LOCAL FLOW

Hawai‘i’s hip-hop artists got game

The camera rolls on three people at Punchbowl Coffee shop in Waikīkī. Two large speakers flank a tattooed DJ fiddling with switches on a soundboard to the left of the coffee bar. To the right, Eric de Mendonca—from the popular Japanese reality show Terrace House—pours coffee and bobs his head with casual confidence, like he owns the place, because he does.

Between them is Tassho Pearce. At first glance nothing really sticks out about him. He's youngish—somewhere between a university super-senior and a new dad—lightly tanned and rocking a neatly trimmed moustache, Hawai'i's signature facial hair. He looks like countless dudes you pass on the streets of Honolulu, but when the beat starts, Pearce becomes something else, diving into song and wielding the mike with effortless confidence. "Shall I start like Moses? I'll part the seas, put Next Coast on the charts for you all to see."

A smile blooms across his face as he rhymes. The song sounds as fresh as it did when it was first released fifteen years ago. "They all thought we livin' in shacks/ Rippin' the track so much doctor's stitchin' it back/Throw your H's up in the air, keep 'em sky-high/Reppin' the H-A-W-A-I-I." That song, "Honolulu," appeared on Pearce's 2003 album *Rhyme and Punishment*, when he rapped under the name Emirc. Since then he's toured the globe and worked with artists like Kanye West and Kid Cudi. But "Honolulu" is still the pinnacle, a joyous love letter to Hawai'i that became a genuine classic and the first song from a local MC ("master of ceremonies") to get regular rotation on hip-hop radio stations, both at home and beyond.

This is no small feat. Hip-hop was born in New York City in the 1970s, a world away from the sandy beaches of Hawai'i, and not just because five thousand miles separate them. The usual musical representation of Hawai'i tends to be the type of generic, breezy tunes that greet you at the airport—either that or one of the few local artists who broke out, like Don Ho with "Tiny Bubbles" or Israel Kamakawiwo'ole with "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." People associate Hawai'i with the mischievous pluck of the 'ukulele or the nostalgic cry of the steel guitar, not the gritty thump of hip-hop.

Even within Hawai'i, though, hip-hop wasn't a major thread in the musical fabric; the only other local hip-hop act to get radio play was Sudden Rush, a trio from Hawai'i Island that rapped over reggae beats. They were around before Pearce broke out with "Honolulu" but were more "Jawaiian" (a mashup of "Jamaican" and "Hawaiian") than hip-hop, and their music was played exclusively on Island music and reggae stations.

But as incongruous as Hawai'i and hip-hop might seem at first, there is genuine kinship. Hip-hop was invented by marginalized Black and Latino youth; it became a way for them to speak about their experiences to people who otherwise had little idea about inner-city American life. Likewise, Island hip-hop artists use their music to depict the aspects of life in Hawai'i that don't fit the idyllic postcard image or the sunny sounds of traditional Island music. Once "Honolulu" blew up, there was a model for how Hawai'i hip-hop could be part of a bigger, imported genre yet maintain its own distinct identity and not just imitate what was happening on the Mainland.

"'Honolulu' is an anthem for Hawai'i and a representation of real life in the Islands," Pearce says. But what's become arguably the single greatest hip-hop track to come out of Hawai'i was an afterthought for Pearce."*Rhyme and Punishment* was full of my most aggressive and hard raps," he says. "I needed something to lighten the mood. I didn't want the album to be totally dark, because that's not really the vibe of Hawai'i. When you're a kid, running around, going to the beach, hiking—I wanted to bring that feeling. … Good thing I did that, because it ended up being the number-one song on the radio in Hawai'i."

While "Honolulu" captures the fun of living in Hawai'i, it never veers into rosy nostalgia. Its summary of life in the Islands still resonates with listeners. "You can still play 'Honolulu' to this day and the younger generation will know what it is," says Kavet "The Catalyst" Omo, founder and owner of the Lightsleepers record label and clothing brand. Although Omo wasn't involved in the creation of "Honolulu," he played a major role in creating the conditions that made it a hit.

Throughout the '90s Pearce was known as one of the wittiest and most polished MCs in the cutthroat world of Honolulu's underground rap scene. "Everyone was hungry," Omo says. "Your street cred and skill came from being physically at the shows, battling, testing yourself in the 'cyphers'"—when a crowd gathers in a circle and rappers freestyle with each other. "Nobody was afraid to call someone out. Tassho came from that."

