Early Years

Define swing? Something that makes you tap your foot, feel good, you know, and snap your fingers. And you can feel a beat. It makes you—automatic—get up and move around a little bit. To me, that’s what it is. It’s a state of mind, too.

—Gabriel Baltazar Jr.

I was born in Hilo. Wait, but first, I gotta say it. My name is Gabriel Ruiz Baltazar Junior. And sometimes I have a little middle Japanese name which is not on my birth certificate, but they call me Hiroshi, because prior to World War II, I used to go to Japanese school. After American school. These are just some of the small things.

But I was born on November 1, 1929, in Hilo, on the Big Island of Hawai’i. My grandparents on my mother’s side, the Japanese side, came from Kumamoto, Japan, somewhere around 1900. They worked near Hilo, on the ‘Olā’a sugar plantation, which they call Kea’au today.

And then, when I was born, well, I don’t remember those things because year one, 1930, we moved. The whole family moved over to Honolulu, the capital of Hawai’i, which is on O’ahu, the third largest island. The reason, I think, is because my dad was a musician. I guess they wanted to find work in the big city, and so they did.

We lived in the Kalihi-Pālama area, by King and Dillingham, just at the beginning of the Pālama area. We were close to the pineapple cannery, the Dole Cannery, what they called Hawaiian Pine. Back then there was a lot of work slicing and canning, so my mother worked part-time and my grandfather worked full-time. My grandmother, she stayed home, cooked, and looked after everybody. This was around the early ’30s, my growing-up period, before elementary school. I can barely remember that, but when I got to be about four, five years old, I can kind of remember the things they were doing.

They were hardworking people. I know that. And the plantation days were still going on. My father was working the dance halls. In 1934, ’35, there were maybe three, four dance halls, that I know of. There may have been more, but those were the ones I knew, because they were right in the area. One was Dance
Land, on the corner of King and Dillingham. That was upstairs, in that big building. Across the street was another dance hall.

During the first ten years of my life, matter of fact, my father was supporting us playing just about every night. He practiced very little at home, but from my earliest days I heard him play, because he used to teach on the side. Students came by, and I'd watch while he'd be teaching the saxophone or clarinet.

But I was raised more on the Japanese side, see, because my mother’s parents were living near us, and they took care of us kids. On my father’s side, they were all in the Philippines, so I never got to see them. Only my father. He spent what little time he had with us, but sometimes he'd be on the road. So we never really got into Filipino culture, until later.

My mother, she was from the Big Island. She was born in 1907 on the ‘Ōla’a plantation, about fifteen miles outside of Hilo. Her name was Leatrice Chiyoko Haraga, and she was an unusual lady. I got a thing about her, it’s really interesting. But first, somehow, my dad was playing in Hilo, and my mother was in the audience, and they fell in love. She fell in love with him. And they had some funny things, like she threw a bucket of water at him one time. He was on stage and all that, and that’s how they met. Something like that, or that’s what Mom said. I guess Dad wouldn’t look at her, so she threw some water at him.

And my father, Gabriel Baltazar Senior, he was born in 1906 in Pasig Rizal, his hometown province in the Philippines. Pasig is a river in Manila, and Pasig Rizal, it’s a known area, like Kaimuki or Kalihi in Hawai‘i. He spoke Tagalog, but he never taught us, which is a drag. Even today I’ve got a book on Tagalog, because I want to learn. That’s part of my roots. And I listen to Filipino programs on the radio, Ilocano and Visayan, the different dialects.

But Dad used to tell me all the time about music. He’d say, “You know, in the Philippines they have the Spanish way of teaching, which is very strict.” When Dad was a little boy, his older brother, Fernando, was learning to play, so he was learning solfeggio, how to sing every note on a scale. And his father, my grandfather, José Baltazar, was a trombone player. He was teaching Fernando how to do solfeggio. And Fernando was getting screwed up. And when my father was washing the dishes, he’d hear what they were doing and he would imitate what his father used to sing, and he’d “cheat.” He’d get it all right. He’d go, “do-mi-so-vi-so-la-so-fa-la-fa,” and he’d be doing all that thing just right. And Grandpa heard him and he says, “My goodness.” So he went to Gabe Senior, my dad, and tells him, “Well, maybe you want to be a musician.” Because Fernando never had it, or couldn’t get it, you know.

So my dad said, “Yeah.”

“So, what do you want to play? A saxophone?” So he got a saxophone for him.

And Dad told me that in the Philippines they have different barrios, little villages, and they have competitions, so they’d memorize all the overtures, like
“Morning, Noon, and Night,” Suppé overtures, Rossini overtures. They memorized it, played without the music. Then they had competitions between the barrios, and they’d go for hours and hours and hours. He told me that his mom, Calixta Ruiz Baltazar (there’s the “Ruiz” in my name), she used to bring a bucket of food, man, while he’s playing trombone, playing “Light Cavalry” or “William Tell.” And he’d eat and play, because it was on and on. In other words, I think what he wanted me to get was that in the Philippines, music was part of life.

