

# KE OLA *"The Life"*

*Celebrating the arts, culture, and sustainability of Hawai'i Island*

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**'Iwi in Māmane**



# LIVING PONO:

## Bula Akamu

| By Mālielani Larish



Bula and his lovely wife, Ashley  
photo courtesy Ranae Keane  
EmotionGalleries.com

Sitting on the white sands of Kamakahonu Beach, framed by the lush slopes of Hualālai Volcano and the dazzling waters of Kailua Bay, Bula Akamu closes his eyes and breathes deeply. Two hundred years of history unwind before his inner vision; he can see King Kamehameha I walking the shoreline and praying in Ahu'ena, the heiau that he built across from the beach. Hands trembling with emotion and eyes glazing with the start of tears, Bula writes down the lyrics for a song called *Legends*.

*Look your keiki in the eyes.*

*We've got all the best things in life; all we've gotta do is open our eyes.*

Bula Akamu sees resources and opportunities all around him, and this has helped him develop a fascination with music into a career as a professional musician. When Bula performs, it is as if he draws the mana (power) from his surroundings up through his body. His 'ukulele and guitar playing is smooth, precise, and rich with technical details, and his voice and chiseled features convey every nuance of emotion. Whether singing the hauntingly beautiful Hawaiian falsetto or sharing his rendition of a pop song, Bula plays a variety of genres with ease.

As a boy growing up in the quiet plantation town of Pāhala, Bula enjoyed playing outside, fixing cars, and learning everything

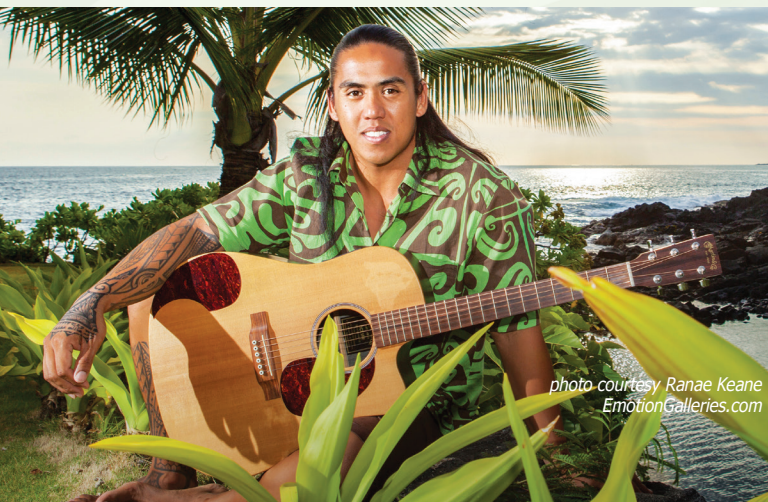


photo courtesy Ranae Keane  
EmotionGalleries.com



Hōkū Amphitheater at Four Seasons Hualālai  
L-R: Bula Akamu, Moa Noble,  
Duncan Bamsey,  
Andrea Lindborg,  
Jason Aiono-Tupuola



about the ocean from his father. Bula's Hawaiian-Chinese-Filipino family lacked material wealth, yet they bestowed him with the riches of music and love. When his father, grandfather, uncle, and brother came together to create Hawaiian music, Bula watched and learned.

Bula expresses immense gratitude for his parents, who taught him respect, humility, and how to live pono (righteously) and love everyone. He especially tries to emulate his father, who he says is the kind of Mr. Aloha who will love you no matter what.

Today, Bula's listeners feel that genuine warm-heartedness when he interacts with his two main audiences: wedding guests and passengers of the Body Glove Sunset Cruise.

One wedding client named Kacey said that Bula was "very kind, responsive, and took the time to try and get to know us as a couple as best he could before the wedding. Our guests were very impressed!"

Another client commented that he "kept everyone loose, having fun, and brought a feeling of 'ohana (family) into the entire day that was truly special."

For the last three years, Bula has won the Couple's Choice Award from WeddingWire.com, an online marketplace for wedding planning. It is difficult to believe that at one point, Bula wanted to pursue a different career.

When Bula started studying sports and exercise science during his first year of college, he found himself jamming in his dorm, forming bands, and performing for his peers instead of studying. He realized that it was time to follow his passion.

