

Star Advertiser

‘Popoloheno’ celebrates Black history in Hawaii



By [John Berger](#)

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When Mahealani Uchiyama takes the stage Saturday for the Hawaii premiere of “Popoloheno: Songs of Resilience & Joy” at Leeward Community College, she will be celebrating the contributions that people she describes as “African descended” have been making in Hawaii for almost two centuries.

The program features mele inoa (name songs) honoring their accomplishments, and performances by Kalani Pe‘a, Kamakakehau Fernandez, Patrick Landeza, Ikaika Blackburn and Azure McCall.

Uchiyama chose the title for the kaona (hidden meanings) contained in the word “popolo” as it relates to people of African ancestry.

“The word ‘popolo’ refers to a medicinal plant with dark brown berries,” Uchiyama told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser in a phone interview. “There’s nothing negative about that, and in traditional Hawaii, blackness was not necessarily considered negative. Somewhere along the line, ‘popolo’ kind of switched out as a local term (for African descended people).”

Uchiyama, born Ricalda Coffey, grew up in Washington, D.C., when the nation’s capital was racially segregated. “Negroes,” the politically correct term at the time, sat at the back of the bus, used separate water fountains and were denied access to “whites only” public facilities.

She discovered Hawaii when she saw Martin Luther King Jr., wearing a lei during the third march on Selma, Ala., in 1965. With her mother’s encouragement, she went “6,000 miles from home” to attend the University of Hawaii, learn everything she could about the islands’ culture and history, and study hula.

She met her first husband at the University of Hawaii. (She kept his name after the divorce because “I wanted to have the same name as my son, and it is fun to look the way I do, and have a Japanese surname.”). She received her Hawaiian name in 1976 during her first year of Hawaiian language class, and studied hula with kumu hula Joseph Kamoha’i Kaha’ulelio, who gave her permission to teach shortly before his death in 1985.

Uchiyama received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Dance Ethnology in 1979, and a Master of Arts degree in Pacific Islands Studies in 1987.

It was while Uchiyama was living in Hawaii that she discovered that although people of African descent have a small footprint in Hawaii’s population, their contributions to island history and culture go back more than 200 years.

Betsey Stockton was an emancipated slave who came to Hawaii in 1822 with a group of American Protestant missionaries and spent three years in Hawaii as a teacher and missionary. Stockton was portrayed by Hawaii-resident Jeanné Wynne Herring in Hawaiian Mission Houses' 2020 production of Oahu Cemetery Pupu Theatre in 2020.

George Washington Hyatt, an escaped slave from Virginia, was one of the original members of the Royal Hawaiian Band in the early 1830s; he served three years as bandmaster in the 1840s.

Carlotta Stewart Lai came to Hawaii in 1898 and spent most of her working life as a teacher or administrator in the public school system (Herring portrayed her at Oahu Cemetery Pupu Theatre in 2019).

Charles Campbell made an outsized contribution as an educator, civil rights activist and successful candidate for electoral office. Campbell was the first politician in Hawaii to use sign waving on street corners as an inexpensive form of political advertising.

Sports fans remember the “Fabulous Five” — UH-Manoa men’s basketball team members Al Davis, Jerome Freeman, Dwight Holiday, Bob Nash and John Penebacker in 1970-1971 and 1971-1972. They also remember Artie Wilson and his contributions to the program’s commitment to excellence through 1974.

Showroom and nightclub entertainment has been enriched by trombonist Trummy Young and his daughter, singer Andrea Young, vocalist Azure McCall, pianists Tennyson Stephens and Tommy James, tenor sax master Paul Madison, and Na Hoku Hanohano Award winner Kamakakehau Fernandez, who was adopted as an infant in Arkansas and raised a native speaker of Olelo Hawaii on Maui.

Roger Mosely originated the role of Theodore “T.C.” Calvin in the CBS television series “Magnum, P.I.” in 1980 and opened businesses that served the Black community here.

Stage and film entertainment in the islands has benefited from the work of actors, playwrights and directors including Leonard Piggee, Lillian Jones, Derrick Brown, Shervelle Bergholz, Wendy Pearson, Curtis Duncan, Twan Matthews, Alison Bruce-Maldonado and Moses Goods, who is being seen worldwide this month in the Apple TV+ miniseries “Chief Of War.”

Stockton, Fernandez, Uchiyama and Hawaii-born President Barack Obama, are among the people “Popoloheno” honors with mele inoa. Other songs describe the experiences of African descended people here. “A Lei for Reverend King” recalls King’s visit to Hawaii in 1959.

“Popoloheno: Songs of Resilience & Joy” was released on major online platforms in June. It became available as a traditional hard-copy CD in July.

“There’s history that most of us were not exposed to, and the fact is, a lot of people don’t know this history,” Uchiyama said. “When you have a song written about a person, place or thing, people tend to learn about it.”

‘Popoloheno: Songs of Resilience & Joy’

Where: Leeward Theatre, Leeward Community College

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

Tickets: \$40 general admission; discounts available for kupuna (65+), Leeward faculty/staff/alumni, people age 2-18, and LCC students.