I think, because of when Spain took over the Philippines for three hundred years or so, music became their thing. You can hear a lot of influence of Spanish music in Philippine music. And they were the troubadours of Asia, the Filipinos. If you wanted to hear jazz or any kind of music, if you went to Hong Kong in the ’20s and ’30s, it was Filipino musicians all over: Japan, Shanghai, Singapore. It was like that because they were the guys that could play. Today, everybody can play, even Asia, even Japan. But back then the Filipinos were, I would say, the “jazzers” of Asia.

So my father came to Hawai‘i in 1926, not as a worker in the fields but to entertain the workers on the plantations. He came with a troupe when he was about sixteen, left home because he was offered a job by Andres Baclig to be one of the musicians for a Philippine entertainer named Vicente Yerro. He was like the Harold Lloyd or Charlie Chaplin of the Philippines in the ’20s. I still have some of those pictures around.

So Dad traveled to Hawai‘i to entertain the plantation people, but he also taught music on the plantations and formed bands there. And the leader, Andres Baclig, stayed on and became a well-known musician in Hilo. He had a Hilo county band for a long time, and he had his own band that played music all over the plantations, dances, any kind of occasion.

Well anyway, my parents met, and then one day they got married. I guess in 1929. And when I was born, those days, a Japanese girl marrying a Filipino is a no-no. Because the Japanese, or I should say my mom’s father and mother, are saying, “Why you gonna marry somebody like that? The Filipinos, you know how they are,” they said. “They’re kinda little savages.” You know what I mean? “They’re primitive people!” And all that. But Mom loved my father. And my dad, well, he was a musician. He had a trade. So he was sort of educated.

Anyway, she broke the barrier and they got married, because those days you don’t see intermarriage like that, whites into black, or black into white. Or Oriental, especially Oriental. They don’t marry outside their ethnic group.

And with my parents, it wasn’t only the ethnic thing. It’s more complicated, because Mom had a kid before me. His name is Raymond, and he’s an American, right? because he was born here. But she was married to a Japanese guy when she met my dad. His name was Fukuda. I don’t know what happened, but when my grandmother, grandfather found out that my mother, their daughter, was going with a Filipino musician, I think somehow there was a big commotion.
And then my mother and Fukuda got divorced. And Fukuda, when the kid was a baby, took off and raised the kid in Japan. And I don’t know anything about the father. He could have worked on the plantations. I just don’t know. Raymond, he came back to the States later on, worked as a translator, I think.

And my dad also had a child before me. His name was Mario, and that’s another story. See, my grandfather, José, died around 1918, and the next year my dad’s mother, Calixta, died. Well, he was only about twelve, so he went to live with an uncle, one of the brothers of his mother, because that brother didn’t have kids. And this uncle, from what I hear, was mean, and he beat my dad and his brother Antonino. Whipped them. And Antonino was only about three or four. Then he forced my dad to get married when he was about sixteen. And the girl, man, she was about fourteen. Her name was Lapaz. So, anyway, they had a child named Mario. And my dad was so angry with this uncle that when he had a chance to leave Manila, he just split, came to Hawai‘i with Baclig’s band and didn’t go back. In fact, my father first came to Hawai‘i, then went to Los Angeles in 1926, ’27, ’28, and then a friend of the family’s had dance halls in Honolulu and Hilo, and he invited my dad to come out to Hilo
and work. That’s how he came to work in the dance hall and meet my mother, Leatrice Chiyoko.

You see, it was like a circus, an American circus. And when my father came to Hawai’i, he says to the immigration people, “I’m single.” That’s why he had no problem getting married to my mother, even if he was married in the Philippines.

So anyway, it happened, and there you go, I was born. Later on, Mom gave birth to three more children. My brother below me, Norman, a trumpet player. My brother Ronald, a clarinet player. He used to be with the U.S. Marine Band in Washington, DC, the President’s Band. And my sister, Doris, who married a musician, Delano Choy. And Doris, her two kids are musicians. They’re great musicians, David Choy and Junior Choy. So the Baltazars, my family, were three boys and one girl.

And Dad, he had only about a sixth- or seventh-grade education in the Philippines, but he managed very well, making a living playing music. Those days, there were a lot of dance halls because the workers from the Philippines had no place else to go. They couldn’t bring Filipino girls or wives with them from home and they didn’t have any recreation, so that was one. Just holding a girl in their arms and dancing was heaven to them.

And if you know what “taxi dance” means, they have hostesses, girls, and you buy tickets. Maybe at that time it was ten cents a dance. Ten cents a ticket. Maybe you’d buy a dollar’s worth. Well, you can dance for ten tickets’ worth. And each ticket was about two choruses of a song, before the bell rang. Every time the bell rings is a next dance. And the dance halls always had live bands. At least seven-, eight-, nine-piece bands.

