

GUEST: TOM MOFFATT: A LIFE OF ENTERTAINMENT

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If Michael calls, I just took the update out and everything. Can you come up real fast? I just want the one that says, March 18th. Only rock and roll. I'll copy you on what I send him, okay? Thanks.

His life is on the walls and shelves of his office, celebrities who are close friends, acts he's presented to Hawaii, awards and memorabilia of a life immersed in entertainment. Coming up on Long Story Short, disc jockey, promoter, entertainer, Tom Moffatt.

Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox is Hawaii's first weekly television program produced and broadcast in high definition.

Aloha. I'm Leslie Wilcox. His career has spanned Elvis Presley in the 50s, the Hawaiian music renaissance feature Cecilio & Kaponu, Kalapana, and Country Comfort in the 70s, all the way to Bruno Mars today. But in the 60s, Tom Moffatt was one of the Poi Boys, a team of disc jockeys taking Hawaii by storm. They pulled off ridiculous, just wacky promotional stunts, and played the latest rock and roll hits from the continent.

The transgression went from KIKI to Mr. Kaiser at KHVH, and then to KPOA, where I hosted the Big 30 Review, which was a major radio show at the time. And Ron went with me there, and then we started KPOI. And that was when we really had a free hand in radio, and we became the first rock and roll radio station to broadcast twenty-four hours a day, with the Poi Boys.

How many Poi Boys were there?

Oh, five or six. And it rotated. But there was Ron Jacobs, and myself, and Tom Rounds and Don Tyler was a Poi Boy, and Sam Sanford was a Poi Boy, Bob the Beard Lowrie.

Jack Kellner was, as well.

Jack Kellner was, Dave—

Don Robbs.

—Donnelly was, Don Robbs. Oh, yeah; yeah. [CHUCKLE]

Those were great days of radio, when you didn't have corporate saying, You have to sound like the other stations.

No, we could do whatever we wanted. On the spur of the moment, we'd do crazy things. People would think they were planned, but they weren't.

What are some of the things you did? What do you remember most fondly?

What was the biggest stroke ...

Well, the biggest—

—of genius?

—thing that we did—this was planned. But Tom Rounds would stay awake for a week at the Wigwam store on Dillingham Boulevard, right by where Meadow Gold is. And he stayed awake for a week. Another time that I did—[CHUCKLE] ... they promised me a week in Las Vegas, so I would do this hang-a-thon from a car high above a used car lot on Nimitz Highway.

A hang-a-thon?

Yeah. So I would broadcast from a car ... five or six stories up, in this car, for I don't know how long. And this crane took me up. And we had a whole drama unfolding before it, but anyway, Jacobs was supposed to do it, and I came in on my white horse and rescued the event, and I will go up and stay when Jacobs chickened out. It was all planned. But I went up—this was not planned. I got up in this car, and I was looking for a week in Vegas, and signing meals. And while I was up there, I could pick meals, and they would send meals up to me from any restaurant in town. It was all set, and I was gonna do this hang-a-thon. Well, the State Safety Commissioner got involved, and threatened to pull the license on the crane company, unless they lowered the car. So I remember being up there, looking at all these mice running around, people, 'cause I was way up there. [CHUCKLE] And all of a sudden, I'm coming down. That's what happened. So I didn't get the trip to Vegas. [CHUCKLE]

Aw.

That one didn't work.

And your management really gave you carte blanche?

Oh, they did; yeah. Yeah. Sometimes, they didn't quite understand it, but they went along with it.

And the audience was just glued for the next move.

Oh, yeah.

Just waiting—

They never knew what—

—for something.

—was gonna happen. That was the charm about that radio station, is that people would tune in, and any time of the day or night, something bizarre could happen.

But the Poi Boys weren't just hanging from cranes and staying awake for a week. They were the ears of Hawaii, always on the lookout for the latest hits from the continent, and bringing those sounds to the local airwaves.

I remember the waiting every weekend ... was it once a year that you did the Song of the Year, and you did a countdown? And I always waited to find out what was the number one—

Oh, that was—

—song.

—Labor Day Weekend. We'd do a Marathon of Hits Countdown. And we had listeners starting in the summer sending in their votes. And we'd send something to some of the listeners and get them to send in their top five favorites. Then we'd tabulate them all, and play off the top three hundred hits of all time, starting Labor Day weekend, and ending up on Monday night. It was pretty wild. And people tuned in, talk about it, what's gonna be number one.

