

**GUEST: MARLENE SAI 1**

LSS 304 (LENGTH: 26:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 8/18/09

So now, this Kainoa. [PIANO] I have to honestly say that I have never learned the words, because I believe that your recording is classic. No one else should have to ever record it again; and yet, at the same time, we do want the song to live. And that's why this is such a great night, because we get to do it just one more time, and I get to play for you.

Yes; that's my act.

**When you think of walking through Waikiki at night, what images come to mind? Maybe traffic congestion, street vendors? Well, how about live music? Marlene Sai grew up in the golden age of Hawaiian music, a time when Kalakaua Avenue was full of the songs and voices that beckoned the world to the romance of Hawaii. Marlene entered that magical world at the early age of eighteen, and never looked back.**

**Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to PBS Hawaii's Long Story Short. There are only a handful of true divas in Hawaiian music, women who wrap their powerful voices with grace, elegance, and beauty. You can add to the list, Marlene Sai. This product of Kaimuki and the Kamehameha School is quite comfortable in a business setting; but she was destined first to be a singer, an actor, even to inhabit the role of queen. This regal performer started out life with the most undignified of nicknames.**

**You know, one time, I was kind of on the fringe of watching what you were doing, and uh, and somebody called you Goofy, and I was just offended on your behalf.**

[chuckle]

**Little did I know that all of your friends and family call you Goofy.**

Yeah; I'm Goofy.

**Why is that? How did that get started?**

Oh, gosh. There is a story to that. When I was little, I had very curly, curly hair, and as my parents would say the Hawaiians would always comment, and they would say, Oh. And the older folks would say, Pupuka, referring to me. Instead of saying, Oh, she's cute, oh, she's pretty, oh, she's this, they would say, pupuka. Pupuka means goofy.

**Because they didn't want you to get conceited?**

No, because that's the way Hawaiians are; you don't compliment in that fashion. So you say the opposite.

**You say the opposite.**

You say the opposite. So as time went on, and of course, it just kind of stuck, and the personality became goofy oftentimes, you know.

**[chuckle]**

And of course, my father would always say, Oh, gosh, she's so goofy. Well, it was he who kind of left me with that uh, nickname. But then our entire family, we all have nicknames, you know. I have siblings; I have three brothers, a sister, and myself. I'm—

**Okay; what are the—**

—right in the middle.

**What are the nicknames?**

My oldest brother Ronald, his name is Jiggy.

**Jiggy?**

Jiggy. And he works for Kamehameha Schools; he's a retired fire captain, and he's on the gate. So you drive in, you say, Hi, Jigs.

**[chuckle]**

My second brother Dennis, he's retired from the telephone company; and his nickname is Big Head.

**Oh-oh.**

Because when he was born, his head was a little bigger than the rest of his body. But then as he grew up, they all kind of blended in together. And, of course, then it's me. And my sister just below me, her name is Yvonne ... Peewee.

**Does that mean she was big, or she was small?**

She was tiny. The story goes that they could fit her in a shoebox, she was so small. And 'til today, she still is very tiny. And she still works at Kamehameha Schools. And my kid brother, Gary, retired from the telephone company, he loved Hopalong Cassidy. So his nickname became Hopalong.

**[chuckle] And nowadays, the new generation probably wonders ...**

Yeah.

**What is that?**

Yeah; oh, yeah.

**You know, you lived in Kaimuki.**

Right.

**Nowadays, we would consider that town, but in those days, it was a bedroom community to—**

Oh, yeah.

**I mean, what was it like living in Kaimuki in those days? Because now, it's such prime real estate, because it's so close to town. I don't know if you considered yourself town folks, though, right?**

No; it wasn't town, but it was a family community. And what I liked about it is, because as I was growing up, I loved the ocean. So I paddled a lot, I used to go surfing.

**Did you catch the bus?**

No.

**HRT? [chuckle]**

[INDISTINCT] or you walk it, you know. But no such thing. And, you know, we had our own little path. Made our own, because 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue never went all the way through, so you would just kinda make your way through the bushes and everything.

**[chuckle]**

Did all of that. Yeah. Good memories, though.

**Off to uh, Kuhio Beach—**

Off to Kuhio—

**—pier?**

—Beach. Well, you know, the wall?

**M-hm.**

Okay; we used to swim over there a lot; the wall. I would go to Ala Moana to paddle, because I paddled for Hui Nalu, Hui Kalia, uh, Healani.

**And that's a whole other kind of subculture and culture of Hawaii, the paddling community. So you were very much involved uh, in your life, first in paddling.**

Yes.