I’ll go to that, more details later, because this is where I learned to play. We played about five hundred tunes a night. See, Dad would be playing and I’d go down as a kid and listen to them. As I got older I went there to relieve him. That was one of my biggest experiences, the dance halls, and I kept on right through the ’20s, ’30s, ’40s, ’50s, even part of the ’60s.

The Japanese Side

But I’ve got to come back to when I was one year old, when we lived in Kalihi after a year in Hilo, and Dad had a job in a dance hall working full-time. I think he was working for a dollar or a dollar and fifty cents a night. This is back as far as I remember, the early ’30s, when the rent was seven dollars a month and you could buy a loaf of bread for five cents.

Our neighborhood was North King Street, then 702 North King, or 591, because we moved around the area. We also lived right off North King, on Akepo Lane and Robello Lane, because my father and mother, well, I don’t know why they moved so much, maybe cheaper rent or better accommodations, but it was always the same neighborhood. Never away from the neighborhood.
The houses those days were nice Hawaiian-style plantation-type tin-roof homes. The buildings were wood, two stories, the majority of them. There were concrete buildings, but most were like the Fujii Store. That’s wood, and that’s the only landmark that’s still there. It’s right across from where my house was. The Fujii Store, 592, I think. And that’s really a landmark. I hope they keep it. I took pictures of that when I came back from LA in 1969. And I took pictures of the old Pālama Theatre, which was just closing. Oh man, because I had those things all in my head. The Pālama Theatre was beautiful there, on the corner of Robello and King. It looked like a pagoda or Grauman’s Chinese Theatre in Hollywood.

So I went to elementary school in Honolulu. I went to kindergarten in Kalihi-Pālama, Nalei Kindergarten, which was right next to where we lived, in back of the Pālama fire station. I have a picture of Nalei, in fact, me on the front lawn over there. It was adjacent to Ka‘iulani School, across from Saint Elizabeth Church and near the Hawaiian church, Kaumakapili Church. And kindergarten was pretty good, I guess. I remember we used to paint, play, do a lot of running around, playing ball, outside, inside, learning to sing “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” and all that, little nursery rhymes and things.

And when I got through kindergarten, I went to Robello School. First and second grade was at Robello Lane, then Ka‘iulani School, which is right across the street, from third grade on. And Ka‘iulani is still there. Well, the school is still there, but the only thing standing that’s original is the banyan tree in back. That’s where Robert Louis Stevenson and Princess Ka‘iulani sat and talked story, things like that, under the banyan tree. That tree was historical, but everything else is new. The old buildings were really great because they had wood and separate cottages for each class. You don’t see that anymore.

And I was a pretty happy kid, I guess. I got along and school never really bothered me that much. At times I enjoyed it, and I enjoyed my teachers. Most of them were women, especially in elementary school. And they were all ethnic groups, because I can still see them. My first, in kindergarten, was a Hawaiian lady, very robust lady, and, matter of fact, a beautiful lady. My first-grade teacher was a Japanese lady. Second grade, Mrs. Ball, she was kind of haole-like. And third grade, Mrs. Quai, or Aquai, was Chinese. Fourth grade, Mrs. McKinley, was a big haole lady. And grade five was Mrs. Myers, a beautiful lady. I thought she was nice, straight hair with a bun in the back, very attractive lady. Never forgot her because she was so attractive. Then sixth grade was Mrs. Kimura, Japanese lady, very nice.

Now, still the 1930s, my grandpa days, the Japanese side was very strict. Being that I was brought up mainly by my grandparents and my mother’s side, I had to go to Japanese school. That was a must. And I started going to Japanese schools from grade one to three, after my regular school. This was just before the war broke out.
And Japanese school was really something, because the teachers were very strict. You couldn’t fool around because they’ll whack you, man, with a ruler or with anything, with their hand. They’ll slap you, or they’ll give you the judo thing if you’re not disciplined, if you get carried away and stuff, making noise, talking out of turn, or all kind of stuff. They were very militaristic. Most of them now. I remember one teacher, man, when we were talking when he was talking, man, he’d turn around and throw the eraser at you. Or come down and, back your head, pafff!! You know? When you’re not looking, he comes right behind and bang! and ooo! Snaps his finger right on your skull. But it’s not to hurt you, not to put any kind of damage into you.

And those days our parents were strict, too. When you go home and cry and tell your mother or grandparents, “Gee, my teachers scold me and hit me,” they’ll say, “Good for you! You must have been really bad. You’ll get a licking again!” So it was like that. That’s how we grew up.

And I did that for three years, Japanese school. I was getting tired of it, but it was good. I wish I’d continued. I was learning to write words from the very beginning style up to a little bit of kanji, which is the calligraphy thing, and then the reading.

And I quit because it was a little too much for me. I wanted to, like any kid, go out and play after American school. And, boy, my grandparents were mad, well, my grandpa. He was real mean, like a colonel in the Japanese army. He was very strict, and that was really huhū, you know. Mad? Oh yeah! But I guess he was looking out for me, because they say that was something you learn, your roots. Part of your roots, anyway. But it was good. I never regretted it.