Yeah, it's sort of ... I mean, with the internet and all the engagement, I mean, it was like that without the internet then. People were—

Oh, yeah.

—back and forth, and talking, and—

Yeah.

—engaging all the time.

The phone was a great communicator for us. You could tell pretty much if a record was gonna happen. I answered the phone all the time. And if somebody would take the time to call for a record, you'd take another listen to it, or play it again, or ...

And you'd decide—

It's a great barometer.

—what to play, or the record companies told you what to—

No, no.

—play?

The records companies didn't. They would bring us the records, but we had a music department, and usually Tom Rounds, Jacobs, and I would sit in, and we'd listen to the records, and see what was happening nationally with them. And if it wasn't happening nationally, if it had a local sound, and we had a certain playlist that we played, but the jocks didn't have to follow a certain list. And we had a whole spindle full of records that were older records that we had the choice of playing that we'd play at a certain time. But we had this whole current playlist that we could play. And sometimes, if a record was hot, I'd play the same record two or three times in a show. It was like that hot. And you could do that.

You had such a large audience.

Yes.

And then, you had influence over the music to be played. So—

Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Tremendous power.

A lot of records broke here, before they broke on the mainland.

Is that because you guys noticed that this is really resonating?

Records took note of Hawaii, because there was no outside influence into our marketplace. Like Los Angeles or any major market had smaller cities in their area that might influence record sales. But we had none here. We were it. There was nobody outside of our perimeter. [CHUCKLE]

So great lab for—

Yeah.

—for music.

Yeah, yeah. So the record companies watched what was happening with our radio station, and watched what we were playing.

How long did the Poi Boy era last?

Well, we started in 1959. And I left KPOI. I went from disc jockey to music director, to program director, to GM vice president. It kinda lasted all the way through, but the heyday was in the 60s, when the Moose, Dave Donnelly, and Kellner, and Jacobs, and Rounds, and all of us were together having fun and ... those were the times.

Tom Moffatt's love for music and entertainment soon opened other doors for the affable deejay with the magical voice. He began working with local promoters, producing live shows featuring some of the most popular acts of his time, including our own homegrown talent.

During the time that I was at KIKI, Mr. Ralph Yempuku and Earl Finch, who had promoted stadium shows, state fair, and things like that, called me into their office and said, Look, we believe this new music is gonna happen, and you seem to know it better than anyone. We'll bring you in as a partner. And if the show makes money, you'll make money; if the show doesn't make money, it loses money, you won't lose anything. So it was the perfect opportunity for me. So I started working with Mr. Finch and Mr. Yempuku, and we put on thirty-some different shows at the Civic Auditorium, from Paul Anka, to Buddy Holly, Jerry Lee Lewis, Sam Cooke, you name it, anybody who was a young rock and roll singer, Eddie Cochran. Many of the people who are in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame came here for the Show of Stars.

What did you learn from the two older gentlemen?

Be conservative, be cautious, be careful, and learn how to sell your product. I learned that from them.

Be cautious with money, or with risk?

Yeah, with risk. Yeah. It's very easy to get in over your head in that business, or this business.

You got to know many of the local entertainers, as well as these big national stars.

Yeah; yeah.

Who were some of the people that made a big impression on you when you were in radio, in those days?

Well, Alfred, of course, did. Sterling Mossman, at the Barefoot Bar, at Queen's Surf. Let's see. So, The Alii's, Don Ho, of course. Don Ho came along ... at the latter days of KPOI. Dick Jensen. We recorded Dick Jensen as Lance Curtis.

Oh, really?

We thought he should have more of a Hollywood sounding name. [CHUCKLE] So we recorded him. I think it was at the KPOI studios. And we recorded quite a few artists here, local artists, that we put out as forty-five records.

And that was sort of a natural outgrowth of what you were doing as part of your radio job.

Yeah; yeah. Yeah.

Or did you do it on the side? Was it part of the radio—

No, it was on the—

—job?

—side.

But it was because you knew the people, and you knew the biz.

Yeah. And we'd play the records at KPOI, and the bands would come and play for us at different promotions. It kind of went hand-in-hand. And we did this show, they'd sing at the Funny Farm over in the American Chinese Clubhouse every Friday night. And one summer, a restaurant had folded in Waikiki, and was available, and so we opened a teenaged nightclub called Fat City. It was the hottest thing of the summer. Just served soft drinks. There was always a line up right on Kalakaua, where the Hyatt is now. [CHUCKLE]

And that was just started by your gang?