**And then music. And not one of the others went into showbiz.**

No. None of them did. I was the only individual from the group. And I think because it—you know how in life, if you're there, and things happen, and it's meant to be, and it just develops in that fashion—and see, we were always surrounded by music as we grew up. Always.

**What kind of music?**

Hawaiian music and a variety of them, really; a variety of music. But I remember our house on Kaimuki on 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue; it was our grandfolks' old house and my mom and dad took it over. And I remember every New Year's, we would have um, a luau. And we would—Mom and Dad would uh, kalua pig and uh, you know, dig the hole and do the whole thing. And everyone would, you know, make something, and we would have a uh, a feast. And Uncle Andy and his musicians—that's Uncle Andy Cummings, and musicians, and I remember Uncle Sonny, another aunt's—my mother's sister's husband, got on the piano. And it was music ... always. You know, it was continuous.

**It was your own live music, you're—**

Oh, yes.

**—talking about?**

Oh, yeah.

**Oh.**

So we kids were exposed to this all the time. As we grew older, Uncle Andy would be traveling, and we developed into our own music and besides hula,

you know, we'd try to sing a song or two. But at some point in time in my growing up years, uh, I remember Uncle Andy and the Cummings family moved to the mainland. But when they moved back for just a spell while they were looking for a place, they stayed with us. And I remember attending Kamehameha Schools, and Uncle Andy would say uh, when he'd see me coming home from school, he'd say, Come, sit down over here. This was before doing homework. This was before doing anything. So I would sit on the steps with him, and he'd have this ukuele and he'd be playing a song, or whatever instrument. If it was a mandolin or—you know, 'cause he played so many.

**Was he—**

So many.

**—known at that time as a composer?**

Yes. And he was I think this was my sophomore year at Kamehameha or even my fresh—I can't remember. But in my early years. He was going to the Big Island, and he was working with a composer by the name of Jimmy Taka. And Jimmy Taka had the song, Kainoa, but he didn't know how to write the music, to actually write it in music form. So Uncle Andy was helping him by putting it in meters an—and writing it and structuring it for him. So he was making these trips back and forth. So Uncle wanted me to listen to the song; and I said okay, and I would come home from school, sit me down, and uh, on our steps outside of the house, and he'd play the song. He said, Now, I want you to learn the song. And that's how I started to learn Kainoa, which was the song that started me in the business.

**It's the signature song—**

It's one of—

**—for you.**

—the signature songs. Yeah.

**How does it go?**

[SINGS] I'm waiting on a warm and sunny seashore, yearning for the one that I adore. My heart is true, I'm thinking of you; forever I will love you, Kainoa.

**Absolutely—**

Yeah.

**—beautiful.**

Yeah.

**Now, Andy Cummings is a heck of an uncle to get started—**

Yeah.

**—in the music business with.**

Yeah.

**Now, I have to ask you something about him. He was, of course, one of the greatest hapa Haole composers, ever, um, and he wrote Waikiki, which is another song you are known for.**

Signature; yeah.

**But I heard that he also tended to write songs about causes. I think he might have been against—**

The puka in the Pali.

**—statehood. Yeah; no puka in the Pali, right?**

[chuckle]

**'Cause he didn't want to see the Pali Tunnel built.**

Yeah. He did all of that.

**Do you remember all that?**

Oh, yes; I do. And I remember him singing it, too. You know, I—

**How did it—**

—don't know—

**How did it go? I've never heard it sung.**

Oh, gosh; I can't remember it right now. Oh; it was the puka in the Pali. But when we would have these gatherings, you know, his group, which was made up of uh, Gabby Pahinui, Uncle Andy, and Ralph Alapai, and all of these old folks, and they would come to the house, and they would jam, and they would practice. And you don't know all of this wealth of talent that's right there with you.

**You don't realize these are—**

And you—

**—very special people. You think—**

Exactly.

**—everybody's got uncles like this.**

Exactly. Yeah, it was Uncle Gabby, and it was Un—uh, Uncle, Uncle, Uncle all over the place, which is the way we are, right? And then as you grow older, and then you realize all of this talent that's right there with you, and how privileged you've been through your younger years.

**I don't think Uncle Gabby was at a whole lot of backyard—**

No.

**—luau. I think he was pretty selective.**

Yeah, but you know, he was the baby in that group. So he was so kolohe. So when he played, you know, he was playing always from the soul, and the heart, and the seat of his pants. And he would just go into, you know, one song, and the rest of them would just jam. But it was um, it was a nice experience through those young years.

**You know, when um, Uncle Andy would call to you on the uh, front porch—**

M-hm.

