



On Afatia Thompson's Time

By Alyssa S. Navares

Humming tunes from soulful artist Luther Vandross, Afatia Thompson descends deeper, with spear gun in hand, into the ocean along the rocky Portlock coast. The former University of Hawaii Warrior running back now makes as much time as he can to freedive, in between a hectic schedule of promoting his solo debut album "Afatia 5:54."

"I enjoy the beauty and serenity of the ocean, as a good getaway," said Afatia, who grew up diving alongside his father, uncle and cousins, "not so much from the music, since I even catch myself singing in the water, but from the busyness of the industry."

The 28-year-old dives at least once every two weeks along the eastside of Oahu, from Diamond Head to Waimanalo, but enjoys the untouched reefs of Samoa, where he has performed many times as a child for his parents' multimillion-dollar entertainment company Tihati Productions, Ltd.

"When we go down there or to other Polynesian islands, I always make some time to get in the water," he said. Afatia, or Afa for short, recalled a time when he speared a 50-pound Ulua. "I thought it was going to drown me because I couldn't pull it up."

All in the ohana, Tihati goes worldwide

But just as freediving became a longtime family activity for the Thompsons so did singing and performing. He and his three older siblings were major parts in parents Jack and Charlene Thompson's more than 30-year-old company. Tihati Productions, Ltd., named after Jack's stage name, provides Polynesian entertainment not only throughout every island in the state but throughout the world. Afa traveled across Europe and Japan and performed for celebrities like actor Will Smith and talk show hostess Oprah Winfrey.

The company started from the days in 1969, when Jack worked as a part-time host at the Duke Kahanamoku night club in Waikiki. Club management asked him to put together a show to fill in while singer Don Ho was on vacation. Jack asked Charlene, more commonly known as Cha, to help him with the production. And after several years since starting the business, they both quit performing and devoted their lives to managing entertainment shows.

But that didn't mean their children stopped performing.

"I was brought up as an entertainer because both of my parents were entertainers," said Afa, a 1996 Punahou School graduate. His mother was a well-known professional hula dancer and his father, a longtime fire-knife dancer. "It was just a natural progression to grow up in the Polynesian entertainment business."

In 1998, Afa became a champion fire-knife dancer after competing in the prestigious Polynesian Cultural Center's World Fire Dance Competition. He placed second behind two-time winner Pati Levasa and received \$2,000 and fire knives. He was soon performing more than 10 times every week for Tihati's "Creation: A Polynesian Odyssey" show.

In addition to fire-knife dancing, which became his trademark performance, Afa danced Tahitian, Samoan, Hawaiian, Fijian, Rarotongan and Tongan.

"I definitely feel that I had a privileged childhood," he said. "I saw first hand and lived a lot of our Polynesian cultures through these dances."

Afa is Samoan, Hawaiian, German, Chinese, Scotch-Irish, Spanish, Tokelauan, Filipino and Portuguese but said he more closely identifies with his Samoan heritage because his grandfather was born and raised in Samoa. Decades ago, his great-grandfather claimed an island, Swains Island, 240 miles north of American Samoa.

Currently, he is the Oahu island manager for Tihati Productions, Ltd. Afa oversees every performance on Oahu, while his sisters Ruana Teo and Misty Tufono work full-time as well. Ruana works in the company's sales, and Misty manages the production. Only Afa continues to perform for Tihati Productions, Ltd.

Even Afa and his wife of seven years, Nicole Thompson, eventually performed together on stage with Tihati Productions, Ltd. After meeting each other after a football game – Nicole, a Sacred Hearts Academy cheerleader, and Afa, the running back for Punahou School – became high school sweethearts.

The couple has three children – three-year-old Eli, two-year-old Bella and five-month-old Afatia, Jr.