Yeah; yeah. We started that. And we started a company called Arena Associates to promote shows at what would become the Blaisdell Arena, then the Honolulu International Center Arena. I remember we used seed money from the Funny Farm and Fat City. I remember this scrapbook came out on the Beatles. And I put a station logo on it, and offered it on the air for sale for, what, fifty—I forget what it was. And we sold those, and made a profit on that. And all that money, we put together to promote the first show at the Blaisdell Arena, the HIC Arena.

HIC.

Yeah. Honolulu International Center. And that was April 10, 1964. That was the first show. And we brought in ten acts out of a big show that was performing in San Francisco.

Do you remember who they were?

Paul Revere and the Raiders, Ray Peterson ... Teddy Randazzo. Chuck Berry was supposed to come in, but he had a incident where he was on parole. And he was all set to come in, and then his parole officer wouldn't let him out of the continental United States. So I called Teddy Randazzo in New York, who was in a recording session, and I said, Hey, we need some help, can you make it? So he dropped everything and came over, and took Chuck Berry's place. Chuck Berry was huge, but Teddy was huge also. Jan and Dean, and people like that.

That was a big start.

Yeah, it was. It was a great show. And we sold tickets for next to nothing, and we did two shows in one day. I think tickets were ninety cents, for ten acts.

And for many decades since, Tom Moffatt has brought heavy hitters from the entertainment world to Hawaii, allowing us to enjoy the likes of Frank Sinatra, The Eagles, Michael and Janet Jackson, the Rolling Stones, and Sir Elton John. If a big act was playing Hawaii, they were probably here because of Tom Moffatt Productions. But if you think that the life of a concert promoter is all glamour and celebrity, you'd be mistaken.

Throughout your career, you've been the good guy.

[CHUCKLE]

You're the one that doesn't get judgments against him for promotion, and you have contract handshakes.

M-hm; yeah. I've done a lot of shows just by a handshake.

What is your life like the week before a big concert? What is it like to be in the office with you?

Well, it's last minute changes in arrival times, and rehearsals, and sound checks and food demands.

Okay.

[CHUCKLE]

That's something I'd love to hear about, food demands.

Uh-huh.

Is it true that some of these over the top requests are just kind of crazy?

They are. They are. It's more expensive now. [CHUCKLE] The first time I brought the Rolling Stones in, we had a drinking fountain back stage. That was it. That was it. It just wasn't thought of. The performers came in, and did their show, and left.

Now?

Well, now, it's—whew. You've got breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And dressing rooms full of goodies, and ...

And they're very specific about vegan this, and certain brands, and—

Oh, yeah. And you get a vegetarian, and you got that whole thing going. They want fish in one day, chicken on another day, meat on another day. It's all specified in the riders. And the riders are getting thicker and thicker. [CHUCKLE]

What else has changed about bringing acts in?

The technical has gotten, like, wow. [CHUCKLE] I refer to the Stones. The first time they came in, we used what they called stage lights that rolled on. This is from the old vaudeville days, and they were a bank of lights that you rolled on and off the stage. And we had overhead spotlights in the Blaisdell. Those were there. But that's what the Rolling Stones used the first time, were these roll-on stage lights, and spotlights overhead.

How was Mick Jagger to work with?

Great; they were great. This was the last date of their US tour, and they came here, and they were looking forward to it. We put 'em at the Kahala, and they were very happy and easy to work with. Unfortunately, they had in their rider where you had to hire fifty uniformed city policemen. And wherever they did this, even with the policemen, kids would mob the stage. Well, here, our young people respected authority, at least around the stage. They made noise, but they sat in their seats. And the Stones weren't used to this. And they did a twenty-seven-minute show, because they didn't know what to do between songs. Where normally, it would be two or three minutes of pandemonium with kids rushing the stage, it didn't happen here. [CHUCKLE]

That's amazing. And that's ended now. People do storm the stage.

Can you imagine a twenty-seven-minute concert now, with a major act?

[CHUCKLE] But we didn't get one complaint. And the reviewer in the Star Bulletin mentioned twenty-seven minutes. And I still have a tape of their show. I have a tape of the show, and I timed it; it's twenty-seven minutes. [CHUCKLE]

So, did you have to rush up to conclude the show, not really ready for that?

No, no. No, I remember Mick Jagger saying, Wonderful time here, and this may be our last concert, ever. [CHUCKLE] Ever; and the drum roll goes [CHUCKLE] when he said that. [CHUCKLE] Oh, it was funny.

Speaking of drama.

