



What Dreams May Come

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Paula Fuga spins music and
magic from her life

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Paula Fuga was a shy second-grader at an Oahu elementary school the first time she performed in public. “It was lunchtime, and our table was the most quiet and well-behaved,” recalls the woman who today entralls thousands with her startlingly powerful and



sultry voice. “So the principal came over and asked if anyone wanted to get up on stage and perform.”

Paula volunteered, stood on the cafeteria stage and sang every song she could think of, from “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” to “Ten Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed.” She sang the songs a capella because there was no microphone — though the next day the principal himself brought one. Paula performed again, determined not to repeat any of the songs she’d sung the previous day. She racked her 7-year-old brain for more kids’ favorites like “Strawberry Shortcake” before launching into a bold rendition of — she hesitates before confessing — Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean.”

“You better believe they heard me that day,” she laughs now as she breaks into the first lines of the chorus: “Billie Jean is not my lover...” Her rich, earthy voice grounds the words as she sings them over twenty years later. “I used

to have a problem with volume,” she says, laughing more. “Believe it or not, at the beginning I was too *quiet*. I had to learn to sing from that deep place, the *naau*.”

The Paula Fuga that audiences flock to see today is distinguished by the commanding voice that pours out of that place. The *pareo*-draped, consciousness-focused vocalist has been called Hawaii’s Lauryn Hill. Her lyrics are poetic and she dubs her music “oregano blue” — that is, “original music influenced by reggae and rhythm and blues.” Young she may be — just 29 — but her fame is growing. In 2006, she was voted most promising new artist in the Islands; last summer, she toured the West Coast with fellow Hawaii musician Jack Johnson.

“I feel lucky to be one of the people who gets to introduce Paula to music lovers,” Johnson says. “One of my favorite moments of the night was when Paula would join us on stage during our set. In most of the towns we played, people didn’t know her music. Every night when she would sing her first line, the audience would just go nuts. The whole crowd would have both hands in the air and huge smiles on their faces.... That moment would elevate the rest of our set to a new level.”

WHEN PAULA SANG “life is but a dream” in the second grade, she already had a good sense of what her own dream looked like. By the age of 4, she was picturing herself starring in music videos and singing in a little room before a hanging mike — she was too young to know exactly what a recording studio was but she intuitively knew she wanted to be in one. When an adult asked her, at 9, what she aspired to be, “I looked toward the sky, and all I could see was myself on a huge stage with a huge crowd,” Paula remembers. “There was a whitish-blue light shining on me, and I had a cordless mike in my hand. And I just felt that it was my show.” But, unwilling to divulge her visions at that moment, she replied, “A teacher.”

“And I did become a teacher,” Fuga says. She taught at Hakipu‘u Learning Center, a charter school on Oahu’s windward side, and she served as a counselor at Hale Kipu, a center

for at-risk youth. “Then,” she says, “I realized I could teach a lot more people with my music than I could in a classroom.” And now she does. Already she is beginning to exhibit the kind of sweeping influence of her greatest inspirations: Gabby Pahinui, Israel Kamakawiwoole, Bob Marley, Aretha Franklin.

“Paula doesn’t have any ego trips; she sings just for the love of it,” says close friend and drummer Mike Love, who plays with Paula in the reggae band DubKonscious. “I love the way she laughs at herself, and the way she belts out those long, soaring notes.”

“Paula has the perfect combination of confidence and humility,” agrees Jack Johnson. “She is the same person on and off the stage. When she tells you a story sitting on the front porch, it sounds like a song.”

Fuga’s debut album *Lilikoi*, released two years ago, features candid tracks that are raw

can do what is right,” she emphasizes, lamenting the destructive toll that temptation can take: “It’s so easy to not want to try. It’s so easy to stay home from work, stay home from school, skip a day, try this drug, whatever.

“Music helps you to feel all the things you couldn’t feel or were afraid to face alone. It helps you try to express your feelings when you don’t have the words to do it,” she reflects. “You have to feel it to get over it ... and you’re comforted by knowing that someone else knows what you’re going through.”

PAULA GREW UP in Waimanalo, raised largely by her grandparents and aunt in a rural Island community; there she cultivated a deep connection to the natural environment. “I was raised in the ocean. It’s heaven,” she says. “I think adults don’t spend enough time in the ocean. We’re supposed to be taking care of the earth and enjoying it, too.” For Paula, today that means planting, gardening, weaving, cooking, sewing and spending time with loved ones. She also spent two years studying the Hawaiian language, which anchors many of her songs.

When she began her musical journey, she often found herself at the Honolulu home of friend Keola Nakanishi; for years, he hosted a backyard jam session every Wednesday where Paula played and sang, a weekly *kanikapila* that fostered free-flowing, politically driven music. Even before she first visited Keola’s home, Paula says, she saw the house clearly in a dream.

“And when I got there, it was like a circus of musicians,” Paula says, describing the power-to-the-people, grassroots get-togethers. Tracing the evolution of her career since those early days, she tells more recent stories: of performing with Damian Marley during a show-stopping finale at Jack Johnson’s Kōkua Festival; of headlining a concert with the Honolulu Symphony. “There were 100-plus pieces behind me playing my songs!” she says. The Symphony show remains her favorite to date, and she is clearly still awed by the experience. She searches for the right description before settling on this: “It felt complete, it felt whole ... if only I could have a symphony of my own!”

She may not have one now but Paula continues to grow and flourish. She just recorded a new song with Jack Johnson and Ziggy Marley, and she is gathering material for her next album. “I’m still at the beginning,” she says. “Dreams, I still have more.” ❀

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with emotion and softened by nose flute and ukulele. In 2007, she organized the Lilikoi Fair, a music festival designed to benefit a foundation she’d established to empower women.

“If I could endow humans with anything,” says Paula, “I would endow them with a huge conscience, so they would think about what they do and how it will affect others. So they