



# JOE YEE HAWAII'S LIVING LEGEND

BY MARK MITSUYASU, CLAY TAM  
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Last April, PIFG had the privilege of sitting down with Joe Yee to talk story about his lifelong experiences growing up on Oahu, surfing, fishing, traveling around the world and, of course, crafting world class trolling lures. Like many local boys, born and raised in Kakaako on the island of Oahu, Joe Yee grew up a water rat, fishing and surfing all day long. Combining both of his passions, he would often catch papio while paddling his surf board in the waters off of Waikiki Beach.

Joe loved the water so much that, as a young man, he became one of Hawaii's legendary beach boys in 1938. Eventually he became good friends with Duke Kahanamoku — yes, the world famous “Duke”, godfather of modern-day surfing. Their friendship and passion for the ocean, waves and fishing carried through their adult lives. Joe shared a story about the day he was out trolling with Duke about forty miles offshore of Oahu. Suddenly, Duke began going into cardiac arrest and, according to Joe, the “captain cut their trolling lines and sped back to port at over 30 knots.” Joe explains that the seas were rough and they could feel the boat hull, built of fiberglass over plywood, flex as they plowed their way back home. Luckily, they were able to get Duke to shore in time to receive medical treatment.

While Duke was a great athlete, winning multiple Olympic gold medals for swimming and becoming an ambassador for the State of Hawaii, Joe Yee also became well known as one of the most recognized names in the world of big game sport fishing. Joe took the art of hand crafting custom resin head lures, which were invented in Hawaii, to the pinnacle of perfection. People from all over the world have come to covet Joe Yee lures and their reputation for consistently catching big billfish.

After graduating from Kaimuki High School, Joe went on to become an aircraft mechanic at Hickam for 36 years. He also worked for Pan American Airways back in the day. His mechanical background set the stage for his ability to create, design and produce some of the best trolling lures for billfish in the world in terms of consistency and productivity. Joe's passion has been driven by the challenge of catching big marlin. “I like to catch marlin, the fish I hate is ahi. It (ahi) never comes up, always stays at the bottom.” “The largest fish I caught in a tournament was 700 something

pounds on 50 pound test, it was in a Hawaii International Billfish Tournament (HIBT),” as he referred to the photos on display in his home. Joe chuckles and adds, “If I caught that fish earlier it would have been 900 pounds with the eggs, but I caught her when she released the eggs.”

When asked when he really started making lures, Joe thinks a bit and replies, “When did the Billfish tournament (HIBT) begin? A really long time ago. Oh boy, it's been so long ago I cannot remember.” We later confirmed the HIBT started in 1959.

“Everybody was making lures before me.” Yee recalls von Hamm Young on Kapiolani Boulevard, the site of the current Hawaii Convention Center, where one of his friends picked up a lure and asked if Yee could make one like that. Agreeing, Yee asked George Lum, who was making lures at the time, about the color, “he (Lum) said you've got to use food coloring. Yup, and you know you cannot mix food

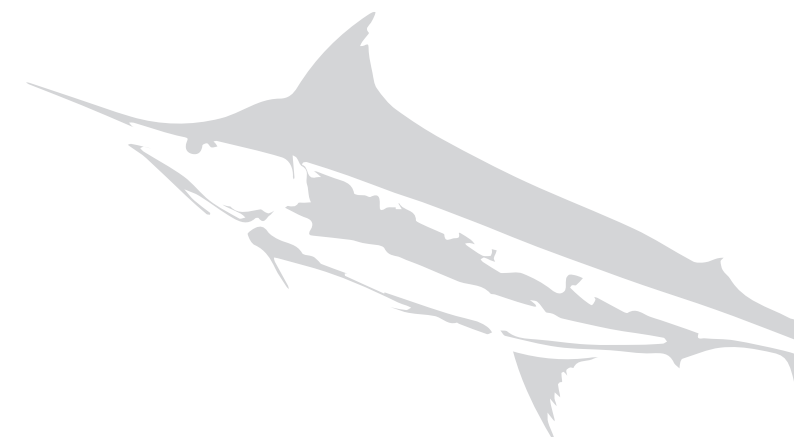
color with resin! And that's how it started.”

As for the colors he chooses, Joe explained, “I like to see what the fish like to bite, the colors, and all that...I find pearl color is the best. So, every fish, you turn it over, you see that pearl color...right on the belly.”

Joe recommends the “next time when you fishing, just turn the aku over and look at the belly, it's not white, it's pink pearl.” In early years, Joe remembers some great old time lure producers from Kapiolani and Kapahulu areas, including George Lum and Chester Kaita.