Yeah, it was. It was hilarious. But not one complaint. The kids just screamed all the way through. The Rolling Stones were on stage, and that's all they wanted.

If you were to ask Tom Moffatt to name the favorite chapter of his career, he might mention the musical renaissance of the 1970s. It was a time when local fans stood in long lines outside the Top of Da Shop—remember how small the room was when you finally got in there? Territorial Tavern, or even the Monarch Room at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

Who were the local artists that you most enjoyed working with, and had the most success with?

Well, the Royal Drifters were one of the first local groups. Dick Jensen, Robin Luke, Ronny Diamond; they were all big singers in the 50s and the early 60s. And we used them as often as possible on The Show of Stars at the Civic Auditorium, and whenever we could at the new arena. I remember the first time that the Rolling Stones came to town we put Dick Jensen on as the opening. Lance Curtis as the opening group, opening performer.

Lance Curtis.

And he danced like Michael Jackson. This was before Michael Jackson. He could dance.

Didn't you record Keola and Kapono Beamer in Honolulu City Lights?

Yes, I did. I had just left radio. I'd finally decided that I'd gone through a couple of owners at KPOL, and a third one was coming in, and I decided it was time to take hiatus from radio. So I started my own record company. And in the door,

walked Kapono Beamer one day, and said that they weren't happy with wherever they were in recording, and so I got the two of them in, and talked to them about it. And I said, Why don't you guys go home and write, and let's do a record together, an album. So I gave them some seed money to go out and write. And Keola called me and said, I think I've got a song. He was living up at Alewa Heights. I'll never forget it. And I went up to Alewa Heights to hear this song, just when it was getting dusk, and that time of the evening when it was getting dark, and the lights were coming on. And he played for me Honolulu City Lights. And I knew we had something. So that was my first recording endeavor, really, on my own. And we came out with Honolulu City Lights, got Teddy Randazzo to help with the arrangements.

And for decades, I believe that was the highest selling local album of all time. Is it still?

Oh, I don't know, with Iz around. [CHUCKLE]

And I think Kealii Reichel might have had a—

Oh, yes, yes.

A really big seller.

But not that long ago, a few years back, I think it was the Star-Bulletin and the Advertiser, and Honolulu Magazine came out with a list of the best albums. Not best selling, just the best albums, Hawaii albums of all time. And number one was Honolulu City Lights. That was a thrill. It's still my favorite. [CHUCKLE] I still love that song.

Me too. Actually, that came out when I was seeing a lot of friends off to college at the airport.

Yeah.

And it was always playing in the airport then, and they were always crying. And those were the days where there was no security.

Yes.

You went to the gate to see people off.

You could go to the gate with *lei*'s. Yeah.

And local style, you didn't bring just *lei*'s, you brought *bento*'s and food, and everybody had *luau*'s. And that song was just playing—

Oh, yeah.

—almost continuously. And if it wasn't, somebody was asking that it be played.

Yeah. So that's such a cultural memory in Hawaii. That was your first, ever, recorded song.

Yes. Well, I'd done some singles and so forth. Once, I put out an album, a trumpet album, but that was with other people involved. But this was the first one I did on my own, was Honolulu City Lights. At the same time, I had a girl that worked for me just as I was leaving KPOI. And she said, You gotta go out and see this group in Aina Haina.

Randy Borden?

No.

No? Okay; who?

Country Comfort.

Country Comfort.

Yeah.

Playing at the old—

At The Sty.

—M's Ranch House? Oh, The Sty.

No, this was at The Sty. It wasn't Aina Haina, it was beyond Aina Haina, at The Sty.

Niu; that's right.

Yeah. And I heard these guys, and I went out and saw what was happening with the audience, and what they had going for them. And so I finished off an album that—this was just before Honolulu City Lights, that my partner Irv Brinski [PHONETIC] had started. And I finished off the album, and we put it out together. Then after that, I left out on my own. But Country Comfort was one of my favorite albums. I also did an album by The Surfers at that time called Shells, which I still think is one of the best Hawaiian albums ever produced.

Did you pretty much have your pick of people wanting to make records?

Yes. Yeah, there was a lot of talent around.

Those are some—

There was a lot of 'em coming up.

—wonderful groups.

And The Alii's, we recorded The Alii's and presented them. And I opened the showroom at the Outrigger Hotel in 1968.

All of these enterprises, these artistic enterprises, and creative enterprises ... to really be stable, and to make a go of them, you have to be good at money, you have to be good at restraint, and you have to be good a planning. Did you have that all along? Or did you have to learn that the hard way?