And I’m sure my grandmother, grandfather saw stuff on the plantations, and before. Those were hard times, strikes and all, and I wish I could have talked to them about that, but we never did. They never said anything, and I was born at the end, because I was not even a year old when we came to O‘ahu. I don’t know exactly when they came to Hawai‘i or what they left in Japan. I don’t know if they came together from Kumamoto. I know my grandfather was from there, but I think my grandmother came from another prefecture. I’m not sure. And those days, anything goes, you know what I mean? It could be she was a picture bride. I wish I knew. It was probably very interesting. But like I say, I didn’t talk to them to find out more.

Anyway, it was pretty much my grandmother who raised me. My grandfather and mother were working in the cannery. My father was playing music, trying to earn a living playing whatever gig he could get. Remember those days were tough, the early ’30s, the Great Depression. My father and mother were still together, because they didn’t get divorced until about 1939 or 1940, but we always lived close to Grandma, and I used to spend more time with her because, well, the grandfolks always took care of us, like babysitters.

Then 1940, when my parents divorced, Ronnie and Doris went with my mother, and Norman and I went with my grandmother, grandfather, because
Japanese-style, they love kids and they’re going to take care of us. Even if I was a half-breed, they love me to death. Remember, a Filipino marrying a Japanese, that’s a no-no!

And that’s how I really learned to speak Japanese, more than at Japanese school, because they could barely speak English, and I had to communicate. They could speak broken English, typical plantation kind of talk, mixed Hawaiian, English, Japanese, and whatnot, but when we were growing up they talked to us in Japanese, and that’s how I got to be able to understand. Now, my Japanese is not too good, because I don’t get enough conversation. But I still remember words, phrases, and so forth. The everyday speech. I can speak a little bit, but mainly I understand.

My grandparents, they were typical husband and wife. The father was the patriarch, the boss. That was Rinzo, Rinzo Haraga. He didn’t talk much, but he was always aware of what was happening. We mess around a little bit, he’d give us a good talking to. And my grandmother kind of played along. She was very quiet, but she took care of us. And she was the hardest worker. Naoyo was her name. I called her Baba or Bacha. And Ji-san was Grandpa. Ji-san can mean older person. But Grandma, she’d get groceries, cook, clean the house, care for us. Everything. She had two sons and a daughter also, my uncles and my mother. Well, she had three sons, Takatoshi, that was “Taka” or Richard; and Mitsuki, which was George; and Masatora, which was Herbert.

But Takatoshi, Taka, I didn’t know him. I had a picture of him holding me when I was about one, but I don’t remember him, because he died in his twenties. Maybe from appendicitis or some operation which is common now. But those days it was serious. And then Mitsuki, well, they all passed on. There was another one that died when he was a baby. His name, I don’t know.

But my grandparents, they lived close by, and I loved to go over there. Even while my parents were together I used to eat a lot with Grandma. She ate Japanese food and I loved that because she was a good cook. She made wonderful miso and chicken soups, or little sweets and rice crackers. She had *hekka*. *Hekka* is chicken cooking over a charcoal stove cooking right on the table. All kind of good stuff. And I remember my grandfather, she always used to get him his *nattō*. That’s Japanese beans, fermented, and it stinks, man. But once you get a taste of it, it’s okay. You get used to it, the way some people like Limburger cheese. We used to call it spider beans because it was sticky, and people still eat it today. In fact, I eat it. I like to mix it with *poke*, the raw fish. Oh yeah, that Japanese food scene, that stayed with me. I love that. Later, when I was on the road, that was a must.

And my grandparents were Buddhist, so I can still hear them praying every morning, especially Grandpa. He’d get up and, first thing, push that little gong, that little bell, and praise. And I hear that every morning. They were also very aware of being respectable. They were proud people, and they didn’t want you
to mess around or get into any kind of problems, serious or nonserious. In other words, don’t shame the family.

And you know, somebody asked me if my grandparents became citizens, or did they vote, and I’m trying to remember. I know my dad was a citizen. My grandparents, I don’t think so. I’m not sure. Isn’t that awful? My mother was a citizen, she was born here. She was Nisei, the first generation born in America. But then, I don’t know much about her schooling, and I’d like to. I imagine she went to school on the Big Island, but I never asked her. She seemed like she had some education, maybe high school, because she could read and write.

The Lady in Red

Anyway, I was telling you earlier I had an interesting thing about her. My mom was the only Japanese lady who was a kahuna. A kahuna is like a priest or priestess, only Hawaiian. And she believed in Pele, the volcano goddess. Sometimes the rangers would stop people from going near the volcano, but my mom was one of the only ones who could go during an eruption. When Halema'uma'u would erupt, she'd go and do her thing. Well, not only during the eruption, she'd go anytime, because there was always smoke coming out. See, for us, Halema'uma'u was alive.