In the old days, all the lures were made by hand. It was difficult to maintain consistency, which is critical if you want to produce good lures. While working at Hickam, during his lunch hour, Joe talked to mechanics about mak-

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ing a “V” block to cut lures. He explained, “It took us three months, we finally figured out how to cut the lure. I can just put the lure in, adjust ‘em, and cut.” Continuing, he shared that there used to be a show at Honolulu’s Neal Blaisdell Center and a guy there demonstrated how a new machine could easily cut a file, which is very hard metal. “Well, he just cut right off, so I bought the darn cutter...till today I use that. For the blade, I bought two boxes, 100 in each box, so I still get one and half left.” Joe found that when cleans the blades they can be reused for many lure face cuts. Once the face is cut, he uses a drum sander to cut the scoop. “I get all kinds of drums. Face cuts are tough, as you have to keep them in line. I’m always thinking (about) how to make it easier.”

Joe learned and studied lure action by fishing with many of the best past and present captains in Hawaii, especially in Kona. He fished with the late legendary Capt. George Parker (F/V Mona H) and later fished with Capt. George’s son, Marlin Parker. And list goes on and on. Joe recalled, Capt. George’s “Mona H could not go very fast, the fastest maybe five miles an hour, but he’s the first guy that caught the big marlin...over a 1000 pounds.” Spending many hours fishing and talking with great big



game captains all over the world, Joe has been able to fine tune his lures to run true and produce fish.

One of the biggest fish he recalls is one that he lost. “We lost one big, big fish, maybe 1500 pounds...if you look, all big fish are maybe 100 yards, 200 yards away. This one was right behind the boat. Oh, I thought we were gonna get hit, it came up like that (signaling straight up). Oh, big, yeah, I’ve never seen a rod just break, crumble. If it broke on the top, I can see, but that thing (rod) crumbled 18 to 20 inches down...” Joe confirmed, the lure that took that strike was his plunger, “the super plunger catches so much big fish.”

According to Joe his most popular, best known and most sought-after lure is his Super Plunger. That lure has landed more 1,000 plus marlin than all the other lure designs combined. When asked how many “granders” his Super Plunger has caught, Joe thinks deeply, shakes his head, points to his shop downstairs and says, “maybe 30 or more globally! The photos are on the wall!” He has many other popular lures such as the Pee Wee, Double Plunger, Apollo, 501, 24/7 and another of his favorites, the Straight Runner. Joe explained, the “straight runner, real radical that lure, runs all kinds of ways, but the first 1000 pounder came up on that one.”

To make great lures you have to have the right mind set of never being satisfied, always questioning what can be done different or better and looking for tools that will allow you to fashion the ultimate lure. It is truly amazing to listen and watch Joe as he meticulously puts an imaginary lure together as he considers balance, weight, insert material and color. In his mind, he envisions how

the lure will present itself and run in varied water conditions in order to draw a strike. When asked what he thinks is the most important part of a lure head, Joe paused, nodded as if agreeing with himself, and quietly said, “I find the red eye” is important. Joe is known for quality hand poured eyes. And, when we had the privilege of touring his shop, we could see first-hand how much work is put into crafting those legendary hand poured eyes. As we talked about the importance of the lure’s eye, it reminded us of a related but totally different conversation we once had with another famous Hawaii fish artist friend, Naoki Hayashi of Gyotaku by Naoki. As

he paints and prints each fish using the traditional Japanese gyotaku method, he explains that he paints the eye last to bring the fish to life and give it a soul.

Our discussion next led to inserts and what Joe likes best — “Shell, when you look at a shell, they have the natural rainbow, yeah, Mother of Pearl. I got some beautiful black pearl from Tahiti. You can see the natural green, pink color, beautiful. My next project will be black pearl.”

Even at the young age of 92 he continues to imagine, create and perfect his lure designs, daily if he can. Joe continues to collaborate with other lure makers in this effort. On the day of our sit down with Joe, we were joined by Jon Niiyama who is pushing the edge in crafting new lure designs as witnessed in his now un-available oama lure and hard to get aku fishhead. Joe and Jon have teamed up to put Jon’s fishhead into Joes Super Plunger, which promises to be deadly.



Lures have literally taken Joe around the world traveling and fishing. What a life! But even with all this global fame, Joe remains a very humble and true local boy at heart.

Although he loves chasing marlin, Joe also appreciates the food and friends from around the world. Joe’s favorite fish to eat is onaga, but he quickly follows that up with, “I also like small papio and dry fish like baby moi. The best one is from Tahiti!” Joe also made a point to show us a painting while touring his shop, “I couldn’t believe when I made my trip to Thailand, I see this lady. I say, you draw that? And she says yeah. I got the picture.”

Joe’s lure production hasn’t wavered, in part through the help of his grandson, Steven Kegley. “My grandfather pours more lures now that he has me to clean them up. He definitely keeps me busy.” Looking at the rack of lures ready to be sent out to lucky fishermen, the quality and tradition of Joe Yee Lures should be set for the future. 🍻

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