**—um, did he pick any of the other kids, or did he sense—**

No.

**—something in you?**

No one else; it was just I. And I don't know why. And because I would try to sing around the house, and I guess he would, you know, hear. Oh, maybe there's possibility here, you know, with this child. Or nothing in particular for him to just pick me out of the—

**He never said anything to you—**

No.

**—about—**

Never did.

**M-m.**

Never did. But all he said was, uh, he would help me with the phrasing. Then, if I wasn't hitting the note, he'd make sure that I'd get up to it, and we'd go over it, over and over again.

**What did he tell you about phrasing?**

Like, I'm waiting on a warm and you don't take a breath until, seashore.

**M-hm.**

You're waiting on a warm and sunny seashore.

**M-hm.**

So we say you see what I'm saying? You see what I'm saying?

**It's the thought.**

It's the complete thought. So you're waiting on a warm and sunny seashore, yearning for the one that I—so you don't break up your phrases. Okay; okay. So here you are [chuckle], tenth grade, ninth grade. Okay, Uncle. But this would go on, sometimes for a couple of hours. Then my parents would step in; she has to do her homework, and she has chores to do. And so ... things of that sort.

**Did you have a—**

—that's—

**—disciplinarian family or—**

Very.

**—or structured?**

Oh, yeah; Dad and Mom were very much the disciplinarians. Yes. You know, with five kids, I guess you would have to be.

**You went through Kamehameha Schools, and then what?**

M-hm. You know, with all of the music besides all of the complete education that one gets, but the beautiful music that the students do learn, and that's all the choral singing and that became a learning process too for me.

**Yes, but I think you were doing it at a time when Hawaiian language was not in favor at Kamehameha.**

Exactly; exactly.

**So you got the music, but not necessarily the Hawaiian lyrics?**

You would—

**Or the meanings?**

—get the lyrics, but we didn't have, in those days the Hawaiian language was not taught at Kamehameha. This is my fiftieth reunion this year, so it's been—'59, so 2009. So this will be fifty years for me. And back then they didn't speak Hawaiian.

**So you would sing Hawaiian songs, and not know what they meant?**

Exactly. Or you would have to sit down with my parents or kupuna, and ask, you know, What does this mean and what is this all about?

**M-hm.**

Because the language wasn't spoken, because the language wasn't taught. You know.

**Did your parents think you should learn the Hawaiian language? Probably not in that generation, right?**

No, because they hardly spoke it at home. Rarely, did they speak it at home. It was hush-hush.

**You've seen it come a long way.**

I've seen it come a very long way.

**Have you learned to speak Hawaiian since?**

No. And I would love to.

**You must hear it all around you now.**

I do, I hear. And you know your phrases, and you know some things about Hawaiian, but that you can relate to. And yes; that, I know. But to converse; no, I don't. And I would love to.

**But you grew up at a home and at school in an environment that uplifted music as a value in life.**

Well, and at that time too—well, when I graduated from Kamehameha, and during that period uh, my later years at Kamehameha as I said, you know, with all of the choral singing the music that came from there, I thought it was just a natural.

**M-hm.**

And so you apply it to oneself, and as you go to parties, and you're with friends, and you're sitting with an ukulele and you're playing along with someone else, who has an instrument, and you're carrying on; you're singing all of these songs, knowing basically what they all mean, but not completely and totally. But you're also bringing out what you've learned at the school.

**M-M-hm.**

All that was taught you. Because there's music appreciation, and so therefore, you're learning all different facets of it.

**So at this point in Marlene's life, the building blocks of her singing career are falling into place. A family that embraced the concept of kanikapila, the musical craftsmanship of her famed Uncle Andy Cummings, and an appreciation for music nurtured at the Kamehameha Schools; now, Marlene Sai just needed to be discovered.**

It was when I came out of Kamehameha, and the plan was to go, because it was full-on business courses that I was taking at Kamehameha, 'cause that was my intent to go on and further my education in business. And that was the concentration. I was working during that summer uh, in travel. Matter of fact, Uncle Andy had gotten me a job, 'cause he was with either Aloha or Hawaiian Airlines. So he got me this job in this travel agency, and I would sell tours and do all of these things and earn some money during the summer. Well, my friends got to have jobs in the industry too, and so we would meet every Sunday. A

good friend of mine, Vicky Hollinger, and this other gal, Norma, and I would meet at Joe's in Waikiki. Because we were low on the totem pole, so we had to carry all of the Sunday work, and everyone else was home with their family. But we didn't care; we were young. So we pulled the Sunday duty. And when we were done, we always planned, Okay, let's meet at Joe's, let's have lunch and everything, and then plan from there what we're gonna do. This one particular weekend, we're at Joes, and in comes—and the beach boys would always come over.

