

“Somewhere Over the Rainbow/What a Wonderful World”—Israel Kamakawi'ole (1993)

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Essay by Jim Tranquada (guest post)*



Iz

Milan Bertosa was locking up his small Honolulu recording studio around 3 a.m. one day early in 1988 when he suddenly got a call from a client who told him Israel Ka--... Bertosa, a Chicago native, only caught the first syllable of the long Hawaiian name, but the caller insisted that this musician had to come to the studio to record a demo *right now*. Bertosa, exhausted after a long day, demurred, but then Israel Kamakawi'ole got on the line. “And he's this really sweet man, well-mannered, kind. ‘Please, can I come in? I have an idea,’” Bertosa told NPR in a 2011 interview. The studio manager finally agreed to 30 minutes of studio time. Shortly thereafter, the massive 450-pound musician walked in with just a ‘ukulele. In 20 minutes, the 29-year-old laid down three tracks, including a haunting medley of “Over the Rainbow” and “What a Wonderful World” that was destined to make him internationally famous, known simply as “Iz.”

Tragically, Kamakawi'ole's success as the most popular Hawaiian musician of the 20th century was posthumous. He died in Honolulu from the complications of morbid obesity on June 26, 1997, at age 38. Originally released as a last-minute addition to Iz's 1993 album “Facing Future,” “Over the Rainbow/Wonderful World” began to gain traction with its inclusion in multiple movies and television shows. Millions of people were introduced to Iz as his mashup played over the closing credits of “Meet Joe Black” in 1998 and during “ER's” 2002 season finale as Dr. Mark Greene died of a brain tumor. Iz's 2001 album, “Alone in IZ World,” debuted at #1 on Billboard's World Music chart and became the only album by a Hawaiian artist to appear in Billboard's Top 200 album chart that year. Four years later, “Facing Future” became the first certified platinum album by a Hawaiian artist; in 2010, almost two decades after its release, “Over the Rainbow/Wonderful World” was at the top of the German and French charts.

Iz's early morning inspiration has become part of the standard ‘ukulele repertoire, with dozens of online tutorials in multiple languages and search for “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” online and you're likely to see Iz's version appear before Judy Garland's. “I've been around long enough to

know that there has never been anything remotely close to what Israel has done,” said Jon de Mello, his producer and CEO of Mountain Apple Co. Longtime Honolulu music critic and author John Berger agrees, saying Kamakawiwo'ole had “one of the most spectacular solo careers in modern Hawaiian music.”

The nature of Iz's fame in Hawai'i, however, is quite different from his international TV- and movie-fueled fame. As compelling as “Over the Rainbow/Wonderful World” is, it is not the reason why after his death an estimated 10,000 people stood in line at the Hawai'i State Capitol after Governor Ben Cayetano yielded to a flood of requests that he be allowed to lie in state there--an unprecedented honor previously accorded to only Governor John A. Burns and US Sen. Spark Matsunaga.

By the time he stepped into Bertosa's studio, Kamakawiwo'ole was one of the Islands' most beloved performers, the frontman for the Makaha Sons of Ni'ihau. The year before, the Sons had won four Na Hoku Hanohano awards--the Hawaiian equivalent of a Grammy--for their album “Ho'ola,” including Best Album and Group of the Year. The Sons' popularity was based not just on their superb musicianship but on their embrace of native Hawaiian culture and politics.

Born in Honolulu in 1959, the year Hawai'i became a state, Iz grew up steeped in the music of the Hawaiian Renaissance, a term coined by historian and Hawaiian cultural advocate George Kanaha and described by Amy Ku'uleialoha Stillman as “the vigorous assertion of native Hawaiian ethnic identity.” The influence of the Civil Rights movement on the mainland, protests against the war in Vietnam, and the decolonization of former European possessions in the Pacific all helped set the stage for such pivotal bands as the Sons of Hawai'i and Sunday Manoa in the late '60s and early '70s. Iz's uncle, Moe Keale, joined the Sons in 1971. His father worked as a bouncer at Steamboat Lounge on Kalakaua Ave in Waikiki, which meant Iz grew up hanging out with Hawaiian musicians, joining the Sons of Hawai'i on stage as an 11-year-old.

When his family moved to Makaha on the leeward side of Oahu when he was a teenager, he met Jerome Koko while playing his 'ukulele on the beach. He and Koko joined forces with Iz's older brother Skippy, Sam Gray, and Louis “Moon” Kauakahi to form the Makaha Sons of Ni'ihau in 1975. One of the Makaha Sons' first big hits was Mickey Ioane's “Hawaii '78,” which asks how Hawaiian royalty of old would feel if they could return and see the sad state of Hawai'i and the Hawaiian people. As concert producer Milton Lau of Ka Hoku Productions told the “Honolulu Advertiser,” “To many people [Iz] represented the real Hawai'i and when he talked about people losing their land, anybody, anywhere who ever felt dispossessed or felt a sense of injustice looked up to him as a leader... Israel proved that if we believed in ourselves and our music, we would find an audience in a bigger world.”

So what is it about Iz's medley that found him an enormous audience in a wider world? “Over the Rainbow,” the 1939 Academy-Award winning song by Howard Arlen and Yip Harburg, has been extraordinarily popular since Judy Garland first sang it in “The Wizard of Oz”--the Recording Industry Association of America and the National Endowment of the Arts ranked it No. 1 on their Songs of the Century list. (“What a Wonderful World,” the 1967 release by jazz great Louis Armstrong, was originally far less successful and took much longer to achieve pop standard status). But it's not just the undeniable power of these particular songs at work. Iz

released a different version in 1990 on his first solo album, a slicker, Hawaiian-influenced arrangement with a full band that attracted no attention at the time. (Long-time music critic John Berger didn't mention it in his album review for the "Honolulu Star-Bulletin.")

Ultimately, it's the stark authenticity of Iz's soulful voice accompanied only by his 'ukulele, and his idiosyncratic approach to the lyrics: For example, "Somewhere over the rainbow/Way up high/There's a land that I heard of/Once in a lullaby/Somewhere over the rainbow/Skies are blue/And the dreams that you dare to dream/Really do come true" in Iz's version becomes "Somewhere over the rainbow/Way up high/And the dreams that you dream of/Once in a lullaby/Somewhere over the rainbow/Bluebirds fly/And the dreams that you dream of/Dreams really do come true." His deceptively simple accompaniment has challenged a generation of 'ukulele players, who struggle to reproduce his syncopated style in low G tuning in which he plucks the G string at the start of each downstroke. The simplicity of his approach stands in dramatic contrast to the kind of highly produced music heard elsewhere--autotune was introduced in 1997--and helped serve as an inspiration for a generation of television ads with a "carefree and happy" 'ukulele soundtrack. It's an example of what author Derek Thompson calls "the power of well-disguised familiarity.... The best hit makers are gifted at creating moments of meaning by marrying new and old, anxiety and understanding. They are architects of familiar surprises."

A former newspaper reporter, 'ukulele historian Jim Tranquada worked for three decades in marketing and communications at UCLA and Occidental College. He is the co-author (with the late John King) of the imaginatively titled "The 'Ukulele: A History" (University of Hawai'i Press, 2012). His great-great grandfather Augusto Dias was one of the three original 'ukulele makers in Honolulu in the 1880s.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.