

Man of a Thousand Facets

For actor, musician and writer Eric Gilliom, Hawai'i's story is a family story



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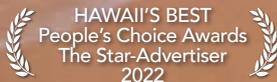
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OPENING PAGE / Actor, musician, dancer and writer Eric Gilliom (seen also at left) plays all the parts in his new one-man show *White Hawaiian*, which tells the story of modern Hawai'i through his own family history.

TOP / The Gilliom family in 1972, a year after Eric's father, Lloyd B. Gilliom, brought the family from Hollywood back to their roots on Maui. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE GILLIOM FAMILY

BOTTOM / Some of the accessories from the thirty costume changes Gilliom undergoes throughout *White Hawaiian*.

A mustachioed turn-of-the-century prizefighter fresh off a bare-knuckles boxing loss struts across the stage, bawdily singing “What do you do with a drunken sailor?” He launches into the story of how he met his wife in 1902. “She was a delicate maiden who paddled a canoe from Moloka’i,” he recalls. Moments later that delicate maiden is onstage, nursing the youngest of their six children while lamenting the departure of her eldest daughter. “Now people from all over the world watch her dance and sing,” she says in a thick pidgin accent. “Our little

Jennie go all the way New York and nevah come back.”

As the evening progresses, there are 1950s hula girls, Broadway musical theater performers from the '80s, lounge crooners and lū'au busboys, parents, siblings, grandparents and great-grandparents—all part of Eric Gilliom's family story, all of them part of Hawai'i history and all of them played by Gilliom in his one-man show *White Hawaiian*.

Gilliom, whose great-grandmother was a Native Hawaiian from Moloka'i and great-grandfather was Irish by way of Canada, straddled different worlds throughout his life. In his

autobiographical romp, he celebrates and pokes fun at his own mixed heritage, at being the middle child stuck between two famous siblings, at his journey from Maui boy to Broadway performer (and back again). Gilliom brings his family tree to life while taking the audience on a hilarious and historical tour of Hawai'i pop culture, with nearly thirty rapid costume changes during the seventy-five-minute performance.

A mix of tourists and locals packs the sold-out ProArts Playhouse in Kihei. The funny, fast-paced show leaves many in tears—mostly from laughter but some from the tenderness

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Of the many roles Gilliom has played, including a big part in the notorious Broadway musical version of *Carrie* by Stephen King, *White Hawaiian*, he says, is the most significant. “It’s my story, but it’s also about all families,” he says of the show, which has been playing to sold-out audiences on Maui and began a year-long residency on Kaua’i last June. “I get to show the legacy of a Hawaiian family going back to the turn of the twentieth century, one that’s been in many facets of the entertainment business. Some have succeeded and some have not—but this is what I’m best at.”

of the underlying story. At the start of the show, the audience gets a clue about its theme. Just before curtain, a prop coconut drops to the floor from a fake palm. It’s the literal embodiment of the show’s logline: The coconut didn’t fall far from the tree.

Gilliom was eight when his

father, Lloyd B. Gilliom, decided to return to his ancestral home in Hawai’i with wife Marilee and their three children. The patriarch had no plan and no prospects, but he was determined to leave the hustle of Hollywood behind and take a break from the entertainment industry in which he’d grown up. That break helped young Eric discover his Hawaiian roots and inspired his own future as an actor, singer, dancer and musician.

“All I had known was California.

Then suddenly we were on this amazing tropical island, living on Maui. I literally had PE class on the beach!” Gilliom recalls. “Hawai’i completely blew my mind. I loved it. And it was the first time in my life that I thought more deeply about our ancestors.”

Gilliom’s ancestors include great-grandfather Louis Bucklemen Woodd, a scrappy pugilist whose skill in fisticuffs wasn’t enough to keep him from being shanghaied and shipped off from Canada to Kahului Harbor in 1902. Soon after arrival, Woodd met and fell in love at first sight with Jennie Ho’okano Ka’ahanui, who had also just arrived at the harbor after paddling a canoe across the treacherous Pailolo Channel from Moloka’i with her brothers to sell fish in Kahului. Their first daughter was named Jennie, after her mother.

The younger Jennie, Eric Gilliom’s grandmother Jennie “Napua” Woodd, developed wanderlust at an early age, along with a love for song and dance. She moved to New York City, teaching hula, performing in Hawaiian-themed events and productions and singing in smoky, late-night clubs. Napua Woodd met and married Lloyd H. Gilliom, a big-band musician in the Big Apple, and their son, Lloyd B. Gilliom, stayed with his mom when she divorced and moved to the West Coast. He learned the ins and outs of showbiz, assisting while Napua promoted Hawai’i through hula shows and lū’au that introduced America (and the world) to the Islands.