### **Because you were attractive young women?**

And because I used to paddle, so I knew a lot of them too. So, you know, they always—you know, Hi, Jessie, hi, you know, Rabbit, hi, hi, hi, and all of this. This one day, they were sitting around and everything, and said, Hey, uh, you want to come down to uh, this place. Our friend has a bar, restaurant bar, club on the other side of the island, Kaneohe. He's taking care of it for his mom, and he manages the place. You folks want to go down next week? They have nice music, good music. Okay. So the next Sunday, we plan, and we all meet, and we all get in the car and we're driving down. So one with the ukulele and another with the guitar, and the top is down, and we're singing on our way down to Kaneohe from Waikiki. And we get to the other side of the island, and we get into this—park in the back, walk into Honey's.

### **Honey's.**

Honey's. And he's giving us the lowdown on who this guy is, he's a beach boy, and oh, they got great music. Sonny Chillingsworth, Gary Aiko; oh, these guys, they're good, good. So we get there, and we're hearing this music. Oh, my gosh. So this guy comes over and he says, I want you to meet Don Ho; I want to meet—this is Marlene. Eh, this wahine can sing; she was singing in the car. You gotta call her up to sing. And this is her friend Vicky. So we sat there for a little bit, and we were having our libations, and having a nice time. He calls me up to sing. I said, Oh, gosh. Do you know Kainoa? If I sang it, do you think you could play it? Sing it to us. Sonny. So I hummed a little tune to him, and he says, Oh, I can get it, sure. So I sang Kainoa, and they asked me to sing another song. I sang another song. And then I went and sat down. Before we left, he came up to me and he said, Can you write your name and your address, and your phone number, just you know, so I can get in touch with you? I said, Okay. He says, What are your plans? I said, Well, I'm planning to go to the university, and I want to get my degree. Well, maybe you can make some money; extra money. Think you might want to sing here? Sing? Really? Oh, my gosh; how much am I going to get paid? And I'm asking all of these questions. He says, I'll call you. One week went by, two weeks went by; and I didn't hear from him. And I thought, oh, gosh; put it out of my head completely. And I thought, okay, that guy was just all wapa. One day, I'm driving down Kalakaua, and I'm looking in my rearview mirror, and it looked like a Thunderbird, and the top was down, and I see this car darting in and out. And it's approaching me. And this guy's hair is blowing; no shirt on, and he's coming up closer to me. And I'm

getting nervous. So I roll up my window, roll up this window, and I'm going further, and he comes and he's telling me to pull over. So I pulled over, and I'm looking at this—and I'm thinking, Who in the world is this? 'Cause he—I didn't recognize him. He got out of the car, came over to me, and he—I had the window up, and he's knocking on the—

**[chuckle]**

—window, and he's saying to me, You remember me? I was playing the organ for you; you remember me? And I'm thinking, What church is he talking about? I gotta remember organ? Where—and then he said, You came to my place with Jessie. When he said Jessie, my play—and I said, Oh—

**Don Ho—**

—Don Ho.

**—is at your window.**

And I'm looking at—so I rolled my window down, and he said, I lost your number. He says, I don't know what happened to the paper, I lost that. He said, I've been trying to get your phone number. So he asked, Can you come down to the um, to Honey's tonight or tomorrow night? He says, I'd like to know if we can get some songs together. If you're still interested, I'd like for you to sing, and maybe make some extra money. And that's really how it all started.

**Singing at Honey's. And your boss was Don Ho.**

And my boss was Don Ho. Yeah. But things happened so fast. Because that night that I got down to Kaneohe, and there were these men that were sitting there; Bill Murata, George Chun, and I didn't know who they all were, and they were all recording individuals. Herb Ono and I'm not sure if Jack DeMello was there too. And they were there to hear Sonny Chillingworth.

**Because they were gonna make a recording of him?**

Right; right. Sonny pulled me over; he told me what was happening. And he said, Don't worry about it and just be comfortable, and we're just going to rehearse. We went through rehearsal, and at the end of that time, Sonny said that a couple of the individuals wanted to talk to me about recording. I mean, it all happened that fast. So I said, What do I do? He said to me, Don't worry; he said, just meet with them, and we'll get a lawyer or somebody that you trust. And it just escalated from there. And in a matter of a short time, I mean, I was meeting Lucky Luck, and Jimmy Walker, if I remember correctly.

