

From the Mountain to the Ocean

A Conversation with Hawaii's John Cruz

It was a little past noon and we were going to lunch in Santa Monica and I began to listen to this catchy tune playing on my friend, Jimmy Lem's car stereo.

“...Mama's in the kitchen cooking dinner real nice,
Beef stew on the stove, lomi salmon with the ice...”

The voice was unusual, unique and I liked the “down-home, warm feel of the lyrics. So, as we drove to Santa Monica, I asked Jimmy who the artist was. “Oh, this is ‘John Cruz,’” Jimmy said, pointing to his dashboard. “He’s big in Hawaii. This is his first album, ‘Acoustic Soul’” Jimmy has family in Hawaii and is pretty tuned in to the music scene. We continued to drive and listen.

“We eat & drink and we sing all day,
Kanikapila in the old Hawaiian way...”

Crossing Olympic and then Santa Monica Boulevard, on our way to lunch, I was expecting an all Hawaiian album. But instead, I noticed that each track of the CD was part of a mix of songs and musical styles. Some songs had a touch of blues, others had a definite folk feel, another picked up a distinctive reggae beat. Then there was a “slack string” guitar solo.

“...On the Island, we do it Island Style,
From the mountain to the ocean from the windward to the leeward side.”

Through the kind assistance of Cruz's manager, Leslie Truglio Vantage Point was put in touch with John Cruz so we could meet and talk to the man behind the songs.

Vantage Point: That song “Island Style” on “Acoustic Soul;” it has such an authentic local feel. So, were you born and raised in Hawaii?

John Cruz: No. I was actually born in San Diego, but I grew up in Hawaii. My dad was in the service and he was stationed in California. I was born in the hospital at Camp Pendleton. My dad is from California and my mom is from Hawaii.

Our family went back and forth from the mainland to the islands; one kid was born in California, the next in Hawaii and so on.

VP: I love to visit Hawaii. But I often wonder if my vantage point is different from someone who grew up on the islands. Is the lifestyle locals live different from the “hotel culture” one sees during short-term visits?

Cruz: Very different. Tourist dollars are essential to our economy. And so the Hawaii Visitors Bureau has promoted an image of Hawaii to get people to come to the islands and spend their money here. They have promoted Hawaii as being is a tropical land of hula girls living in little grass shacks wearing only grass skirts, that sort of thing.

VP: And what do you see?

Cruz: Hawaii is more of an international place. There is a melting pot of cultures and influences. Because we are located in the Pacific (Ocean) we see a lot of Asian influence on the local scene. We also are significantly influenced by the western culture.



VP: Is Hawaii a place where new trends in music begin?

Cruz: Only in some ways. Hawaii is a little behind the most current western trends. Definitely, the Honolulu scene is several steps behind the Los Angeles scene. I know that Hawaii truly is a laid back place...I left Hawaii because of that. I wanted to get as far away as possible. I lived on the East Coast for several years for that reason. But eventually I came back and had to make some adjustments in my lifestyle...and it is so good to be back. I love it here.

[John Cruz moved to the East Coast in 1983 and began to find his own “voice” as a singer songwriter. During his 12 years in the Northeast, he cut his musical teeth in subways, coffeehouses and bars in New York's Greenwich Village, as well as in the clubs and local haunts from Martha's Vineyard to the Boston area.]

VP: Coming back from the East Coast after all that time there, were you able to once again adjust to the slower pace and lifestyle in Hawaii?

Cruz: It took awhile but I did. It was hard. I loved living in New York as well as Martha's Vineyard. But this is my home.

VP: New York has a nonstop, frenetic pace of life. Did that energy change you?

Cruz: When I first got back from the East Coast, I am sure I was quite different from the person I was when I left. I guess I carried that mainland vibe.

VP: How was that “vibe” manifested after you returned?

Cruz: (Laughs) I was fortunate to sit in and join my brother Ernie's band when I first got back — the Ka'au Crater Boys. Friends would ask Ernie, “Say, who is that haole (White guy) playing

base?" Ernie would try to explain, "Yeah, he's my brother, John." And people would say, "Ahhh yeah, cool, brudda John..." Ernie would then have to clarify, "No John IS my brother."

VP: Do you miss being in the East Coast scene?

