

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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CHA THOMPSON:

And if you said you were from Hawai'i, that sold. You almost didn't have to do anything. And so, we started traveling around the world. And when we came home, people wanted shows. We actually had to decide: We gotta get off the stage, you cannot be producer, director, business manager, choreographer, which is what we did. And oh, god; try do the books. Hello.

JACK CIONE:

I just had them open their kimonos to add a little more to the show.

And what were the skaters wearing?

The skaters wore clothes, but the three girls that stood there on the ice—

Oh; I see.

They were the nudes on ice. That was my hook. Every show needs a hook, you know.

Yeah; because you're a marketer, too.

Yes.

LESLIE WILCOX:

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

TOM MOFFATT:

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.

The world of bright lights and big stages holds a certain allure. But only a few carve out a successful business in the grueling entertainment world. Meet three of Hawai'i's showbiz masterminds, next, on Long Story Short.

One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawai'i's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Show business can be fun, exciting, and profitable. But there are no guarantees. Yet, Polynesian entertainment company co-owner Cha Thompson, nightclub owner Jack Cione, and the late radio deejay turned concert promoter Tom Moffatt excelled in this risky industry. These three people are very different from each other. In common, they all trusted their artistic tastes and business instincts to entertain Hawai'i for decades.

First, we turn to our 2008 conversation with Cha Thompson. In the early 70s, she was a nineteen-year-old hula dancer traveling the world for performances, when she was suddenly put in charge of a popular Polynesian dance group. Cha Thompson and her husband Jack soon founded Tihati Productions, now one of the largest and longest-running entertainment companies in Hawai'i.

I was with the original Puka Puka Otea group that Elaine Frisbie from Rarotonga ran. And we were the only one in the State to do Polynesian everything. And then, when she was leaving, I was her lead dancer, and she simply said: Here, take it and run. And at nineteen, excuse me, I knew nothing about business. And so, you know, when I married my husband, I was working in medical records at Queen's Medical Center, and he was working in reservations at Hawaiian Airlines. And people started calling us. And I'm telling you, it was so successful, because tourism at the time was the thing, and everybody wanted a show.

What year was that? What general decade?

1969, '70. And if you said you were from Hawai'i, that sold. You almost didn't have to do anything. And so, we started traveling around the world. And when we came home, people wanted shows. We actually had to decide: We gotta get off the stage, you cannot be producer, director, business manager, choreographer, which is what we did. And oh, god; try do the books. Hello.

You danced. What did your husband do?

He was the emcee. And his very first thing to do was, he came to Canada when I was with the World's Fair, and I was a dancer. And he was one of the few Polynesians who could speak English. So, when our emcee got sick, he said: Give it to Thompson. And he said: I'm not an entertainer. You know. And in fact, just before we left, he said: I'm part-Samoan, surely I can learn the knife dance. I always thought he was too handsome to be a knife dancer. He didn't look as wild and savage. But he learned it, and became a knife dancer. Terrible knife dancer in the beginning; can't hold a candle next to my son, who's a world title holder. But that's how we started. We had

to get off stage, and get a good attorney, get a great CPA, and we gave up our careers to run the business.

You were singled out to be the one to take over the dancing troupe.

Yes.

Why?

You know, I wonder if because shucks, I was always vocal. I always had an opinion. I wonder. And many of the Polynesian girls were more reserved. I always had the plan, I always had the plan.

And it was a good plan?

It was a good plan. I think survival mode; always in a survival mode, you know. And I think that's what my children detect. Like: Mom, oh. You know, always plan for tomorrow, save, you know, the rainy day is coming, and always dress well if you get into an accident and make sure you have clean underwear. And you know, the house must be clean. Visitors will come, they'll judge us. I always felt like I was being judged; always. People started taking us seriously when we would sit on business boards, or when we contributed in a business fashion. But yeah, I mean, you're Polynesian; surely you can't be too smart. And entertainment; heavens, you must fool around you must do drugs. Well, we did neither, and it paid off. It paid off for us.

I sense you're a good negotiator. I'm trying to figure out what your style is.