**Who's Jimmy Walker; another radio guy?**

Yeah, he was a radio guy. And then J. Aku Head Pupule.

**The uh, top paid disc jockey in the world—**

Yes.

**—as they said.**

Yeah; yeah. But—yeah, and things really started to escalate, and really happen very fast.

**And here you were, how old; nineteen?**

No; seventeen, turning eighteen. I just got out of high school. And it was just that quick.

**Quick, indeed. What began as casual conversations with her Uncle Andy had now turned into the opportunity of a lifetime. In Part 2 of our Long Story Short with Marlene Sai, we'll hear the story of a highly unlikely recording studio that was the setting for one of her iconic songs. And we'll hear advice for anyone aspiring to pursue a career in music. Until then, thank you for spending this time with us. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.**

Video clip with production credits:

I enjoyed Donald; and you know, his nickname is Quack.

**Donald Ho?**

Yeah; you knew that.

**No, I didn't. [chuckle]**

Yeah; he was Quack.

**You were—**

And I'm Goofy.

**—Goofy, and he was—**

Yeah; yeah

**—Quack.**

Yeah. Uh, matter of fact, all of the uh, beach boys, everybody, all of his close friends called him Quack. Many of the songs that he recorded for all his beach boy days songs, lot of it you know, all of the different songs that he sang. And he would just sing it over and over, and over at his shows. I loved them, because they reminded me of my paddling days. So it was good fun. [SIGH] And I didn't mean to interrupt you; I'm sorry.

**Not at all.**

As we're talking, all of these different stories are just popping in my head.

**Well, just the idea that you call him Donald, and if you don't call him Donald, you call him Quack.**

[chuckle]

**This is Don Ho we're talking about. [chuckle]**

Yeah; yeah. I miss him. Yeah.

**GUEST: MARLENE SAI 2**

LSS 305 (LENGTH 26:46)

FIRST AIR DATE: 8/25/09

[SINGING] I see the sunbeam dancing on the waters, surfing on a wave that comes to shore. The promise in that beam is a long awaited dream, it tells me that you love me, Kainoa.

**Marlene Sai grew up in a time when the worldwide image of Hawaii was one of romance, song, and paradise. She was fortunate enough to sit at the feet of some of Hawaii's most talented and revered musicians, and she combined those influences with the tender power of her voice, and her ability to command the stage.**

[SINGING] —in my heart, I feel a thrill. The tradewinds say you love me, Kainoa.

**Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Welcome to PBS Hawaii's Long Story Short. Marlene Sai learned the craft of music from her Uncle Andy, famed Hawaiian music composer and singer, Andy Cummings. She learned the soul of Hawaiian music from her parents, her extended ohana, and all the musicians who came to kanikapila at her family home. But the business of music, the business of music was taught to Marlene by the man who gave her her first big break; Don Ho, who, when Marlene got her start, was not yet a world famous musician.**

No, he was managing his mom's restaurant.

**So you had—**

But he would play music.

**You knew he could play the organ.**

Yeah. He had his group, and it was made of Sonny Chillingsworth, Gary Aiko.

**Wow.**

Tony Bee; I mean, great talent.

**I can see how everywhere you went, you thought everybody was really gifted in music. At your house, at the bar.**

Oh, I know. But you see, because of Don and all of this talent, of musicians, we started to do gigs all over the place, and people were asking. So we were constantly going and performing outside of Honey's. So the word got out, and you know, people were finding out about us, the place was getting filled. And then from there, it was moving from Kaneohe to Waikiki. And that all happened in a matter of a few months, so to speak. When it was time for me to leave

Honey's in Kaneohe, I went to Donald this one night, and I said, I need to speak with you. And he said, Okay, sit. And I said, I need to give you my notice. And he laughed, and he said, You can't leave.

**[chuckle]**

And I said, What do you mean, I can't leave? He said, You signed a contract. This is a true story. And I said, Yeah, but I don't think that contract is any good. He said, What do you mean, you don't think the contract is any good? I said, Because I'm under age. And he said, Oh, come on. I said, Yes, I am. Went to my locker, got out my wallet and brought it back to him. Oh, he was furious. Don finally gave in, and he said to me, I tell you what did you sign a contract with them? I said, No, they want me to come in, and Kimo McVay wants me to sit with him, so we're gonna negotiate. He says, Okay, I'll go with you, I'll negotiate for you. I said, You will? Yes, of course. So he did. He negotiated with Kimo.

**Was he a good negotiator?**

One of the best; one of the best.

**So he had that whole business side going before he really came out as a soloist himself, and as a—**

Yes.

**—star.**

Yes; yes.