Cruz: Sure, at times...I still go to the East Coast frequently and play there. I made a lot of good friends during the years I was living there and growing artistically.

VP: Did you begin to pick up an east coast accent?

Cruz: No, not an accent but I picked up a lot of profanity. (Laughs) That's just how people talk in New York. It can be a bit more abrasive, but it allows people to get to the point much quicker.

VP: How important is it to stay in touch with the fans you made, say on the East Coast?

Cruz: It's really important to tour and meet the fans. In today's music business it is a requirement. The old business allowed you to stay at home, the records would sell, and then you could walk to the mailbox to get paid. Those days are gone. You have to sell every record because it is easy for people to download your songs without paying for them. I hope they buy my records because they relate to me and the enjoyable time they had at the concert I gave.

[John Cruz's first album, Acoustic Soul was released in 1996. It has sold over 100,000 copies in Hawaii alone. John produced the album and released it on his own label, Lilikoi Records. It spawned radio hits "Shine On," "Sitting in Limbo" and "Island Style," which has become a local anthem in Hawaii. Acoustic Soul won two Na Hoku Hanohano Awards in 1997 — one for Contemporary Album of the Year and one for Most Promising Artist.]

VP: Can you share the roots of music that influenced you and allowed the songs on Acoustic Soul to be so varied in style?

Cruz: My dad is a country singer and so his musical influences reached me very early in my life. I loved that music. My earliest influences were "pre-Kenny Rogers" country. Merle Haggard, George Jones, Tammy Wynette Patsy Cline, Lefty Frizzel, Loretta Lynne, and Dolly (Parton).

My Mom, until she met my dad, sang in a band that covered a lot of Motown stuff. That was her preference in music. My mom's record collection was primarily R&B, soul, and some blues. Growing up, I would listen to a lot of Marvin Gay, Otis Redding, Aretha, the Temptations, the Miracles, and so on.

VP: Were your mom and dad's tastes in each of those very different music genres popular in Hawaii at the time you were exposed to them?

Cruz: (Laughs) No, not really. That was one of the things that drew me to New York. I loved a variety of music styles and figured that New York would be the best possible place to get into them. A lot of local musicians, if they feel Hawaii is "too closed," go to L.A. It is a natural thing to do if they want to progress.

But I was looking for that "funk" influence in my mom's music...in hindsight perhaps I should have gone to New Orleans so that I could have soaked up more of that Southern Blues and jazz. I went to New Orleans about four years ago and realized what a powerful and influential music resource it is. There are so many good musicians...and the food is unbelievable.

VP: Did your mainland time expose you to other musical influences?

Cruz: I got into the “singer/songwriter” folk scene. Because I play acoustic guitar it was a natural path for me to play in the coffee house circuit along the east coast. I still am really into the folk and acoustic influences in my music.

VP: When you perform in Hawaii venues, is there acceptance of these other blended styles and external influences in your music? Let me be more direct...Are local fans at concerts and clubs open to blues selections, R&B or folk?

Cruz: I just do it, you know. The reason I left Hawaii was that I could see my future. I was going to be in doing shows in a lounge somewhere, wearing an Aloha shirt singing cover songs or hapa haole.

I was starved for other kinds of music and going to the mainland was what I needed. The good thing about it is that it has come full circle allowing my musical influence to carry forward to other local songwriters and performers. It is also easier today because of the Internet which also exposes people to all kinds of genres of music.

VP: Reggae became a very big musical style in Hawaii in recent years. Why did it catch on so rapidly?

Cruz: In the seventies, parts of Hawaii outside of the larger towns and cities were becoming known as an “herb culture.” As a result, a lot of Hawaiians were interested in reggae; the Bob Marley, Jimmy Cliff, and The Wailers style of music.

VP: What was happening musically in school as you grew up during that period?

Cruz: I grew up in town where it was predominately local kids. There were, perhaps at most, two haole kids in the entire school...and they were brother and sister. Then I moved with my mother - who got remarried - from Honolulu and went to Kailua High School which at the time was half white, half local. Music tastes broke down into two somewhat separate cultures: the white culture was a lot of hard rock music, Led Zeppelin and the other bands at that time.

But, at the same time, the locals in my school were listening to pioneering reggae artists. Musical preferences often depended on which social circle you chose to hang with. From my parents, I had a love for all kinds of music.