"Back then everyone would have cyphers, and we'd all try to come with our best bars," Pearce says. "Anything could pop off at any time. Rap battles, open mikes—it was electrifying. There was a little bit of danger, a little bit of fun."

But if an MC rips a microphone and no one is around to hear it, does he make a sound? Unless you were at the venues in the pre-smartphone, early-internet era, you never heard Hawai'i hip-hop. Local hip-hop radio stations played the same top-forty playlists from the Mainland, and the only local music on any station

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"We wanted to represent hip-hop culture to the fullest extent," says MC (master of ceremonies) Tassho Pearce, seen above and on the opening spread, left and right. His 2003 album, *Rhyme and Punishment*, was the first locally produced record to put Hawai'i on the larger hip-hop map. "We played up the fact that we were from Hawai'i—we know that's what made us unique—but we focused on having something that people outside of Hawai'i thought was dope." On the facing page, Pearce raps in signature Flip the Bird clothing that he designed.

was reggae or Island music. There was no larger stage for Hawai‘i hip-hop until Omo, the skateboarding son of a jazz musician who had been rapping over his own self-produced beats since his days at Kamehameha High School. “All I wanted to do was make music,” he says. “I went to school because it was plan B.” Omo made a name for himself as “that hip-hop skateboarder kid,” a reputation that presented an opportunity when he started attending the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa in 1997.

“My friend became the general manager at KTUH, the student-run college radio station. Their hip-hop deejay graduated, so they asked if I wanted to do it. I said no because I didn’t want to play what I heard on the radio. My friend said, ‘No, this is college radio. You can play whatever you want.’ So I said I’d do it.” The original time slot was 3 to 6 a.m., so he called it the *Lightsleepers Show*, a name that stuck even after its popularity moved it to the 9 p.m.-to-midnight slot. The *Lightsleepers Show* became the premier outlet for Hawai‘i hip-hop, and it took off.

“We went viral before viral was a thing,” Omo says. “I’d record my show on cassette and trade tapes with other underground radio stations on the Mainland. That’s how people started finding out about different scenes—mailing cassettes and burned CDs of radio shows to each other. Eventually, artists from New York, San Francisco, Seattle and even Japan would send me their demos, and I’d send them the tapes of my show.”

With the *Lightsleepers Show* bringing Hawai‘i hip-hop to Mainland and international audiences, some buzz started up around Pearce. He was Hawai‘i’s standout MC, and not just in a big fish/small pond, “good for a Hawai‘i rapper” way. In 2000 he was invited to freestyle on *The Wake Up Show*, a prominent, nationally syndicated hip-hop radio show based in Los Angeles.

“Let the kid from the HI state go first,” host Sway said as the beat kicked in. “From a tropical metropolis I’m droppin’ this/larger than hippopotamus, rockin’ it not monotonous,” Pearce rhymed. People in the studio reacted audibly, like “this guy is for real.” And if they didn’t know where he was from, Pearce was sure to remind them. “Impossible man from tropical land, I migrate/travel the Earth, but battled my first in HI state.” His performance lasted only a minute, but it was impressive enough to be included on a compilation of the show’s best freestyles of the year, alongside heavyweights Pharoahe Monch, DMX and Eminem. It was a watershed moment for Hawai‘i hip-hop, surpassed only by the success of “Honolulu” three years later.

Hawai‘i hip-hop was forging its identity, and it looked like Pearce was on track to become its flag-bearer, ready to cross over to the highest levels of stardom. But he fell off the map shortly after he put his home state on it, or at least that’s how it looked from the outside; in truth, he put music on the back burner to check some other things off the bucket list.

“We created a clothing brand called Flip the Bird for the album release for *Rhyme and Punishment*. We put it in stores and it sold out.” One of the most iconic Flip the Bird products was the Humuhumunukunukuapua‘a, a sneaker with a print resembling Hawai‘i’s state fish, on which Pearce collaborated with hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons. The local kid who was drawn to hip-hop after seeing Run DMC perform at Aloha Stadium ended up inking a sneaker deal with the man who launched Run DMC to superstardom.

In the heyday of the *Lightsleepers Show*, Omo also leaned into merchandise, making shirts to promote his shows and music. “I was never vain enough to put my name on a shirt,” he says, “so I went with the name of the radio show. It would represent myself and my crew but also anybody who related to the soul of *Lightsleepers*.” When the radio show ended, Omo parlayed its popularity into concerts and events. Now that people had heard what Hawai‘i hip-hop had to offer, they had reason to show up to performances. And man, they showed up.