As Napua became a mainstay for Hawaiian dance and choreography in Hollywood and Las Vegas, Lloyd B. Gilliom became a jack-of-all-trades, assisting Napua by sweeping floors,



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bussing tables, digging imu (earth oven) pits and filling any gap needed to keep the shows running smoothly—including performing as a fire dancer. He learned to act a bit as well, hanging out on movie sets and hobnobbing with celebrities. As a part-Polynesian who could pass for a variety of ethnicities, Lloyd B. Gilliom secured occasional gigs as an extra in motion pictures like *Ben Hur*, *The Time Machine* and others. But the elder Gilliom eventually tired of bit parts and stereotypes, and longed to connect his children with their Island roots. Coming home to Hawai'i brought the Gilliom family full circle.

“By the time my dad moved us here, we had already spent a lot of time with Grandma Napua,” Gilliom recalls. “When we were little, we loved hanging around with Grandma, always singing

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Gilliom describes his grandmother, Jennie Napua Woodd (seen above), as “a funny, Hawaiian, hula-dancing comedian.” A well-known figure in show business through the 1940s and '50s, Napua appeared in film and television and danced hula at the famed Hawaiian Room in New York City’s Hotel Lexington, often alongside her best friend, Hilo Hattie. The two frequently traveled together as “ambassadors of aloha,” promoting Hawai’i on the Mainland. PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE GILLIOM FAMILY

and dancing. My younger sister, Amy, and I got the bug very, very young. My brother Tim was older and not as into it, but Amy and I just loved putting on our own little shows, even when we were just kids.” When Gilliom got to Baldwin High School in Wailuku and joined the drama program, it felt like the big leagues. “The minute I got to do it for real, in high school, I just thought, ‘Oh my God, this is awesome!’ Amy was right behind me, doing her thing, and that’s the trajectory of how entertainment came through our bloodline.”

While Amy Hanaiali’i Gilliom eventually became a renowned Hawaiian singer who’s earned six Grammy nominations, and brother Tim (the other great-grandson of canoe-paddling Jennie Ka’ahanui) became a captain of the famed Polynesian voyaging canoe *Hōkūle’a*, Eric continued down the acting path. Role after role, Gilliom brought down the house at Baldwin, gaining notoriety and the attention of acclaimed drama teacher

Sue Loudon, who helped Gilliom get into the prestigious Goodman School of Drama in Chicago as the first person of Native Hawaiian descent ever to attend.

From Chicago, Gilliom followed in Grandma Napua’s footsteps, heading west to pursue a life on stage and screen. In Hollywood he earned numerous credits, including a role in the 1986 film *Hoosiers*. “I had come up as a young actor from Hawai’i who could sing and dance,” Gilliom recalls. “Then one day I got a call from Debbie Allen, the choreographer from the TV series *Fame*, and suddenly found myself auditioning for a huge Broadway musical.” Gilliom landed a big role in the production, and it was off to London for rehearsals, followed by a highly anticipated opening in New York City. Unfortunately, the play—a musical version of *Carrie* by Stephen King—folded after only four days, becoming one of Broadway’s biggest and most expensive failures ever. Theater critic Ken Mandelbaum called one of *Carrie*’s

big numbers (a scene lampooned hilariously in *White Hawaiian*), “A nightmare from which no show could possibly recover,” and even named his book on Broadway bombs *Not Since Carrie: 40 Years of Broadway Musical Flops*. “How could I have known?” Gilliom laughs. “It had seemed like a good idea at the time.”

After *Carrie*, Gilliom headed back to LA but started coming home to visit family in Hawai’i more often. “Maui just started to feel more like where I belong,” Gilliom says of making the move permanent. “When I was going to school in Chicago, doing the play in New York, churning through auditions in LA, I just never really felt settled down. I was always a fish out of water. But Hawai’i—it was comfortable and familiar, and allowed me to just focus on being an artist.”

Gilliom’s Maui homecoming also meant hard labor, helping his dad in the family sandblasting business by day while continuing to land leading roles at

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TOP / Gilliom performs in the House of Rumours band with Mick Fleetwood. “Even when I was going to acting school, I was hanging out in the music school with all the musicians,” says Gilliom. “I was always in both worlds.”

BOTTOM / Gilliom plays with the late Hawaiian music legend, Willie K.