**Did he give you any advice along the way?**

Yeah, well, the advice was always be true to yourself ... help if you can. But always be true to yourself. Always try to get the amount of money that you feel that you're worth. You know, but just to watch yourself, and to be careful. He constantly did check up on me. I mean, we were always in touch with one another, especially once I moved up to Waikiki. But shortly thereafter, he and the rest of them came up to Waikiki, and then later on he had the Aliis. Because all of these other musicians went on their own way too, so he developed his rapport and he had the Aliis, starting with them.

**Was there a lot of music in Waikiki in those days?**

There was a lot of it.

**Showrooms?**

Because Duke Kahanamoku's was a supper club. Don the Beachcomber was a supper club. And the International Marketplace, where it is now, way in the back of it to the left, was Duke Kahanamoku's. That was where the supper club was. In the front of it, on the street, was Don the Beachcomber's.

**So there were all kinds of venues for live Hawaiian music.**

Oh, yeah. And then down the road, you had Sterling Mossman was there. So he had the—

**At Queen's Surf—**

—Barefoot Bar, and he had Queen's Surf. I mean, it was all of them. Across the street was the Moana Surfrider, so you had Pua Almeida playing there. At the

Royal Hawaiian, Haunani Kahalewai was playing. I mean, it was all over the place, and it was just wonderful.

**What a different time that was.**

Yes; yes.

**And you sounded fearless. I mean, you were up for the challenges.**

Well, because you're young, I think. You know, because you're young and you want to explore, and you want to just give it a whirl and try it. And of course, the career was just unbelievable.

**So you were a teenaged recording star.**

Yes.

**Where did you record your songs?**

Well, the first recording the first album was done in the bus barn.

**[chuckle] The bus barn on Alapai?**

Alapai; Alapai Street, yeah. You know where the police department is, and that whole area down there, Young Street. That whole area was the bus barn, and all the buses used to park there. And I remember when they said to me, We're going to record, and it's going to be in the bus barn. And I said, Okay.

**How does that work? [chuckle]**

Well because this is all so new to me. And I said, Okay. We're not gonna start 'til about ten o'clock at night, and that's because the buses are all parked, and the people, the traffic on the street, the noise and everything is all quieted down. So the buses are parked all on the side, and away. And this area back here is where they're setting up for all of the portable recording units that need to be brought in.

**You could see the buses as you were—**

Oh, yeah.

**—performing?**

Sure; sure. I mean, like the buses are parked way out here.

**[chuckle]**

And we had this area that they cleared out.

**And that was in the days of the old HIC buses, right?**

HRT.

**HRT.**

HRT.

**I'm sorry; HRT buses.**

HRT; yeah.

**Which were, what—**

Honolulu Rapid Transit.

**—green, or turquoise and white, were they?**

Something like that.

**But that was the old HRT days.**

HRT.

**So all these parked buses are silent members of your audience—**

[chuckle]

**—as you record an album.**

That's right; that's right.

**How did the album sound?**

[chuckle] Because I never knew any better, you know, that was the sound for that particular album. But I'd like to take that original one and digitize it, you know. I think it needs to be done.

**You were singing Kainoa in the bus barn?**

Kainoa.

**And it became a huge hit.**

Huge; huge. Kainoa was on it, Kaulana Na Pua. Matter of fact, Kaulana Na Pua, I had to go and meet with the Pendergast sisters at that time to get the clearance to record the song. And Sonny Chillingworth recommended that I do it. And so once all of that was cleared away, then we were able to record it. And did Lovely Kauai, which was a composition of Benny Sax, Crushed Flowers, and I mean, you know Kuu Hoa, which is a Beamer song, and I just loved it.

**What if you hadn't had access to all of these wonderful people; Andy Cummings, and Gabby Pahinui, and the people who, perhaps they didn't guess Uncle Andy coached you in so many words, but the others—**

Sure.

**—who you got to see in action, and learn from that way.**

I think what happens in life, if you are meant to be in a certain place, and things kinda unfold for you, which is truly the way I believe that things started to happen for me. Because no way along this, did I plan it. I was just so grateful that it unfolded this way, and it was happening. Because I just felt like the greatest gift had been given to me.

**What was it like to be a very young person with this—**

Exactly.

**—huge following?**

I am the young kid on the block. I was the baby in the industry. Genoa Keawe, who I adored, I mean when I first met her, it was like, oh. When I met Haunani Kahalewai, it was, oh, gosh. And all of these names that, you know, you hear of, and you learned of and heard of; I was privileged, I am privileged to have known most of them. Even to have be brought on the side and instructed in some way, shape, or form—

**Did you get scolded?**

No.