It's the Pake blood, Leslie; it's the Chinese blood. And the funny thing about it is, in entertainment, they will say: Oh, come and put on a show, or come and dance for us, and you can eat all you want, and you can drink. I don't drink. I'm really thin; I don't eat that much. I need something else. And money was the thing I needed. But we had to earn it, we had to earn it. They didn't take us seriously, you know.

I know you brought in some major acts.

Yes.

And you developed major talent.

I think we're known as a Polynesian revue. And I don't know that many people know that Tihati Productions has a vast department that brings in contemporary acts. Like, we brought in Lionel Richie, and Cyndi Lauper. And we also do thematic parties. You know, we'll prepare a whole Raiders of The Lost Ark, or Aloha in a volcano. So, we do

many things. But I think they still think of me as the hula girl. I mean, maybe, because then they'll say: Oh, you know, you run that hālau. And I say: No, I'm not a kumu, I don't have a hālau. But Tihati Productions, they think of as a Polynesian revue.

You've had to really strike a balance between Polynesian authenticity and entertainment. How have you worked that out?

I decided early on not to educate them, rather to entertain them, but to not sell myself and not give them what is real. Any Tihati revue that you see will have real flowers, we'll use real ti leaf skirts, we do authentic numbers and sing it in the native tongues. You know, Tahitian, Samoan, Fijian, and all of my instructors are from those islands, Hawaiian. So, I never felt that tourism was a threat to me. In fact, when some people might have thought, Oh, that's a sell-out, she's worked in Waikīki for thirty-five years, you know, why isn't she with us?, I would say, Well, tourism dollars sent all my kids to college, and I never felt that I wasn't doing exactly what is me. You know, I believe God gave me a gift in my roots and my heritage, and I share it. And lucky for me, tourism is Hawai'i's number-one industry, and they'll always need the hula girl, and the steel guitar, and the fire knife dancer. And so, I think I'm here to stay.

With clear vision, quick reflexes, and a tenacious attitude, Cha Thompson and her husband Jack built a respected, long-running entertainment business.

Our next showbiz mastermind is also a longtime entrepreneur. Jack Cione first gained notoriety in the 60s with live shows that were new to Honolulu at the time—nude entertainers and bottomless wait staff. He was fired up to put on his own dance productions after seeing what he called a lousy show at the old Forbidden City Nightclub in Kaka'ako. Here, from our conversation in 2014, Jack Cione remembers talking to the Forbidden City's manager about organizing his first shows there.

I just told him how bad his show was, and he said: You want to do a show for me? I said: Yeah, I'll do a show for you, I have nothing to do. He said,: How much is it gonna cost? I said: I'll do a show for you for nothing. I just need something to do. So, I did a show at the Forbidden City. And I did two shows that made a lot of money. And then, I did an ice show. First time we had an ice show at the Forbidden City. I called it Nudes on Ice.

So, you put in an ice skating rink?

Yeah; it was about twice the size of this table. Portable. And two skater friends of mine from the mainland, I brought them over and said: Come and skate; a paid vacation, two weeks. So, they came over. And I had the Japanese girls, and I used them as showgirls. And I talked three of the Japanese girls into going topless. I just had them open their kimonos to add a little more to the show.

And what were the skaters wearing?

The skaters wore clothes, but the three girls that stood there on the ice—

Oh; I see.

They were the nudes on ice. That was my hook. Every show needs a hook, you know.

Yeah; because you're a marketer, too.

Yes.

So, now you're really kinda dealing in a different kind of venue.

Right. And there were no nightclubs having any nudity. It was against the law.

Now, you already lied about your age, but now you're talking about breaking the law.

Well, there were no laws. Hawaiian dancers were topless.

Throughout history.

Right. And so, what was the law? What was the big deal? So, the next show I did was complete nude show. I brought burlesque in. It wasn't nude; it was just topless. The girls then had to wear pasties and silk bras. But it eventually evolved. And every time we would do that, they would come and arrest me.

You're saying this like this is, you know, just part of doing business. And what was the charge? Was it lewdness, open lewdness?

Lewd and lascivious conduct.

How did you feel about that?

Well, they'd arrest me, and I'd say: Excuse me, can I go to the restroom? And I'd run in my office and I'd call the TV and the newspaper, and I'd stay there until they all got to the club.

So, you're actually enjoying this.

Oh, loving it. And the next morning, it was in the papers and it was on TV.

