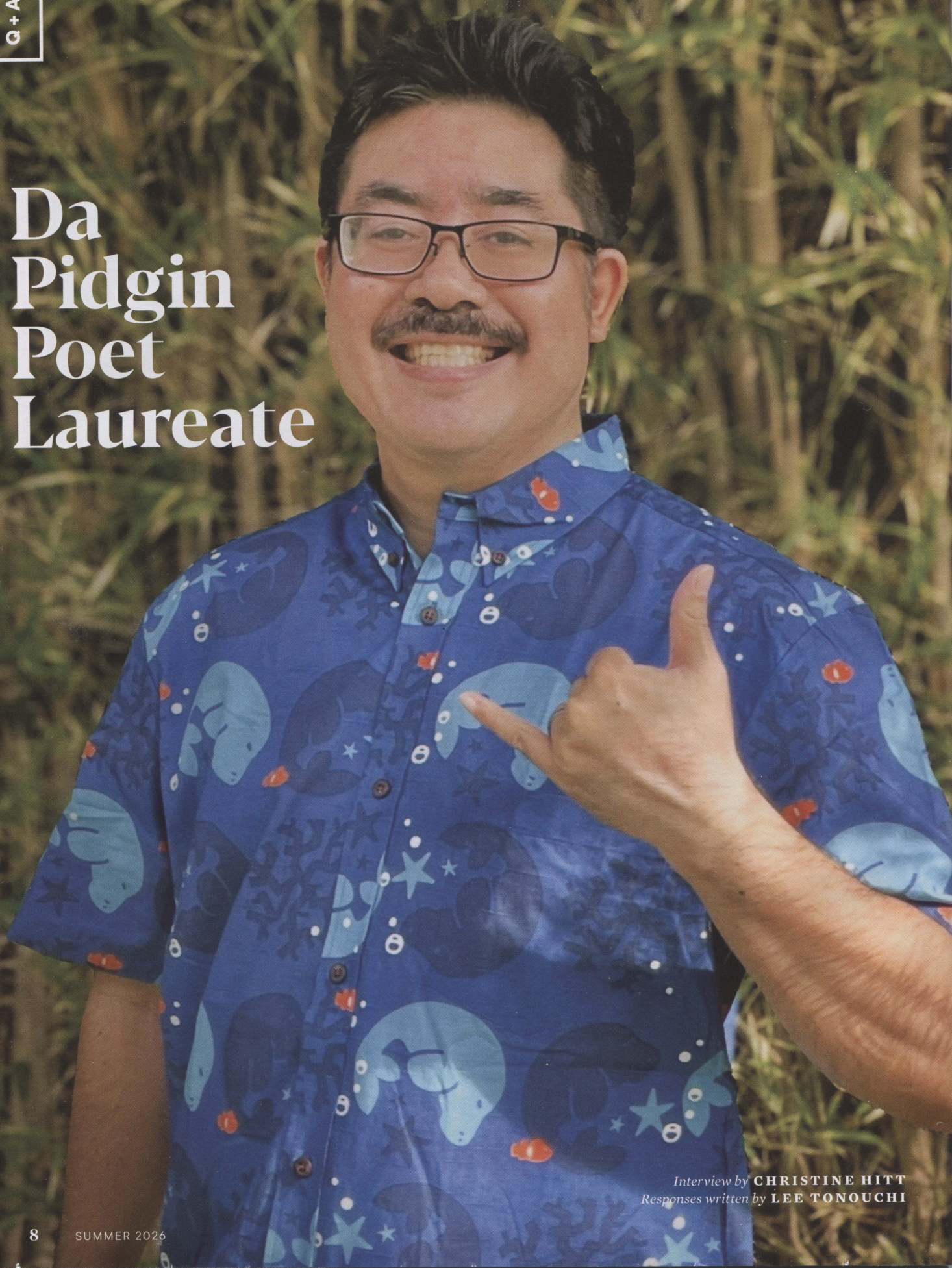


Da Pidgin Poet Laureate



Interview by **CHRISTINE HITT**
Responses written by **LEE TONOUCHI**

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In February, Lee Tonouchi (BA '95, MA '97, UH Mānoa), the acclaimed Pidgin writer known as “Da Pidgin Guerrilla,” was named Hawai‘i’s poet laureate by the Hawai‘i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, the Hawai‘i Council for the Humanities and the Hawai‘i State Public Library System.

His work spans books, poetry and plays, including two new projects debuting soon. His play “Our Okinawan Ohana: Stories We Share from Hawai‘i’s Uchinaanchu Community” arrives this fall from PlayBuilders of Hawai‘i, while Ohana Arts is adapting his children’s book “Okinawan Princess: Da Legend of Hajichi Tattoos” into a musical in 2027.