Nicole comes from a long line of hula dancers. Her great-grandmother, Rose Joshua, became the first kumu hula to introduce cellophane hula skirts to the islands for the more modern style of dance, or Hapa Haole Hula. Today, Rose's name is honored through an award at the World Hula Invitational Festival. Nicole's mother and two sisters became "The Fabulous Joshua Sisters" in their teen years, when they performed during wartime at military bases and restaurants in Waikiki.

From football star to music icon

Afa not only grew up in the water and on the stage but on the football field as well. He played football since "small kid time," taking after his older brother and father. Afa played for the Kalani Falcons as a child and then the Punahou High School football team, where he recalled earning the most yards as the running back for the entire Interscholastic League of Hawaii division.

"It was pretty cool because I only played five out of 10 games my senior year, before injuring my knee," Afa said, "and rushed more than 800 yards just in those first games, as opposed to people who played all 10 of them."

He became an all-state and all-conference performer in addition to a recipient for the Punahou School President's Award.

Eventually, his 5'10" stature and athletic ability on the field helped him to earn a full-ride football scholarship for four years to UH. During his first year, he played 10 games and

gained 25 yards on five carries during a November game against Michigan State University.

"In football, I feel like I'm representing my hometown and Polynesian people," said Afa, a business major.

Afa's most memorable moment in football during college was when UH went from worst to first. In 1998 UH, under the coaching direction of Fred vonAppen, had a 0-12 Western Athletic Conference record. Even football game attendance slid from 44,000 in the early 1990s to 29,000 in 1998, according to Aloha Stadium figures. But when current Coach June Jones was hired a year later, the team became WAC champions. This was the biggest turnaround in National Collegiate Athletic Association history.

"My family really supported me the whole way," said Afa, who mentioned that his family painted their faces, brought signs and even wore T-shirts with his name on them to the games. "And I had a huge family because my parents took in a lot of our cousins and family friends' kids. They filled an entire section at the Aloha Stadium."

'I'm not abandoning who I am'

After a slew of injuries during the later years of his college football career, which prevented him from playing in the professional league, Afa turned to singing.

"I think my getting injured was really the deciding factor for me to go into the music and entertainment industry," he said. "I look at this as a good thing because I got to get into music again."

He put all his efforts into performing with a five-member group called Reign. Afa, then a college freshman, was invited to join them as the lead singer. This forced him to manage football, family and performing with Tihati Productions, Ltd, as the group sang throughout the islands and eventually released its self-titled debut album.

Reign based most of its songs upon the Christian faith, while mixing in Polynesian and soft rap, too. As strong Christians, Afa and his family went to church every Sunday. He sang in the church choir, as well as the Punahou School choir.

The group split up several years later, as members got married and had children. But Afa wanted to do more.

"I was the youngest in the group, so I still had a couple of goals that I wanted to attain as an artist," he said. "They [other members] may have reached their goals in music, but I knew that I still wanted to do that."

Afa recorded his first solo album, "Afatia 5:54" in 2005, which was released in September of last year. This month, he is on a 10-day tour along the west coast mainland, where he will perform in San Diego, Calif. and then in Las Vegas, NV. He is also the first entertainer from Hawaii to perform on Las Vegas' Treasure Island.

Afa hopes to convey a more mainstream sound, which would appeal to the mainland audience, while still having a Polynesian style.

"I'm not abandoning who I am," he said. "And I don't want to be the next Justin Timberlake. I want to be the next Afatia, representing Polynesia as a whole."

His true musical passion, Rhythm and Blues, can be heard in songs like "All Night Long and a tribute to Luther Vandross, "Love Won't Let Me Wait." He also wanted to stray away from the usual island sound made popular by the Jawaian movement.

The title of his album represents his UH football team jersey number, 5, and his late brother Eli's number, 54. His brother passed away at the age of 18, just months after signing a football scholarship to UH.

"We always wanted to play college football together," Afa said, "but since we never did, I wanted to dedicate my album to him. 5:54 was what we always said was 'our time.'"

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