Pearce and Omo were two pillars holding up the hip-hop scene in Hawai‘i; Pearce brought the skills and Omo brought the audience. Together they defined a style and sound of Hawai‘i; then they sent it out to as many people as possible. As artists and entrepreneurs, they pushed the limits of what Hawai‘i hip-hop could be: urban, ruggedly individualistic and street-smart, capturing a side of Hawai‘i that no other Island music does. And once the door was muscled open, a new generation busted it down.

If Hawai‘i hip-hop fuses the multicultural experience of living in these Islands, that’s partly due to producer Scott Ohtoro, seen above and on the facing page. Raised in California, Ohtoro’s family has ancestral connections to Hawai‘i and Japan. His label, Zenbu Records, is a collective of artists blending Hawai‘i’s many musical lineages. “Zenbu is a house for everything,” says Ohtoro, “a network of artists who are down to collaborate. I just want to keep expanding it.”

Plenty of the original Hawai‘i hip-hop artists are still making music, and new artists have emerged since, but none have been more active or innovative than the Zenbu Records crew. DJ and producer Scott Ohtoro chose the name Zenbu, the Japanese word for “everything,” because it defined his vision of inclusion. “We try to make music for everyone,” he says. But Ohtoro doesn’t think of Zenbu Records as a label: “I want it to be more of a collaboration between artists.”

Ohtoro grew up in Southern California, but he’s always had strong connections to the Islands. His father is from O‘ahu, and though his mother was born in a Japanese internment camp in Colorado, her family is from Maui. The sounds of Hawai‘i were a staple in the Ohtoro home. “My dad had three Kalapana records,” he says. “Those were my first memories of music.” But as soon as he left his house, he was immersed in the eclectic world of Los Angeles hip-hop. “Friday was Friday Night Flavas on Power 106, and they’d always play dope underground hip-hop. Then Saturday was *The Wake Up Show*, and Sunday was college radio.” Ohtoro sharpened his beat-making skills on the Mainland but moved to Hawai‘i in 2013, “when the Hawai‘i hip-hop scene was really blooming,” he says. “I felt this energy here that was really unique and special. I wanted to be a part of it and try to push it to the next level.”

With a musical double helix of Los Angeles hip-hop and contemporary Hawaiian music—combined with a growing sense of his Japanese heritage—it’s no wonder Ohtoro meshed with Sans, a former

slam poet and current Hawai‘i Pacific University lecturer and debate coach who also happens to be an acrobatic lyricist born and raised in Nu‘uanu, near downtown Honolulu. Hip-hop allowed Sans to express what it was like growing up with one foot in Hawai‘i’s natural beauty and the other in the city’s urban core. “I grew up in this beautiful valley with tradewinds and daily showers behind me, and in front of me I had the city,” says Sans. “I probably had the most urban upbringing possible in Hawai‘i, but my music is also influenced by the rhythms of nature: tides, celestial orbits and the stars. That comes from growing up swimming and surfing and hiking, being surrounded by nature.”

Working with Ohtoro also awakened Sans’ connection to his ancestry. “My family has been in Hawai‘i for five generations now, so our ties to Japan are weak,” Sans says. “Ohtoro was one of the first hip-hop producers I met who was sampling Japanese music in his beats. For someone who grew up listening to Japanese music from my grandparents, that was impactful.” “I got the idea from Onra,” Ohtoro says, referencing the French-Vietnamese hip-hop and electro producer. “He got a bunch of records from Vietnam and made some dope beats. So I wondered if I could do that with Japanese records.”

Spoiler alert: He could. The quality and diversity of Zenbu’s artists got the attention of Doctabarz, an MC who moved from Los Angeles to Hawai‘i in 2016 to teach at UH-Mānoa. “Ohtoro is a genius,” Doctabarz says. “There’s harmony in his music. It sounds like a landscape.” Doctabarz is a musical storyteller straight out of hip-hop’s golden era, a slick lyricist with punchy delivery that sounds both fresh and familiar, at once original and retro. “Ohtoro writes tracks that allow me to tell a story. The way he thinks is very similar to me. I wanted to do a lot of different things, but I hadn’t met someone I could do them with until I met him.”

