

# Warming the Midwest with his Fiji grooves



**Pita Kotobalavu**

Pita Kotobalavu spends a lot of late nights in bars and clubs.

However, he rarely takes part in the festivities that bring most bar-goers out to those same destinations.

“No alcohol, no nothing. Clean,” Kotobalavu said of his usual nightlife regimen. It appears the Fiji native is just about his music. In fact, it’s his only profession, gigging more than 200 times a year — sure beats his days as a waiter, part-time mechanic and delivery man.

After years of musical exploration, including work with numerous musicians (including the late great Sakiusa Bulicokocoko) in the Fiji Islands and a long stint in Hawaii, Kotobalavu founded the reggae outfit Unity the Band when he moved to Oshkosh in 2003. His nomadic lifestyle, which also included residency in Madison and Chicago, came to a halt when he “fell in love” with Appleton two years later.

Being the vocalist in a reggae band, there’s little shock in discovering that one of Kotobalavu’s favorite all-time frontmen is reggae legend Bob Marley. However, he rounds out his top three with Mick Jagger and Elvis Presley, making his musical tastes as diverse as

his Irish, Fijian and Native American decent — all of which reflect on Unity’s music, especially 2011’s “Oceania.” The new album, released in March, is Unity’s most adamant crossover attempt to date, blending reggae with touches of blues, funk and rock.

With the album release, Kotobalavu and his band are also attempting to distribute a new music video each month, “hoping to open up our market a little bit more in the Fiji Islands, New Zealand and Australia.”

And though Kotobalavu said he has almost “traveled the whole world,” it’s evident that he hasn’t forgotten where he came from. Consider it a bonus that he likes where he is — and where he hopes he’s going.

Did you set out for the U.S. with the intention of creating a reggae band?

No, not at all. Music wasn’t really my forte. I mean, it was a hobby for me. I loved it with a passion, but I never ever thought I’d have a band because I was working, and I couldn’t find a job that could compensate me for taking care of me and my kids (Sebastian and Melanie). The only thing that I knew I was good at was music, so I went to that.

Why did you create the band?

Well, mostly from seeing what my uncle (who was a musician) did back in Fiji and being with some of my idols like Sakiusa. Having a band is working as a team to make beautiful music and you can take people’s personal feelings and put them together in a bowl and produce something beautiful. ... Music is a place where there’s no government, there’s no rules, there’s no laws. It’s just you and music and the world. That’s how I look at it.

You play reggae music, but there’s no ocean here, our sunlight is limited and it’s cold about nine months of the year. Why are you still in Appleton?

To tell you the honest truth, if it wasn’t for music, I would be back home. But I think that this is the best place for me, talking about my country and beautiful weather and the ocean so people can maybe visit my island one day and say, what a beautiful place. I’m representing my country and where I’m from. I’m very proud of where I’m from. Fiji Islands is me and that’s my culture and who I am. ... Reggae music takes people from the cold winter tundra to the summertime for four hours and we try to do that every night.

You mention the Fiji Islands often in your songs. How important is it for you to blend your heritage into your music?

It’s everything because that’s how I relate in life. Fiji is such a small country. When you wake up in the morning, the world is just that island. We don’t have the U.S. where you can go from one side to the other and drive across. We have a small island and everybody around it is your family, so that’s all I knew until I stepped out of the Fiji Islands and moved away and I realized how big the world was. But for us in the Fiji Islands, we’re very loving people. We’d do anything for another person in the Fiji Islands. That’s a way of life because we just look at this small island as this is our life.

We care about today, living happy and surviving one day at a time. That’s how Fiji is. When you go there, you’re lost in time.

Is that the same sense of community you find in Appleton? Appleton has its own culture. It’s very small, family-based, but in order for you to be welcomed into this city, you have to become their family. And family here has very strong bonds and there are certain rules that you have to abide by, and they’re simple rules — be

honest, hard working, just be a decent human being — and people will appreciate you.

Do you think you’d have more success in a warmer climate with your type of music?

I would. But then I wouldn’t be talking about beautiful sunny beaches. Living here in Wisconsin makes me appreciate where I’m from. It makes a big difference. Seeing the snow and the four seasons, it’s beautiful. People in my islands, some of them have never seen snow in their life. ... Living on a beach on an island, there’s a lot of reggae bands, but I always want to be different. So that’s what makes me different from everybody else.

There has been civil unrest in the Fiji Islands for the past decade, with a couple of coups taking place in that time. Has that ever deterred you from going back and visiting?

No, you know why? I’m a Fijian. It’s a small country. There’ll be unrest today and tomorrow. People will want the government back; they can take it, simple as that. But part of my music is talking about my people in Fiji. Right now, there’s a military government and I talk about freedom for my people and I stand for freedom and democracy in my country, but it doesn’t matter who’s in government in Fiji, it doesn’t change. It could be a military government, it could be a regular government — my people are still suffering, so there’s no

difference. So the only thing I can do is say what I feel like saying and it’ll be up to the people in Fiji if they want it. ... Our turn will come. Everything takes time.

Unity the band has won WAMIs, you’re working on music videos, and the band just released a new CD. Are you comfortable with your music career or are you looking for more?

We always want more. In every musician’s dream, we always want more. It’s a never-ending saga in music. We keep on writing more albums. We keep on striving for better music. As we evolve as the human race, you want more. Every band wants more.

Is this an all or nothing journey for you?

Yes. Music is my life and all the albums that we’ve done — there’s a message in all three albums — from “Liberation” to “In the Beginning” and now to this album, “Oceania.” I have something to say. Most people won’t say it, but the undertone of the music that I’ve written is trying to change people’s thought of mind to more peaceful ways instead of fighting. Now, a bullet claims a life every minute, every second of every day. ... If we try to change it, we’ll think more on a peaceful manner and probably achieve something better in the human race. That’s my journey and I’ll go down dying doing it. (Post Crescent, Wisconsin)