And what she did was to pray to Pele. Of course, she was Catholic, too. I don’t know how she got to do all that being a Christian. But she believed in the Hawaiian legend of Pele. We called her Tutu Pele, Mama Pele. Matter of fact, a TV show was made about my mother, Real People or something, a national show which came later. So she was into that thing, and people would come and talk to her, and she would pray for them, for anybody with any kind of problem, domestic problem, sickness, anything that’s negative. If some person is cursed, she’d try to help through prayer, and through the Hawaiian way. And all those people, politicians, professional people, the most common people, used to ask her do some prayers for them.

So she’d go down and get gin, Pele’s favorite drink, and I used to help her, carry those bags of gin to the crater. “Offerings,” they called that, and she goes walking right through all that sulfur and gas, and man, I couldn’t breathe, man, but she goes right through there and makes a prayer to Pele and all that. Always dressed in a red mu’umu’u. That’s what they called her, the Lady in Red. I was about thirteen, fourteen, and believe it or not, we flew down there on Hawaiian Airlines, and Aloha Airlines, too. And we’d go about once a month, or every two months—depends on how many people see her.

And you know Yoko Ono? I heard she used to call if she had problems, and my mother would give her advice, but I never met her. My brother Norman said a chauffeur pulled up to my mom’s house and gave her a check from Yoko Ono. It could be true. Maybe I was on the mainland, and that’s why I missed that. But
I know she helped celebrities, like Shecky Greene, the comedian from Las Vegas. He used to come down. When he performed in Hawai‘i he'd come straight to my mother’s place.

And where did she get that? Well, 1917, there were lots of eruptions and earthquakes, and she was there. She was ten, and her camp at ‘Ōla‘a was right on the volcano, man. Then 1929, right before I was born, there were all kinds of earthquakes and eruptions, so my mom and the volcano got pretty tight, I guess. Funny, because she really believed in those things. Whenever the volcano would erupt, she’d say, “Oh, Pele’s mad today.” And she said she saw Pele one time, that Pele talked to her, talked to her in Hawaiian. And you know, by coincidence, when my mother died, that’s when the eruptions started again, until today.

Another thing about my mom, and this I never understood, on my birth certificate her name is Chiyoko Yamanaka. I think my mother was taken care of by a Yamanaka family when she was young. I asked her once. I said, “How come you got this Yamanaka name?” She lived with them for a while, I think she said. Maybe because both of my grandparents were working. But she still was a Haraga, and then her first married name was Fukuda, and then Yamanaka. And I asked her, I say, “Who are these Yamanaka people?” I think they owned a bakery or something in ‘Ōla‘a, and she was working and living with them. Or it was like an adoption, like hānai family. I mean, those days there were a lot of things going on. Nobody knows who or what or where, man. See, plantation days, you had a lot of fence hopping and everything. And I don’t know if my grandparents and them jumped fences and things like that, but it was, I guess, really something. We used to talk about that, about plantation days. We'd joke about it. That’s why we might have relatives in Kaua‘i or all over, because my father used to travel a lot, playing music in the plantations. So probably there was more of that going on. Plus the Filipinos, like I was telling you, they couldn't bring female companions. Male workers only. The plantation owners didn’t want them to “propagate” around here. They were savages. It’s a cliché, but to the Japanese those days, they were savages.

And the Japanese, they worked it out with the Japanese and American governments that they could bring their wives. That’s why you have a lot of pure Japanese in Hawai‘i. But the Filipino families, they were all mixed: Portuguese-Filipino, Hawaiian-Filipino, Chinese-Filipino. But Japanese-Filipino was still rare.

And I might have Spanish blood. Probably, because the Philippines were under the domination of Spain for three hundred years, and a lot of us carry Spanish names as part of our heritage. They intermarried with the natives, the conquistadors, or whatever you call them. And you find the Filipino languages have a lot of Spanish words. So, anyway, that’s some of what I know about my roots.
Kid *Kine*: Pee Wee, Eggets, Bandoola, Bamboocha, Boonchee, Loonchee

And my background with music, well, before the war broke out, Dad would try to teach me piano, got me a piano teacher. He wanted me to learn that first. And I regret till today that I didn’t take it up, because I had a couple of lessons and gave it up. I said I didn’t want it, which is a drag, because I love the piano, but back then I wanted to go out and play ball with the kids. Well, yeah, when I was a kid I liked to play with the boys. We used to play all kinds of games because, well, today, the kids, they have their toys handed down to them, but we used to make our own.

We used to have a game called pee wee. We’d get a broomstick, Mom’s broomstick. We’d cut it up, make different shapes, then get a stick and whack it, see who can hit it the farthest. It was cut in a certain way, and you put it in a little hole, then you tap down and the thing spins up and you whack it, see? And you see how far it goes. The winner makes it as far as “pee wee.”