**Did you get inspired?**

Yes; always inspirations, but never scolded to the point that you're singing it wrong. But, why don't you try this. Met with Auntie Matty Lam on learning some of her songs that she wrote. Mary Kawena Pukui, you know.

**Did you meet Mary Kawena Pukui?**

Yes, I did.

**What was she like?**

I mean, all of these people were just magnificent; magnificent, warm.

**She was, of course, a Hawaiian language expert, and cultural expert.**

Yes.

**What did you speak with her about?**

Primarily about their songs. Because I wanted to learn them, and I wanted to learn it firsthand, and really find out from them why the song was written.

Therefore, I always felt that it would help me in my interpretation—

**M-hm.**

—when I recorded it, when I sang it. And then, you know, just have a genuine feel for the particular composition. So I always try to do that, and try to meet up with the talent, the composer.

**Maybe that's a legacy of Uncle Andy Cummings. You'd grown up with a composer, and you respected the composers.**

Yeah; and Daddy always said, my father said to me, because Dad comes from music background too. He was raised by his uncle, who was Al Alohikea, who has written Pua Lilia and, you know, all of this. So our family, Daddy's side of the family is from Kauai, and so that's all—the Alohikeas are all Daddy's ohana. So he always said to me, If you don't know, you go and find out. And he said—he would say to me, You have to promise me this; don't ever do anything that you don't know what you're singing about. And so it's been a natural thing for me. I always do try to go to the source and get a sense of why they wrote the song. Like with Waikiki; you know, hearing from Uncle Andy as to why he wrote Waikiki, and where he was, and what took—

**He was in Michigan, wasn't he?**

Right; he was in Michigan. And he was in Lansing, Michigan, and as the story goes, he was snowed in. And because he was snowed in, he couldn't—he and his colleagues couldn't fly out back to Hawaii. So these musical ambassadors, you know, are snowed in and locked in this room, they can't get out. And he's thinking of Waikiki, of Hawaii, and so he starts to pen this song.

**I heard you sing that song. Do you consciously think of Uncle Andy in Michigan when you—**

I do.

**—sing that song?**

Uh-huh; I do. I really, really do. Because when you know that he's snowed in, and you know that this is all taking place, and he's missing his Hawaii, he's been away from his family, and he writes about Waikiki. There's a feeling deep in my heart, stabbing at me just like dart, it's feeling heavenly. And outside, it's snowing, it's snowing and I see memories out of the past, memories that always will last, of a place beside the sea. Waikiki, at night when the shadows and I can just see him writing this, and just having a nice warmth about him, in him while he's stuck in the snow.

**This was nobody trying to sell Hawaii as a visitor destination.**

No. [chuckle]

**This was somebody who lived it, who loved it.**

Exactly.

[SINGING] —an angel sweet and heavenly. Waikiki, my whole life is empty without you. I miss that magic about you, magic beside the sea. Your tropic nights and your wonderful charms are ever in my memory. And I recall when I held in my arms an angel sweet and heavenly. Waikiki, my whole life is empty without you. I miss that magic about you, magic beside the sea, magic of Waikiki. [APPLAUSE]

**Although this product of the Kamehameha Schools grew up in a time when the Hawaiian language was not taught, barely spoken, Marlene Sai searched for the meaning of every Hawaiian song she sang. In the late 1980s, this constant quest for the source, for the truth, led her to a groundbreaking production and a regal portrayal.**

[CLIP FROM BETRAYAL] The first night of my imprisonment was the longest night I have ever passed in my life. My companion could not have slept well that night. Her husband imprisoned, her children alone. I listened to her sighs without cessation ... her pain and anguish pierced my heart. It seemed as though the dawn of day would never come.

**PBS Hawaii was so pleased to be the presenter of Betrayal, and it was—**

Oh.

**—shot right here in the studio, where we're sitting.**

Yes.

**Betrayal; and you played the key character of Queen Lili'uokalani. I don't think I could ever read about the Queen again, without seeing your face in that role. Tell me a little bit about making that.**

Well prior to Betrayal, I was doing a one-actress play. And it got quite a bit of recognition; it really did. And it was asked of me if I would consider taking it to Congress, and performing it for our Congressional people. And I said, Okay, let's figure this out. So I believe Representative Whitney Anderson and Danny Kihano was involved in really setting the groundwork on all of this. And it was just an eye-opener. Because I performed at the Folger Shakespeare Theater but we wanted to—from that, and after these one presentations—it wasn't filmed in the way that it should have been filmed. And we felt—and when I say we, there's a core of us that formed Kukui Foundation, and we wanted the story to be told with characters, not just Liliu, and all of the most of the information from research gathered to be brought forth, and to be put into a docudrama. And when I said yes to doing this, I didn't realize what a huge project, you know, that this was gonna evolve and come to be. And Ellen Pelissero did all of the research and most of the writing on it, and of course, Tremaine Tamayose and Joy Chong did the directing. We had a great, great cast.