He auditioned for and was accepted to the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston, where he could finally feel like a kid in a candy store, surrounded by amazing musicians and the ideas that he needed to advance his talent to new levels. He soaked up new styles like jazz, R&B, world, soul, and blues, and learned the intricacies of written music.

"I became addicted to learning and I was excited that I was excited to learn!" he recalls.

Exceeding his own expectations, Bula earned a Master's Degree in music after six and a half years at Berklee.

Back in Hawai'i, Bula started to build his reputation by performing at resorts and restaurants. However, he knew that something was missing. He had a broader vision of sharing his art, his heart, and his knowledge with youth, and in 2011, he

The Akamu family celebrating Bula's high school graduation.



L-R: Bula, Mom, Dad, sister Sae, brother Chris

jumped on the opportunity to teach Hawaiian Studies at Kahakai Elementary in Kailua-Kona.

When Bula talks about the students at Kahakai, you can feel his already-infectious enthusiasm increase a notch.

"Kids are great!" he says "Whatever comes out of my mouth, they soak it in."

When he discovered high-quality Kamaka 'ukuleles gathering dust in storage, he could already see them in student's hands, their iPads and smart phones temporarily forgotten. Bula started an after school 'ukulele program with five pupils, and when that number swelled to 150 students, the Kahakai 'Ukulele Ensemble was officially born.

Famous for their spirited performances, the ensemble has won first place in the marching division of the annual Kailua-Kona Christmas and Kona Coffee Lantern parades for the past four years. The kids dance, spin, and play 'ukulele behind their backs and between their legs. Bula loves seeing the diversity of kids, from all ages and skill levels, come together as a whole to share the joy of music.

"My only job is to get them excited about music," Bula says, so he chooses popular top 40 songs with positive messages for them to learn.

If you walked into Bula's classroom, you wouldn't see tables and chairs. The students sit down, 'ohana style, on the floor.

"I get everyone involved, even the quiet one in the corner. It's fun!" Bula exclaims.

Bula aims to teach the keiki so that they have the passion and knowledge to teach themselves. He wants them to be able to listen to a song and think *I can figure out how to play this!* He is delighted when he sees his students teaching each other and going home to teach their parents.

Due to the interest expressed by non-Kahakai youth, Bula has spent the last three summers teaching the Akamu Music Academy, which is a month-long course in guitar, voice, and music theory offered twice during the break. Students from O'ahu and Maui have attended the program, which gives students the chance to record themselves in Bula's studio as a culminating project.



L-R: brother Chris, Dad, Bula performing in 2004





In addition, Bula credits exercise, a healthy diet, and time in the ocean with energizing him for a demanding schedule.

Bula met his lovely wife, Ashley, while he was performing at the Hilton Waikoloa. They exchanged vows on a double-hulled canoe that was launched from the same beach where Bula penned the song *Legends*.

Bula and Ashley form a great team: Ashley coordinates and manages the wedding center at the Royal Kona Resort and Bula is the musician at the altar singing sweet melodies while the bride and groom walk down the aisle. Bula may be a stranger when he arrives at the ceremony, yet by the end of the day everyone feels like Bula is part of the family, too.

The key to Bula's success as a wedding and cruise ship entertainer, is his ability to cater to a range of musical tastes. Bula's first CD, which he recorded fresh

out of college, experiments with genres like acid jazz, pop, R&B, and funk. He collaborated with Grammy-nominee L.T. Smooth on the project.

Debuting this fall, Bula's new CD contains original tracks showcasing his skill with the whole spectrum of Hawaiian music. The soothing, relaxing songs feature slack key guitar, piano, and saxophone, and Bula's messages of caring for our precious children and land. The CD, called *Honi Honi*, will be available on iTunes and at Bula's gigs.

Reflecting on his journey so far, Bula is simultaneously excited and at ease. Although he has stepped down as a Hawaiian Studies teacher to dedicate more time to music, he will continue to teach the Kahakai 'Ukulele Ensemble.

"It's nice to enjoy what you are sharing and what you are giving to the world," he says. "I'm just proud that I earned my music career, and I feel accomplished that I am doing what I love."

Back at Ahu'ena Heiau, which is dedicated to the Hawaiian god of peace and prosperity, the ancestors are smiling. ❖

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