Then we had marbles. “Eggets” we called that, and we had our own little language: “No hapa hand. No funk.” “Funk” is using one hand to steady the other. No “hapa hand”—your shooting hand is up on the other one. We played bandoola. Some guys call it bamboocha, but we call it bandoola. Or you get a big egget and play ring, or fish, or box, all with marbles. All those games.

And top. You know, spinning top. We were about four, five, six years old. Playing those kind of games. We’d get a top and fix it up. You know the little top? Got a little nail, right? Well we used to get a long nail and sharpen it so it was like four inches long, man. And then we’d spin it and it’d spin, spin. And we’d grab it like that, and that thing would make a whirling sound, and we’d put it on the ground. Then if you don’t hit the other guy’s top you got to put yours down. Then he can break your top by whacking it with the long nail, which we call a *kui*. And that point would break the top. If it breaks or splits the other guy’s top, you win. Just like fighting chicken: “You take the chicken if you beat the chicken.”

We used to do sword fights. We’d cut little oleander trees for swords, pick our favorite samurai from the movies, and we’d fight each other, just like we’d play cowboys and Indians. That was one of the scenes. We’d make tin-can canoes, *totan* canoes we called that, and go in the stream over there, the Kapālama Stream. Put a little street tar, get a little what do you call it, a tin-roof-type of thing, and some wood, and we’d make a canoe out of that and ride around the stream over there. And that was part of our growing-up days.

Then we’d go down and get clams in Pearl Harbor. Those days it was still clean, so we’d fish for *āholehole*, the little silver fish, down at Pearl. In the Ala Wai Canal we’d go after scallop with long spines or short spines. We’d catch these little fishlike anchovies. Use a screen, and when they’d swim over we’d bring up the screen, put them in a bucket. They’re *eriko* in Japanese. And we’d get the Samoan...
crab. They were big and mean, man. They get a hold of your finger, that'd hurt. We'd catch eels too. The white eel you can eat, but look out for the moray, those are dangerous. You leave those alone.

Yeah, kids don't know today, local kids, because they got everything, skateboards and all that stuff, handed down to them. But this is stuff we made ourselves. Oh, we had a lot of fun. Out in the yard, in the area, any place where we can find a little room to cut loose.

We used to ride the old streetcars in Honolulu, just like the San Francisco streetcars. We'd jump on and hang on, and when the conductor came, we'd jump off. We did that because we didn't have money. We just wanted to ride it. And that thing would spin around. I don't know where it came from, downtown or maybe Kaimuki, or down to Kalihi-Pālama, which was the end, on King and Dillingham. And he'd spin around and go back. And we used to jump on that thing. I didn't do it later, because they got rid of those the latter part of the '30s.

And pets. I had a dog. And cats. I love cats and dogs. I had cats with my father and mother. This is back in the mid-30s. I had one cat and it bore kittens. I remember the names, they were Boonchee and Loonchee. The names don't mean anything. I just had a habit of giving nicknames to people, and somehow it caught on. And I don't know why, I just said, “Boonchee and Loonchee.” Boonchee was the mother cat, and the baby was Loonchee.

What else about kid days? Well, we'd celebrate birthdays. Not big celebrations, but I'd always have a cake. What's a birthday party without a birthday cake, right? Yeah, my mother used to bake a cake when I was a kid. And we'd get presents. I always looked forward to something nice. I always got, maybe all of us got, a nice shirt or something. Very practical. A good shirt, a pair of trousers. And my aunts used to give me things like that too.

I can remember one of my earliest friends from those days. We did everything together. Guy named Frank Misaki. We called him Bolo. He died already. They were Japanese, the Misakis, because in Pālama where we were it was mostly the Japanese camp, with the Korean camp and the Filipinos dispersed in and out of the area, the Pālama area.

A “camp,” by the way, is an area. In Hawai‘i we just call it a camp. We say “Japanese camp,” means mainly Japanese people live there. “Korean camp,” mostly Koreans, but interspersed with different ethnic groups. Like Little Italy, Little Chinatown, but on a smaller scale.

“He’s Got Worms”: Yaito

And prewar days, when I was about four or five, I was really a crybaby. I’d cry all the time. I always wanted. I wanted a nickel to buy candy or rice crackers, because I got hooked on those darned things. You know the little crunchy crackers? I love them. A nickel a bag, man, and they give you plenty. Well, anyway,
I used to cry for that all the time, and my mother didn’t know what to do. She says, “What’s up with this kid?” Then this Japanese lady says, “You know, he’s got worms, and I got just the cure for that. We’re going to give him yaito.”

*Yaito? What’s that? It’s a Japanese thing. It’s like a torture. They have these little punks that they put on your back or wherever, and they light it and it burns. It burns right into your skin. Today they call it abuse. But it was a Japanese way of healing a certain kind of problem, and I think some Japanese still do that. Rarely. But yeah, a little punk, like a small plug, and they had three big Japanese matron ladies holding me down, and I’d be crying, man. And they’d light that thing on my back. They say, “This’ll cure that boy from crying all the time.”*

Did it work? I guess so. I don’t know. But today, they call it abusing. Really. Torture. But it was fairly common around here. It was mostly for adults, but sometimes they’d do kids. So I had that, *yaito*. Right on my back, man. And some people give that on the hands or arms or chest. I thought I’d bring that up because that’s something a lot of local people of that era understand, that *kine*. That’s the Japanese side. And that’s another chapter of the *yaito* scene.