In the same way Ohtoro was able to connect with Sans through Japanese and local cultures, Doctabarz and Ohtoro share the connection of being LA transplants. The result is another representation of modern life in Hawai‘i. “I’m a guest in Hawai‘i,” Doctabarz says. “If it wasn’t for these artists, I wouldn’t feel at home here. I feel like I have a kuleana [responsibility] to this place. I have an obligation to give more than I’ve taken.” As a Black American, Doctabarz says he feels a connection with Native Hawaiians, one he can share through hip-hop, an invention of Black culture. “You resonate with people who are going through some version of what you’re going through. My culture, hip-hop culture, is worldwide now, but it survived loss of language, loss of connection to land. So it gave me an appreciation for Native Hawaiian knowledge and ways of being, ways of protecting the planet. If we would just listen, there’s a model here for how the world could operate.”

Fellow Zenbu artist Punahele affirms this connection. “Hip-hop culture and Hawaiian culture are exactly the same, just in different languages,” says Punahele. Coming from the tough neighborhood of Mākaha on O‘ahu’s Leeward side, Punahele found an unlikely way to connect to his own culture through hip-hop. “My grandma was beaten in school for speaking Hawaiian, so she didn’t want to teach my parents. Not being able to use my mother tongue left me lost and angry. Part of myself was missing. Hip-hop filled that void.”

Born in Nu‘uanu, with one foot in nature and one in Honolulu’s urban core, Zenbu artist Sans, a.k.a. Sterling Higa, seeks to capture the experience of growing up in the Islands, both in its idyllic waters—like Walls in Waikīkī (seen above)—and on its gritty streets. “There’s a sense in my music of needing a place to belong. For me, that place has always been Nu‘uanu, Honolulu and Hawai‘i.”

Punahele first made his name as a titan of Hawai‘i’s battle rap circuit, but the mindset of always being ready to attack was a burden and a distraction. “My goal was to make one song about my life and community and put as much ‘ike [knowledge] into it so that anyone who thinks of me would remember me through it.” He did more than make a song; he made an album, *From Beneath Mt. Ka‘ala*, which won Hip-Hop Album of the Year at the 2019 Nā Hōkū Hanohano Awards, also known as the Hawaiian Grammys. It was a home run on his first swing, but Punahele was humble about his success. “Me and Ohtoro were serving the community with no eyes on us: organizing beach cleanups, feeding the homeless. I didn’t win because of my skill, as much as my ego would like to think that. I won because of karma.”

Through Punahele, Zenbu Records has captured a perspective of life in Hawai‘i in a medium that suits the urgency of its message. “Hip-hop is a way to perpetuate culture, navigate through struggles and provide for people,” Punahele says. “Same thing for Hawaiian culture. I’m a Hawaiian practitioner and a hip-hop practitioner. One hand washes the other.” Though hip-hop gave Punahele a language when he couldn’t access his ancestral tongue, he’s now learning ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language) and fusing it with hip-hop. “I get to create a hip-hop/Hawaiian hybrid,” he says. “I’ve yet to master the meshing of them, but once I do, it’s going to sound like the best work I’ve ever created.”

A Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian), Zenbu artist Punahele (seen above in his hometown of Mākaha) found a connection to his roots through hip-hop. “Life in my community,” he says, “it’s not the paradise the tourist industry shows,” and hip-hop, having come from artists living in rough places, gave the artist a medium to express his experience. Now Punahele wants to give back. “Hip-hop gives me a tool, just as my ancestors used hula to tell stories,” he says. “I want to use it to strengthen and uplift my people.”

Hawai‘i is a mixture of cultures, influences and identities. The eclectic artists associated with Zenbu reflect the diverse worlds that coexist in the Islands today, both on the beaches and in the back alleys. Zenbu racked up two 2020 Nā Hōkū nominations for Hip-Hop Album of the Year, including Punahele’s *The Menehune Giant*. That they didn’t take home the award (the honor went to Thomas Iannucci’s *Kuleana*) is, oddly, a good sign that Hawai‘i hip-hop is growing, its artistry and quality improving. Next year’s nominees will almost certainly include two more Zenbu representatives: Doctabarz and Sans.

While Zenbu’s success stands on the shoulders of the giants, those giants are still at it. Pearce released his fourth album in 2020, and Lightsleepers’ new merchandise sells out faster than it can be designed. “How to be successful is no secret,” says Omo. “It’s been laid out by Tassho and me. When Ohtoro got here, he did exactly what he had to do. He worked his ass off, and it shows in the success he’s had. Ohtoro and Zenbu are forging the sound of Hawai‘i hip-hop. It has the roots of hip-hop, the roots of Hawai‘i, plus the flavor of Asia. It represents the soul of Hawai‘i. If that’s not the formula for where Hawai‘i hip-hop should go, I don’t know what is.” **HH**