly, they're all gone. But these guys set the mold. Musical geniuses.