VP: What about today’s Hawaiian reggae music? Are you interested in or influenced by Hawaii Reggae?

Cruz: I find Hawaiian reggae not the same as reggae music that originated from, and still is sourced from Jamaica. Adopting the music is one thing...(pauses to think) To me, the local versions tend to be a thin recreation of the original sound; something is missing. I can even detect the false reggae accents. Unfortunately, that is what gets a lot of airplay on local radio and a lot of kids get influenced by it. It isn’t for me.

[Cruz’s second album, One of These Days was released on September 25th, 2007. After its debut week, the album reached #1 in Hawaii, #2 on the Billboard Heatseekers Chart for the Pacific Region and #6 on the Billboard World Chart. The Hawaii Academy of Recording Arts

gave the album the Na Hoku Hanohano Award for Contemporary Album of the Year.]

VP: On the topic of AM/FM radio airplay, is your music included in the rotation of music being played by Hawaii stations?

Cruz: Acoustic Soul most definitely. It gets airplay on adult contemporary, rock format, and Hawaiian, of course. The latest album (One of These Days), not so much on Oahu. On the outer islands, they play three or four songs from the new album.

One Oahu station, which has a Hawaiian/pop format, includes music from “One of These Days” on their play list. The irony is that my acoustic style of music with a little harmonium sounds gets mixed in with imitation Jamaican/Hawaiian stuff. Go figure. It’s kind of strange, but I’ll take accept it.

VP: Why are the Oahu stations less inclined to pick up songs from the new album?

Cruz: Play lists are so tight, you know. Conglomerates own most of the radio outlets on Oahu. The majority of the market (for radio airplay) is here in Honolulu. The stations are directed to work with consultants on the mainland to try to figure out what songs to include on the radio back here.

The program directors on the outer islands have a little more leeway, and that gives “One of These Days” more exposure there than it does in the Honolulu market.

VP: How much airplay does your new album get on the east coast?

Cruz: “One of These Days” songs get more airplay in Martha’s Vineyard than they do here in Hawaii (laughs).

[While he lived on the East Coast, John Cruz several years in theatre and dance companies, performing everywhere from Lincoln Center to Washington D.C. Cruz starred in a variety of shows, including ensemble productions, two-man plays, and gospel inspired musicals. Cruz was often the leading man, and his roles spanned a wide range of characters and ethnicities. He has played a Chinese immigrant, an embittered Native American, and an Hispanic hustler, to name a few. As a member of the prestigious New World Theater, Cruz played the lead role in "The Dance and the Railroad," by Tony Award-winning Broadway playwright, David Henry Hwang, of M. Butterfly fame. Cruz's outstanding performance was nationally recognized in the finals of a collegiate drama competition.]

VP: What is the business of music like for you? Do you still enjoy making music as a recording artist?

Cruz: The music is one thing. My love of the music is what keeps me in this profession. The music “business” is a completely different thing. It is an incredibly tough way to make a living. While I still find it rewarding on a personal level, I would not recommend it as a career choice. It is much more difficult now to survive as a recording artist with easy access to downloading and file sharing.



VP: Do people who are not familiar with the business have misconceptions about the lifestyle of a recording artist?

Cruz: People often have this mystique and tend to romanticize what we do. They think it is such a great life. Because your songs are played on the radio, they think you are rich. It's not like that. A very small percentage of people are successful. But for the rest of us it is hard work and there is a lot of uncertainty.

Living in Hawaii is incredibly expensive and we are reliant on tourists for a major part of the state's income. Tourist trade is down with the bad economy. People in our business have to be concerned about whether or not people will be willing to spend hard earned money on music. If you sat down and did the math, being a musician wouldn't be a likely way to earn an income. I joke around in my shows about how much it costs to have a house.....But people manage, you know. We all find ways to somehow get along in life.

VP: After your work is done or on weekends, what do you like to do with your free time?

Cruz: I like to go fishing. I like to out to the beach, out to the park or up to the mountains and just hang, you know? I'm more recognizable now so it can be harder to go out in the public and just be "kick back" me. My picture is on the second album, so a lot more people now know what I look like. It's part of the job and I don't have a problem with it. People want to have that connection....except some days I don't have the energy that I need or I'm in a bad mood for some reason and I am forced to put on my smiling face (laughs).