I'm still learning. [CHUCKLE] Still learning. But I've got good accountants around me. Yeah.

And you're not by nature prone to take unreasonable risk.

No. We put quite a bit of money into some of the recording projects, but I believed in them, and it turned out okay. Opening the Outrigger main showroom was kind of a gamble. The room that was sitting there was a convention room that they never used. And Tommy Sands had come to Hawaii, and was looking for a place to work, and so we opened that showroom. And it's been going ever since. After Tommy, then I kinda drifted off, but ... and another time, when the Beamers got going with Honolulu City Lights, there was another room that was sitting empty, which we opened as the Reef Showroom at the Reef Hotel. The Ocean Showroom at the Reef Hotel, that's what we called it. I put the Beamers in there. That was kind of a gamble at the time, but I felt, you know, this record was happening. So we opened the showroom with Keola and Kaponu Beamer, and Andy Bumatai as the opening comedian. It was very successful.

With Tom Moffatt's reputation and success, you might think that his son would be eager to learn the business.

You have one son.

Uh-huh.

Who's not a promoter.

No. No, he's a—

Because he saw the stress involved.

[CHUCKLE] Yes, I think so.

What does he do?

He's in landscaping in Hilo. He lives in Hilo. He likes the feeling of Hilo.

So he's kinda like his dad, in liking the country?

Uh-huh. But when Dad comes over with a show, I put him to work. When he graduated, I promised to take—he's a surfer, take him to Surfer's Paradise in Australia. So while there, I took him to Sydney and met a good friend of mine, Gary Van Egmond, who was promoting a concert at the time, several of them with the same artist. I can't mention the artist, because he's a good friend of mine now, and he's doing fantastic now. But at that particular time, he wasn't selling tickets. And I went to see him, and introduced my son to him, and he was getting these calls from different box areas, and what the ticket sales were in different areas of Australia. He had a couple dates in New Zealand with the same artist. And his face was getting whiter and whiter, because they weren't selling. And I think my son watched this, and decided this is not the business he wanted to be in. [CHUCKLE]

Yeah. Watching you do it, it must have looked kinda easy.

Yeah; yeah. Didn't see the stress sometimes you feel in an office when you're getting box office reports.

Was there a time you considered getting out, because maybe the risk was too high, or you know, the cost was too high in some way?

No, I've never felt that way. I always have been very optimistic about this business, that people want to be entertained, they want to see live concerts, they want to go out and be there, and experience that music firsthand.

Would you have done anything another way along the way?

Well, I think I was making big money in working in an automobile factory first, in Detroit, and if they hadn't gone on strike, I might still be there. [CHUCKLE]
'Cause I was making good money.

Well, later—

But then, I saw—

—Detroit was to be a music center, too.

Oh, yeah. When I was going to work in the Dodge factory at Hamtramck, I took the bus down Grand Boulevard, in Detroit, and went past, every day, coming and going, what would soon be the site of Motown. [CHUCKLE]

Wow. So it could have worked out, if you'd stayed. Except, you would have been a lot colder.

[CHUCKLE] But if they hadn't gone on strike everybody was making great money, but they went on strike at Dodge, and I said, Wow, this isn't the life for me.

Do you see yourself retiring one day?

I can't see it, really. I enjoy what I do. I don't feel like it's going to work. I think if it gets to the point where I'm like, going to work, and having to do it, I may think about that. I love music, I love the people involved in it, and I just love to see a happy audience and a happy performer.

In Tom Moffatt's career, spanning more than five decades, he's been a part of our lives, first, as a radio deejay, then as a promoter. It's likely that nearly everyone in Hawaii has either seen a Tom Moffatt production, or heard about the one that they missed. For Long Story Short, and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou.

For audio and written transcripts of this program, and all episodes of Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox, visit pbshawaii.org.

When the Hawaiian renaissance in music came around with groups like Olomana, Country Comfort, Kalapana, and of course, Cecilio & Kapono, I got involved with all of them. Especially Cecilio & Kapono at the beginning. I got a call from their manager, Bill Thompson, and they were rehearsing their firsts Columbia album in Colorado. They were skiing and rehearsing, and performing. So I flew over to see them, and they had some of the top sidemen from Hollywood doing the album with them. So I got all excited, and when they came back to Honolulu, I put them in a concert at the Waikiki Shell. We did, I think, about three to four thousand people. But when the album came out shortly thereafter, they kind of introduced songs from the album that night and sang them live, but when the album came out, wow, everything happened.