**Ship Days**

I went down to ship days when I was a kid too, because Dad used to play for the ships that came in. They were part of the gigs the Royal Hawaiian Band did, meeting ships or playing departures at Aloha Tower and the old Honolulu Harbor. It was beautiful. You had the *Lurline*, *Matsonia*, the *President Cleveland*, *President Wilson*, all those, and the Japanese ships came in quite often. It was really something to see—people throwing the long streamers, kids diving for coins, lei sellers on the sidewalks, the band playing “Aloha ‘Oe.” And that was a wonderful band. I’ll tell you more about that later. Anyway, it was really something, the tourists coming down the walkway, waving, hugging everybody. And those days, you didn’t have jets or too many planes. Everything was ship.

I remember ship days from the ’30s, from before war days, because I used to shine shoes on Hotel Street when I was eight and nine, and sometimes I’d see the ships coming in. And the guys that used to dive for coins over there, well, I would have liked the pocket money, but I was not in that group, that was another gang, and you had to have the rights to dive. I didn’t know those guys, so . . . And they were tough guys. Later on, I used to go with the Kalakaua Homes boys out on the Ala Wai Canal, because a lot of servicemen went over the bridge on Kalākaua Avenue. That was our turf over there. But you go down on boat days, that’s another gang. You ain’t gonna go. They don’t know you and they’re gonna kick your ass. But ship days, yeah, that was beautiful.

Now, the trip to Japan, there was no work in Hawai‘i because it was the Depression. And my father, I told you that the Filipinos were all over Asia playing music. That’s their thing. They were the musicians of Asia. So a couple of his
friends, or compadres, called him up from Japan, say, “Gabe! Come on down, bring your family. We got work for you over here in Tokyo, in the dance halls.” Because my father could play jazz. He could improvise, which is a very rare thing those days, especially in Japan. They don't do too much improvising. Today, yeah, but those days, the ’30s, they copy records and things like that. But Dad was one of the only guys that could go there and play jazz. This is 1937 or so, and Japan was already at war with China.

And so my father brought the whole family. At that time Doris was not born, so it was me, Norman, Ronny, and my mother. We went on the Taiyo Maru, a little, little ship. And I don't know, it took over ten days, I think, to get to Japan. Everybody got seasick. Well, my mother got sick. My father didn't, but I remember I used to go on the ship's deck when it was going up and down in the waves. I'd climb up to the bow, look over, and the boat would be rocking way up and down. Oh, I loved to look at the ocean. Today I couldn't do that, at the bow of a ship, all that blue ocean going up and down. And a year before that a little boy fell into the water and they could never find him. On that same boat, you know. Well, that's what I was told.

And then my father was looking for me. He says, “Where's Junior?” I'm Junior, see. He says, “Oh, there he is! Over there!” Because the merchant marine guys, they don't do nothing, you know. They won't even watch, they're busy working. So he sees me up in the bow of that thing, on the edge, looking at the blue ocean, at the flying fish, and he ran up and grabbed me. Ran up. Even my father, years later, before he died, he used to tell me, “You know, you would have been gone, man, because that thing was going all over the place. And once you fall over, you're gone.” It was in the blue ink ocean in the middle of the Pacific. So I remember that.

Then we got to Japan. My father worked all day in Tokyo and Yokohama. There were beautiful dance halls and about three hundred, four hundred hostesses, beautiful ladies. My father got carried away. He got, well, because he can play jazz and he was an extra-special musician, the girls love him. Plus, he was handsome. And my mother—“Gabe, we're going home!”

“So, what's the matter?”

“Well, you know, the kids are missing school.” And then, “and I don't trust you with all that womens over there!” You know. “We better get on home. Come on.”

So, we went. We came home. Came on back after two months!

And my brothers and I, we were just hanging out. We didn't go to school because they didn't have an American school, that I know of. We'd go out and sometimes we'd fight with other kids because we were immigrants. Japanese bully kids used to come down and bother us, throw rocks at us, and we'd throw rocks back at them. That was Norman and me. Ronny was a little too small. But you know how kids are. “They're strangers over here! They're from Hawai'i, from America, or someplace.”
So we came back, and Mom and Dad found work, even in the Depression. I mean, you could find work in Hawai‘i, but it was a minimum. Those days, I think my mother was making $5, or under $10 a week, to work in the cannery. And my father worked in a dance hall for about $2 a night. But remember, a loaf of bread was five cents. And a block of tofu was five cents, too.