For me, one of the most enjoyable times I have on my free time is going out to see people I know who are playing in bands. Sometimes I go to bars to see people who are still building their music perform. But it's hard, you know?

VP: Why is playing in bars difficult?

Cruz: I played in them for so many years. When I was 15, I thought I had reached the ultimate pinnacle of cool to be playing in a bar. As one who has been there, I can relate to the challenges working musicians face in today's economy. Costs continue to go up, equipment costs more money and yet the bars are still paying musicians the same amount of money I made back in the '70s. It's frustrating, man.

VP: How rewarding is it to work with family and other musicians?

Cruz: I love listening to the music my two younger sisters (Connie and Tiffa Cruz recently formed a band called, “One Right Turn.”). They just put out a few records. It is interesting because I shared with them examples of song writers, like Patti Griffin, and now I see the influence it has had on them. It is gratifying to see the process being perpetuated through their talent and unique writing skills.

I also get e-mails and calls from other young singer/songwriter musicians in Hawaii who are starting out and have questions about our business. They don't expect much help as a lot of musicians tend to be secretive about their artistry, choosing not to share insider information on what they know. That isn't me. It is so great to be able to mentor them!

VP: You mention “artistry” as it relates to song writers. On that topic, how important are the lyrics in the songs that are getting airplay today.

Cruz: I think the lyrics are really important and the best song writers sweat the lyrics. It isn't always an easy process. What I really would like to see is an improvement in the quality of songwriting in Hawaii. So much of the stuff I hear on today's radio is written without much thought. The lyrics are really simplistic and the songs lack any kind of life perspective, and emotional depth. We need to try to get people to think a little more about the message of a song. I think we sometimes suffer from our history in Hawaii.

VP: How does Hawaiian History affect Hawaiian song writing?

Cruz: Because we have been serving tourists for so many years, we tend to mistake the terms, “musician,” “singer” and “song writer” with the term “entertainer.” Don't get me wrong, I like to entertain people and make jokes to get a laugh. But a good song writer has thought about aspects of life and can deliver a message that resonates in people's hearts or takes on a deeper purpose that comes through in songs he or she creates.

VP: Do song writers in Hawaii need mentors to help them explore more thoughtful or better music?

Cruz: It could be very helpful. When I was their age, I was looking around for someone like me but I couldn't find him. So, when someone asks me questions about making music, I try to provide as much information as I possibly can. I know how much time that could have saved me when I was getting into my craft. Sharing just a little bit of information with someone can open up so many new ideas and a wealth of possibilities. I love to be a positive part of that process.

VP: Why are more established musicians reluctant to mentor young artists?

Cruz: Some people get upset when they feel an artist has imitated or “ripped off” their unique style.

VP: Do you ever resent people who ride your musical coat tails?

Cruz: I don't think that way. I love it when I hear my influence on another artist's music. I can hear exactly where a part of my song comes up in another artist's work. It is truly how music works; new artists are influenced by the success of others who were instrumental in the style of the music before them.and so on, and so on.

VP: Do young song writers/singers ever come up to you and say they are sorry about

“borrowing” some phrase or harmony from your music?

Cruz: It takes courage to do that, but some do. Before they can finish apologizing, I tell them that we can't help but be influenced by what we hear. I will tell them that I actually got that idea from the riff you lifted in a song by Van Morrison.

VP: Do you have a ritual that you go through when song writing? How does it work for you?

Cruz: I love the process but for me there is no rhyme or reason to it. It just happens...it could start with a lyric, a chord or a rhythmic phrase. I can't predict it but when it happens I feel really blessed. Ever since I was really young I have always loved the creative part of putting a new song together.

VP: What kinds of messages, as a singer/song writer are you sharing in your music?

Cruz: My messages are generally positive. My songs focus on hope. I sing about faith and love. I try to infuse my music with a sense of pride and self worth. I've written songs that go further out on the fringe of things, but I've been smart enough to keep them off my albums. (Laughs)

VP: How do you prepare before a concert?

Cruz: Some of it is physical. I like to think about what I will be capable of pulling off tonight. Because, from night to night it differs depending on where my voice is at the time. I consider what songs might be difficult in terms of hitting certain notes. I check my fingers to see if they are moving well today. I make decisions about the songs about what to include or sing in a lower key. Emotionally, I want to consider whether or not I can convey the spirit behind a song before I perform it on stage.