LEFT / Gilliom in the groove at Fleetwood’s on Front St. in Lāhainā, Maui.

night in a slew of local stage productions like *The Rocky Horror Show*, *Evita* and *Godspell*. Gilliom eventually got away from sandblasting by joining a luxury cruise line’s onboard variety show while keeping roots planted firmly on Maui.

Upon returning home from the cruise-ship gig (a period that stands out as one of the funniest sequences in *White Hawaiian* because of the rapid-fire costume changes and campy ship-show montage), Gilliom started focusing more on music. He honed his guitar and songwriting chops, learning from one of Hawai’i’s best guitarists: Barry Flanagan of the group HAPA. He formed the Eric

Gilliom Project, a musical steppingstone that led to eventually creating the Nā Hōkū Hanohano Award-winning group Barefoot Natives with the late legendary Hawaiian performer Uncle Willie K.

“Willie and I got to travel the world, and we had so much fun,” Gilliom remembers. “But every time we hit the stage, it was terrifying and thrilling all at once. At one of our first big shows, I had printed out the set list and taped it to the stage, and he picked it up, crumpled it and threw it away, saying, ‘I don’t use set lists.’ Then he just stepped on the gas and I was like, ‘OK, here we go!’ As a rhythm guitarist, playing with Willie

really helped me learn to just strap in for a roller-coaster ride and hold on tight.”

In 2007 Gilliom’s stage presence, vocal ability and guitar chops got noticed by a notable guest at one of his gigs. Fleetwood Mac co-founder and Maui resident Mick Fleetwood approached him after the show. “He came up to me—all six foot eight of him—and said he was putting a new band together and wondered if I’d like to get together sometime to jam and see what happens,” Gilliom says. “That was more than fifteen years ago, and we’ve had a great time doing shows together ever since.” Fleetwood kept Gilliom in the lineup

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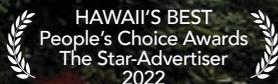
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“This is the best version of this band we’ve ever had,” says Gilliom of the current lineup in the House of Rumours band, seen above at Fleetwood’s on Front St. “It’s super tight and has a kind of blues base to it, which is really in Mick’s wheelhouse.” Fleetwood, for his part, calls Gilliom “a riveting performer whose musical talents run deep, including singing and songwriting skills.”

through multiple iterations of his post-Fleetwood Mac projects, including the current House of Rumours band, which plays several times a year at Mick’s restaurant, Fleetwood’s on Front St.

“I saw Eric playing at a show, and I was blown away,” says Fleetwood, “He is a riveting performer whose musical talents run deep, including his singing and songwriting skills. Over the years Eric’s become a close personal friend and has been a part of teaching me about these lovely Islands. It’s always a continuing inspiration to share the stage with him.”

After years of experience in local stage productions on Maui, multiple music projects including tours with Willie K, HAPA and Fleetwood, and more film and TV credits (including the lead in 2011’s Hawai’i-filmed comedy feature *Get a Job*, also starring Willie K), Gilliom currently finds himself exactly where he wants to be. *White Hawaiian* has earned rave reviews in every run. All fifty performances to date have sold out. He’s booked a one-year

residency-style engagement performing the show weekly on Kaua’i at Porter Pavilion in Kilauea and plans to continue monthly performances on Maui and possibly other islands. He’s also playing semi-regular shows with Fleetwood and doing frequent solo and duo singer/guitarist gigs at various local live-music venues. And he’s still a go-to lead for serious stage productions on Maui.

“I think right now, for the first time in my career, all of the things I love to do are at play,” Gilliom says.

Despite fronting a one-man show (and single-handedly designing and building all of the show’s set pieces, costumes, props and special effects), Gilliom’s got plenty of capable accomplices. “I’ve got a great team behind this production,” Gilliom says. “Brian Kohne was my writing partner. All of the interstitial videos on screen conveying the historical Hawai’i were put together by Adi El-Ad, a fantastic Hollywood editor. And I couldn’t do the show at all without Luke McKinna in

the booth running all of the sound and lighting and special effects.”

***White Hawaiian* ends with**

Gilliom finally finding the closure he’s always been looking for. Or does he? When the house lights come up, the crowd reflects on what they’ve just seen. Almost universally, audience members can relate it to events and experiences in their own lives.

“Brian and I really set out to make *White Hawaiian* a show that’s *not* just about me,” says Gilliom. “I’m the vessel, my family is the vessel for telling a story—but that story is really about everybody. Everyone has an origin. Where do you come from? How did you get to where you are? Just like mine, everybody’s story is also wacky and colorful and funny and sad and weird and heartfelt in its own way. The greatest satisfaction I get out of performing this piece is making people remember their families, their history, their own stories.” **hh**