Was that part of being a showman?

Yes. And business increased. People would see that. Oh, look, arrested, nude. We gotta go see that at Forbidden City.

And how did your new wife think about this?

Well, she didn't particularly like it. But it was making lots of money. And so, we opened that club, then we opened another one. I ended up with twelve bars here.

And how many arrests?

Oh, gosh; I was arrested so many times, but not once conviction.

Because as you said, the laws hadn't caught up with this business activity.

Right. We went topless, then we went bottomless, and then we went totally nude. We used to have a businessman's lunch at The Dunes.

Back when three martinis were tax deductible; right?

Right. And it was all businessmen. And the show was a striptease show. And these secretaries said: We're so tired of coming with our boss; why don't you put a naked man on stage for us? And I just happened to say: Well, why don't you get me a reservation for fifty ladies, and I'll have a naked man for you. That's how it started.

And did you get a reservation for fifty?

Oh, gosh; they called about two weeks later. They said: We have your fifty; you're gonna have a naked man? And I said: Yes. Well, by the time the two weeks came, they had two hundred reservations. That filled up my room. They kept out my men customers. The ladies took all the seats.

And did you have your naked waiter in line?

No.

No?

I didn't have any.

How do you hire a naked waiter?

In those days, this was now 1973, and there were no such a thing as Chippendales and men strippers. But I had a beach house in Hale'iwa that I was renting to five surfers. And they were behind on their rent. So, I called them and said: You guys gotta pay the rent, or you've gotta come in and do me a favor. They said: What is it? I said: Well, you gotta come to The Dunes, Friday, and you've got to drop your pants on stage. Oh, hell, yeah; we'll do that. Those women stayed all day. We had the biggest bar business I ever did that afternoon. They all drank, drank, and the surfers were enter—

Paraded.

Paraded, without their pants. So, when I saw that, I thought: Oh, this is a goldmine. So, in a week's time, I told the gals; I said: We're gonna have waiters every day.

Instead of waitresses?

Instead of waitresses.

Because the women were the ones who were paying more money.

Yes.

As clients.

That's how it happened.

And people keep coming back?

Oh; unreal. Four hundred lunches, Monday through Friday.

I just sense that your guiding force is money and showbiz. But you weren't really into the flesh stuff of it all?

No. Nightclub business is not an easy business. But I stayed the straight line, and did it as a business. I don't drink; I never did drink. And so, people would want to buy me a drink. I said: You know, I'm in the business to sell this; I don't drink it.

Jack Cione is a showbiz mastermind who went with his gut. He knew what he liked, saw what worked, and gave people what they wanted.

So did our next guest. Much has been said about the late Tom Moffatt's career, first as a pioneering rock and roll radio deejay who introduced Hawai'i to Elvis Presley, then as a promoter of big name concerts, bringing everyone from The Eagles to Bruno Mars to the islands. But let's not forget Tom Moffatt's work with local acts, especially during the

Hawaiian music renaissance in the 1970s. In our 2011 conversation, he recounts his work with Keola and Kapono Beamer on a recording that still strikes a chord here at home, and beyond.

I had just left radio. I'd gone through a couple of owners at KPOI, and a third one was coming in, and I decided it was time to take a 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 out 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 'Ālewa Heights; I'll never forget. And I went up to 'Ālewa Heights to hear the song. It was 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?

I don't know, with Iz around.

And I think Keali'i Reichel might have had a really big seller.

Oh, yes; yes. But not that long ago, few years back, I think it was the Star Bulletin or the Advertiser, and Honolulu Magazine came out with a list of the best albums. Not best-selling, just the best albums, Hawai'i albums of all time. And number one was Honolulu City Lights. That was a thrill. It's still my favorite. 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 the airport then, and they were always crying. Those were the days where there was no security.

Yes.

You went to the gate to see people off.

You could go the gate with leis; yeah?

And local style, you didn't bring just leis; you brought bentos, and food.

Yes; uh-huh.

And everybody had lū'aus, and that song was just playing—

Oh, yeah.

--almost continuously. And if it wasn't somebody was asking for it to be played.

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

Yes. 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 'Āina Haina.

Randy Borden?

No.

No? Okay; who?

Country Comfort.