When I performed with my father, he'd say to me, "You ready to sing, boy? Are you sure you're ready?" In other words he was saying, the people came here and they are ready to hear you. If you're not ready, don't put yourself in that position.

VP: From the videos you seem to be having a lot of fun on stage. Is performing your music an enjoyable experience for you?

Cruz: I am so blessed to be doing this. To be very honest, it is a privilege to stand up in front of people and do my music. People plan for months to get out to a concert. They have to pay for a baby sitter and have a dinner out. It's expensive for some couples. Wow! You know what I mean? They honor me by listening to what I have to say in musical form. I try to deliver messages and music I hope people will carry with them for awhile.

VP: So you have just wrapped up a great performance. People loved you and brought you back for a couple more songs. The sound system was perfect. They knew your songs and sang along with you. How does that feel?

Cruz: It is an amazing high to be able to help generate and perpetuate that kind of energy. I feel wonderful and I go through it in my mind when the show is over.

But then sometimes it's an hour later, everybody's gone and you have packed up your stuff and you are driving home. Maybe your car breaks down on the side of the road and you're trying to

get a ride home. People stare at you and they just keep driving right past you... You know what I mean?

VP: It sounds like returning to the real world has a significant downside?

Cruz: Life and being on stage are two entirely separate things for me. When you are on stage and you are that long-haired musician character, people love it. But when you are that long-haired sort of stranger on the roadside with your thumb out for a ride, where there isn't that glamor and mystic, then it can be frustrating. I could have had a fight with a friend or lover just before the concert, but I have to put that aside for the time being... compartmentalize it,, and get into the music.

After a performance it can be tough to go back to your hotel room and be alone. You are tired. You try to get four-hours of sleep before you have to drive 400 miles to the next concert location for a sound check. That can be tough.

[In 2005, John Cruz was given a Grammy for his original song "Jo Bo's Night." The song was featured on the compilation CD Slack Key Guitar Volume 2, which won the first Grammy ever awarded for Hawaiian music. Hawaii Magazine named him the Best Singer Songwriter in Hawaii in 2008.]

VP: How did it feel to win the Grammy?

Cruz: When your peers recognize you, it's a wonderful feeling inside and it helps with record sales. But it also takes longer to introduce me on stage, you know? (laughs)

VP: Do you look at awards and recognition such as "Best Singer Songwriter in Hawaii" as career milestones?

Cruz: No, not really. Not in a disrespectful way. I look at them as blessings.

VP Were you surprised to win the awards?

Cruz: The Grammy thing was a shocker. I thought, for sure, a singer would win. It was pretty neat to be recognized as an instrumentalist. It is an honor...like wow! I still consider myself fumbling around, especially on "flat key."

VP: What is the future for John Cruz?

Cruz: I just hope I'm going in the right direction. Sometimes we stray, at other times we take steps backward. I try to reassure myself that I am heading in the right direction that it is good and solid as a singer, a song writer, as a person, a brother and a father. I don't try to put too much in the way of accomplishing specific future objectives. Sometimes, thinking about a huge hit record or massive airplay can get in the way of my connections with people I want to reach and relate to today. Being a very good musician is not necessarily going to make you successful. I've also seen people who were extremely mediocre and enjoyed a lot of success. Go figure. But if the timing thing happens and my career continues to climb, I'll be respectful and grateful.



With economic pressures, most music programs have been cut from the public schools in Hawaii, even though music is such an integral part of the Hawaiian culture. John Cruz became involved because he wanted to make a difference. Cruz is the official spokesman for Sprint Hawaii and is working through the [Mr. Holland's Opus program](#) to put musical instruments in the hands of local school children.

John visits public elementary schools along with Sprint representatives to donate free ukuleles to classrooms in need. Schools in low income neighborhoods that have established music programs are selected as possible beneficiaries. Then the school is contacted to see if they need new instruments.

Sprint will pay for sometimes up to 100 new ukuleles and surprise these kids with an assembly and concert performance by John. He jams with the kids, mostly on "Island Style" since they all know it. Cruz tells them stories about the importance of staying in school and believing in dreams, even if they come from an economically disadvantaged situation. Kids respect Cruz because he's one of them and his life serves as a good example.

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