WHAT ROLE DID PIDGIN PLAY IN YOUR LIFE GROWING UP?

Like planny Local people Pidgin wuz my firstest language, but I nevah even know I talked Pidgin until teachers would “correck” me. Den I wuz force for not use Pidgin, cuz oddahwise teachers wuz going go all red pen crazy on top my papahs. But den in college at UH, aftah seeing Local literature for da first time, I started taking some creative writing courses so I could try write Pidgin. Den eventually I wuz all like, if I can do my creative stuff in Pidgin, hakum I no can do my critical stuff in Pidgin too? So I started doing my short response papahs in Pidgin, den my five-page papahs in Pidgin, den 30-page research papahs in Pidgin, eventually all my work, I did everyting all in Pidgin.

My tinkings wuz that da Pidgin talker stay perceive as being not intelligent as da English talker. So da way I saw ‘em wuz I had two choice den. I could either change myself or I could try change da perception. I wen decide for dedicate my life to trying for change people’s perceptions about Pidgin.

WHAT FIRST MADE YOU WANT TO ADVOCATE FOR PIDGIN?

Teachers used to tell me I write like how I talk. So I said, “Oh, das good ah!” Den dey said, “No, that’s bad.” I no could understand hakum I no could use words like da kine, bumbye, try like, hammajang. Cuz in da world around me, all these words wen exist. So writing always felt like wuz fo’ fake to me. An’den I remembah small kid time, when my Maui Grandma used to come visit O’ahu, she always wanted me for order her food for her whenever we ate out at restaurants cuz she told me she wuz shame of her Pidgin.

My Maui Grandma had so much for be proud of an’den. She wuz one plantation worker and she wuz one of only two women irrigators in all of Maui. And she got da job cuz she fought for ‘em, she had to ask for da job. So she wuz one very strong woman who advocated for herself. Seeing her feeling all shame li’dat, I remembah it made me feel really sad.

HOW DID YOUR TIME AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SHAPE YOUR ADVOCACY FOR PIDGIN?

Back in da ‘90s, I took English 256: Poetry and Drama from Rob Wilson. He no wuz from hea, but he felt wuz important for incorporate Hawai‘i literatures as part of his curriculum. Along with Shakespeare and Faulkner, he wuz also using one Local literature textbook called “The Best of Bamboo Ridge.” Inside dea we wen study one Pidgin poem called “Tutu on da Curb,” written by Eric Chock. For me wuz mind blowing. Wuz my first time seeing Pidgin in literature. I wuz all like, “Ho, get guys writing in Pidgin... and we studying ‘em in college... das means you gotta be smart brah for study Pidgin!” And das what started me on top my journey. All my oddah non-English major friends who went UH same time as me, dey went their whole college careers and dey nevah get no Local literature. So I wuz very fortunate I wen go take from da cool Professor.

DO YOU FEEL LIKE PERCEPTION TOWARD PIDGIN SPEAKERS HAS CHANGED SINCE YOU WERE A KID?

I tink so still get prejudice against Pidgin, but da ting stay mo’ covert now. Whereas back in da day wuz considered socially acceptable for be all overtly anti-Pidgin, li’dat.

IN WHAT SPACES WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE PIDGIN USED MORE?

Pidgin stay like gravy, brah. I like ‘em all ova!

BEING SELECTED AS HAWAII’S POET LAUREATE IS A HIGH HONOR. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO YOU?

Early in my writing career one famous Local writer who I wen look up to recommended I lose da Pidgin if I eva wanted for be successful. So I wuz all like should I change da way I write o’what? Cuz I really wen admire dis big time writer. So I thought about ‘em for two seconds den I said “NAH, I going show you, famous writer!” So what does being Hawai‘i’s Poet Laureate mean to me? It means I can tell that famous writer, “Wop yo’ jaws!” And I feel like I stay also representing da Pidgin people, and we showing alllll da naysayers. It’s not no can. It’s no... CAN!

WHAT WILL YOU BE DOING DURING THE THREE-YEAR TERM?

We stay slowly figuring out da plan. Generally I like work with da kine marginalized kine communities for help encourage people for find their voice. Cuz as one Pidgin poet I know how feels like for grow up and have oddah people tell you that your voice no stay good enough.

WHAT DO YOU WANT OTHER PIDGIN SPEAKERS OR WRITERS TO KNOW?

Lotta times people try position Pidgin against English. But just cuz you learn one language, no mean you gotta give up your oddah ones. Just remembah, da mo languages you know, da mo’powah to you!