Country Comfort.

Yeah.

Playing at the old—

At The Sty.

--M's Ranch House?

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

Niu; that's right.

Yeah. And I heard these guys. 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 Peninsky 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.

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, Ronnie Diamond; they were all big singers in the 50s and 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. Remember the first time that the Rolling Stones came to town, I 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.

You know, 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 at planning.

Uh-huh.

Did you have that all along, or did you have to learn that the hard way?

I'm still learning. Still learning. But I 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 they turned out okay. Opening the Outrigger main showroom was kind of gamble. It was a room that was sitting there was a convention room that they never used. And Tommy Sands had come to Hawai'i, and was looking for a place to work. And so, we opened that showroom. And it's been going ever since, after Tommy and I kinda drifted off. 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 Kapono Beamer, and Andy Bumatai as the opening comedian. It was very successful.

Was there a time you considered getting out, because maybe the risk was too high, or 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.

The concert promoter, the nightclub entrepreneur, and the Polynesian entertainment company co-owner; three masterminds in showbiz who trusted their tastes and instincts to entertain the islands. After months of declining health, Tom Moffatt left us in 2016. What an honor to revisit his tremendous career. And we thank Jack Cione and Cha Thompson for their savvy business stories. Mahalo to you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

CHA THOMPSON:

You learn that from Kalihi. Somebody puts you down and, ah, you know, I could do something better than they could. I knew I could. I don't know how this is gonna sound, but what was important is, you gotta know how to beef, quite frankly.

You can beef?

You can beef?

Yeah, man.

You're so elegant.

Yeah, man. Or at least, I used to a lot. And you know, when you come from a large family, nobody wants to beef with you. 'Cause in the housing, families fight families. I mean, I know it sounds imbecilical, but we did.

Did you beef boys, too?

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. Most of the boys didn't want to take me on, though. I had brother, big brothers.

LESLIE WILCOX:

I mean, you were just a kid.

JACK CIONE:

Yeah.

Playing at nightclubs.

I did.

What time did you go to sleep?

Well, I changed my age. I was twenty then. 'Cause I had a mustache at fourteen, I didn't look like a high school student. And I was making seventy-five dollars a week. That was good money.

And how did you keep up with school, when you were actually working in the city?

Yeah. Well, I didn't keep up with school. That was the sad part. I remember one day, a teacher said to me: Jackie Cioni, you're gonna be a bum; you're gonna be a bum if you don't learn Algebra and English. And I said: Get out of my face, honey; I make seventy-five bucks a week; what are you making? Schoolteachers made thirty-five dollars a week.

Ouch!

TOM MOFFATT:

I introduced Elvis Presley. The place went crazy. It was so exciting.

Really high decibels?

Yeah; yeah.

Shrieky.

Yeah. And there he was, just a microphone, and a simple sound system. But he held that audience.

And when had you met him before that?

Well, the day before, Ron Jacobs and I ... Ron figured this one out. Do something different. And we'd me the Colonel, and we'd kinda hinted there might be something like this in the works. And Don Tyler was one of our guys at KPOI, and we dressed him up to look like Elvis. Ron had his convertible, a Ford convertible, hardtop convertible, top went down. And got a fellow who looked like Colonel Parker, and Ron driving. And we had it all planned. I'm on the radio. From the moment Elvis arrived, I'm on the radio playing nothing but Elvis records. And I did this all morning, into the afternoon. So, I kinda planted it; well, we understand that Elvis is heading for Kailua, for people to be

out in the streets looking for Elvis, and drive down the streets, and people are screaming. And we did this in different neighborhoods.

Did you get any fallout from it?

Well, we got back to the studio. By then, I'd played Elvis for six straight hours, at least. It was mid-afternoon, and we were patting ourselves on the back. And we get the message from our news guy that Colonel Parker wants to see you guys downstairs, immediately.

Dun-da-dun-da.

And we looked at each other. We wanted to escape. So, we went downstairs and there's guards at the elevator. We went down one floor. And they took us into Colonel Parker's suite. We didn't know what to expect. Colonel said: Boys, that was a pretty good promotion you did. Oh, my gosh! Oh, and here's Elvis. In walked Elvis. And that's the first time I'd met Elvis.

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