**Let's see; Ed Kaahea was in it?**

Ed Kaahea.

**Who else was in it?**

Moe Keale was in it, Brickwood Galuteria, god, Charlie Enright and her husband. I mean, there were just so very many talented individuals that came to, you know. Wade Cuvian was here, and I think even our Glenn was here too.

**[chuckle] The person who directed the lighting of this show and—**

Yes.

**—lights all of our shows.**

Yes; yes. That's why it was good to visit with him, just today. But, yeah. And so I was parked here for a couple of months, and very fortunate that we were able to—you know.

**How did you determine how to play Queen Lili'uokalani?**

The sense that I got of Queen Lili'uokalani was really one of ... I felt that her persona was regal, kind and loving, because she loved children. But when I found out that she loved her cigars, I figured, okay, this is—

**This is a woman I can get into.**

—this is something—

**[chuckle]**

This is something that I really want to know a little more about. Yeah. And because she wrote such fantastic music, Paoakalani and, oh, Sanoe, and on, and on, and on. I think of her as just a beautiful, warm-hearted, kind, sensitive and remarkable woman.

**And may I ask, if you were the Queen, would you do what she did? Because we debate all of this to this day.**

You know, it takes some person to stand her ground, and to be that remarkable, remarkable onipaa.

**Steadfast.**

Yeah; as she was. And she just loved her Akua; you know, she trusted in the Lord.

[CLIP FROM BETRAYAL] Gentlemen of the court, in the year 1893, at the request of a large majority of the Hawaiian people, I propose to make certain changes in the Constitution of the Hawaiian Kingdom. At the last moment, a minority of the foreign population made my action the pretext for overthrowing the Monarchy, and aided by the United States naval forces and representative, established a new government. I owed no allegiance to the Provisional Government so established. But to prevent the shedding of blood of my people, native and foreigner alike, I quietly yielded to the armed forces brought against my throne, and submitted to the arbitration of the United States.

**While we don't see too many docudramas being filmed nowadays, and the showrooms, as you pointed out, are mostly shut down; so what do you say when people ask you, when young people say, How can I get started in show business, how can I be a headlining musician or singer?**

That's funny you should say that. Because there's a group that we're going to be recording, and I was just saying to them, Treat this business as if it is a

business. It's not a place or an industry that you step in just to have fun. That all will come, but you have to treat it seriously, so that you can take care of your business. Because I had to learn it that way. And that really is the best. That's really the best, I think. If anyone can just apply that, it's the best route to go, and the best thing to do, is to be serious about what your focus is.

**Are you talking about contract law?**

I'm talking about everything.

**Do you ever miss seeing your name in those huge marquee lights in Waikiki?**

No. No.

**Been there, done that?**

Been there, done that. Yes; yes. I enjoy being Grammy, and I enjoy my grandchildren, you know, and enjoying the family. Yeah.

**Do your grandchildren know that Grammy was a huge star in Waikiki, everybody knew your name, and many—**

They—

**—obviously still know it?**

They know; they do know. But, you know, they also know that, you know, they have to know their place too. But they're very good about that. They really are. [chuckle]

**Showing respect?**

Oh, sure. But not boasting or anything.

**But they have a sense of who—**

They do have a sense.

**—you are.**

They do have a sense.

**And the legacy?**

Yes.

**What's your legacy?**

What is my legacy? God, she's been around for a long time. [chuckle]

**From headlining in Waikiki at the age of nineteen, to recording some of Hawaii's most iconic songs, to portraying Hawaii's Queen in the Monarchy's darkest days, Marlene Sai is one of our most talented and multifaceted artists. And after all that, not a day goes by where she doesn't think about the man who gave her that big break, the man whom she affectionately called Quack, Don Ho. Thank you for spending this time with us. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawaii, I'm Leslie Wilcox. A hui hou kakou.**

Video clip with production credits:

**When was the last time you saw him?**

Maybe a couple of weeks or a few weeks before he left us.

**Did he want to talk, or was it just a matter of your saying goodbye to him?**

No; no. We were at a friend's service, funeral service, and he was there, and we just hugged, said hello, and honi.

**Yeah.**

Couldn't talk; yeah.

**I see.**