And we were never in poverty. Of course we weren’t rich, but we were never poor, or destitute. We always had decent food. We always had rice, and Mom used to cook vegetables, fish, and meats. We always had potatoes, hamburgers, and bean sprouts. I remember bean sprouts. I used to love that. And carrots. And she loved American food too, so sometimes she’d go and buy from across the street, maybe pancakes for breakfast. And she used to make French toast. And once in a while I’d watch them roasting a pig in the back yard. I’d wait for the crispy ear, the skin. Oh yeah, that’s the best part for a kid, the ear, the snout, the tail. Comes crispy, just like potato chips, and you chew it.

We also had the tofu man and the manapua man in Kalihi-Pālama. That’s a local thing I gotta tell you about. The man with the manapua, he’d come around with a log of wood on his shoulder, the end in front with a heavy, big canister hanging, and another in back, and he’d yell, “Manapua! Manapua!” And we’d all, “Oh! Here’s the manapua man!” The kids would run over there and get some manapua. Manapua is dim sum, or part of the dim sum scene. It’s a Chinese delicacy and it’s delicious.

And the puffed-rice man used to come, too, maybe three times a year, in the ’30s, when I was about five or six, and he’d bring his wagon, and you can hear the sound of the rice cooking, the puffed rice. And the smoke and the smell, it smelled up the whole area. This was Robello Lane, right down from Akepo Lane, where I grew up, and when it was just about ready, there was a big cannon boom! I don’t know, it’d go, boom! and it was ready. I don’t know why. That oven, it would explode, man. Yeah, and they had it with a certain taste, like red-yellow or honey or whatever, butter, sugar. Well, we were kids, but we loved the taste, and we’d say, “It’s ready, man!” And we’d all run and crowd around that thing. But it was only maybe three times a year, it wasn’t all the time, because he made the rounds elsewhere. He’d go Liliha, Kapahulu, Mō‘ili‘ili. So I remember that. I remember Goodie Goodie ice cream, too. That, we got in the store.

Filipino Park

And when I was a kid, still preteen days, I started getting out, you know, exploring the neighborhood a bit, so ‘A’ala Park, or “Filipino Park,” was the place where all the families, especially on a Sunday, would spend some time. Instead of going to the beach, you go there and you see all kind of things. This is 1933, ‘34, ‘35, up to 1941, when the war started. And for me, I heard a lot of music there, went
down to listen all the time. I didn't play yet, but my dad played in bands there. I didn't really get into music until I was about eleven or twelve, to play as a saxophone player. But Kalihi-Pālama was a very active community, and I learned a lot about a lot of things, not only music.

I remember they used to have a *sipa sipa*, which is when Filipinos would get in a ring, maybe ten, twenty guys, and they kick that little ball made of *lauhala*, or leaf. They'd make it into a ball and they'd kick it, like, *boom!* and the other guys would kick it and they'd go back and forth, all around the ring. It was fascinating to see that going on. And sometimes they'd set up a stage and have music and singing and dancing, where ethnic groups like the Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, Puerto Ricans, whatever, Hawaiians, would participate and put on beautiful, colorful shows.

Of course, they called it Filipino Park, but it wasn't just Filipinos. They lived there, in that area, Iwilei, Pālama, Kalihi, so there were plenty of Filipinos, but there was a Japanese theater there, too, so there were plenty of Japanese. You had the Park Theater. They had vaudeville shows. My father played the Park Theater, right by Beretania and King, where they split. And part of that park was another building where they had pawnshops, little magazine shops, and a Filipino barbershop.

One of my good friends lived at that barbershop. Bernie Halman, the piano player who lives in Kona now. Bernie lived over that barbershop, and he was a Filipino kid. His original name was Bernie Conception. But I'd always visit Bernie. I'd hang out and watch him practice. His grandfather, he had the barbershop, was so mean, man. He used to beat the hell out of him if he didn't play scales on piano. But I'd be watching, because I'd wait for him to get through, so we can go out and play. And I'd listen and I'd say, “Wow,” because he was already a virtuoso. This is 1937, ’38, ’39. I was seven, eight, nine years old. And he's three or four years older than me, so he was kind of a big guy, and I used to look up to him. We called him Kodomo Taisho. Kodomo Taisho in Japanese means “Captain of the Kids.” It was like he's leading the kids all the time, the biggest guy. Yeah, Bernie was just like that.

And then my mother worked in a little hotel right in that area, where the dance hall was on Dillingham and King. When the dance hall finished out it became an old hotel called the Swanky Hotel. My mom was a maintenance lady over there, she had a job maintaining the place. And I was still a kid, maybe nine, ten. And those days, a lot of the Filipinos were lining up at the Swanky Hotel, because there were two lovely ladies living in one of the rooms. And I'd say, “What is all this thing going on? All these long lines over here?” I finally realized, it was prostitution was going on. That's part of the so-called catering to the plantation workers, you know. And things like that was happening. I was saying, “What in hell is going on with this line?” I was a little kid but I remember watching all this saying, “Hey, boy. Something going on here!”