

GUEST: TOM MOFFATT: THE MAKING OF A SHOWMAN

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Tom Moffatt in the morning.

Hear Elvis direct from his Army quarters in Germany. He'll be interviewed on KPOI by Tom Moffatt.

From sunrise to sunset.

Modest new voice in music today.

Tom Moffatt.

He has a name that's as well known locally as many of the acts that he's presented to Hawaii, from Elvis Presley to Frank Sinatra, from Michael Jackson to Bruno Mars. Ladies and gentlemen, presenting Mr. Tom Moffatt.

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

If you grew up in the 60s, this is how you heard the latest and greatest music, a transistor radio. There were no music videos, no iTunes, it was just you and a disc jockey, the faceless voice spinning the hottest hits from artists like the Beatles, Elvis Presley, and Paul Revere & the Raiders. In Hawaii, the radio station leading the way in rock and roll music was KPOI, and KPOI's most popular deejay was Uncle Tom Moffatt. Now, you would think that a man who has such a passion for rock and roll grew up in the big city, L.A., Chicago, New York. But not Tom Moffatt.

Where did you begin life?

In Detroit, Michigan.

Detroit, Michigan.

Uh-huh.

Well, what was it like?

Cold. [CHUCKLE] I didn't like the city, and I had relatives who lived outside of Detroit, so in my eighth grade, my folks let me work for this cousin of ours who

had a mink ranch in a little town called Waterloo, Michigan. So I spent my eighth grade in this little town, in a one-room schoolhouse.

How many kids?

Oh, it was from kindergarten to eighth grade. [CHUCKLE] It was full.

Now, what didn't you like about the city?

I don't know; I didn't like the congestion. I liked the country. I just liked the country. I liked the feeling of being outdoors, and just that nice feeling of [INHALES] inhaling and [CHUCKLE].

What did you do at the mink ranch?

Fed the mink, cleaned up after 'em.

And enjoyed it?

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, and I had a pet pig, Herman. And we fed the mink horse meat and cereal. And there was always some of that left over, so I fed the pigs what was left over. And the pig became very healthy. He was pretty young, he weighed three hundred fifteen pounds when I took him to the county fair. And he won first place.

Wow.

So then, we took him to the state fair, which was at Michigan State University. On the very same football field where they play football now, I showed my pig. He didn't win, but. [CHUCKLE]

And so, did you go K through 12?

No, when I—

You started in the eighth grade?

—graduated, then I returned to Detroit to go to school. And again, I wasn't too happy. I got a job washing dishes in a restaurant called Curly's. And the people who owned it had a farm about forty miles outside of Detroit. And they took me out there one day, and I fell in love with it. And so they needed somebody to work on the farm, so I talked to my folks, and they let me go into high school working on the farm.

So you'd been away from eighth grade, and then went you went away again in high school.

Yeah. I spent one year at Detroit in high school there. I just wasn't happy. So I went tenth, eleventh, twelfth grade and ended up at South Lyon High School.

And graduated from there?

Yes, I did.

And then, what?

Well, I played football and basketball there, and I got a scholarship in my senior year to play football for a very famous coach, who wasn't a famous coach at the time. But his first coaching job, he'd graduated from the University of Michigan. And I got this scholarship offer.

What position did you play?

I played tackle. [CHUCKLE] I was a farm boy. [CHUCKLE] So I remember going to Bowling Green, Ohio and seeing his team play, and sitting on the bench with he and the players. And I really was excited about it. I have the

correspondence from him, not my letters, where I kept writing and asking, If I get hurt in football, will my scholarship still be in effect? I couldn't get a definite answer. So I decided to go to work for a while in a factory and earn enough money to go to college. By the way, the coach is George Allen.

George—I was gonna ask you.

Yes. [CHUCKLE]

Wow.

Los Angeles Rams, Washington Redskins, Hall of Fame. [CHUCKLE]

And did you want to play for him? I mean, did he—

Oh, yeah.

Did he evoke that leadership—

Oh, yeah; yeah. I liked him. But I was just—, what happens if I get hurt, and I don't have a scholarship, and I don't have any money? And I didn't want to go to my folks for money, so I worked in a Dodge plant, and the Michigan Seamless Tube Company in my hometown of South Lyon. So I spent a year working there to save enough money to go to college.

It's said that Hollywood actress Lana Turner was discovered at a drugstore on Sunset Boulevard. In Tom Moffatt's life, the corner drugstore would provide that little catalyst which would take him away from the Dodge plant, and send him to a place he would come to call home.

One day, I'm in the corner drugstore in South Lyon, on my way to the tube company to work, and it was a steel mill. And I found this little book about colleges in the United States. The last page was University of Puerto Rico, and University of Hawaii. So I wanted to travel and go to school, and I got interested in University of Hawaii, and that's how I ended up in Honolulu.

When you got here, was it what you expected?

Yeah; it was. It was more than I expected. I didn't quite know what to expect, but I could just feel the love of people and just the feeling of Hawaii when I got here.

So you didn't have trouble breaking into local culture, or—

No, I kinda [CHUCKLE] fell into it. [CHUCKLE]

And knew you were gonna stay?

Well, I didn't know. I didn't know at the time if I knew I was gonna make this my home. But after I spent some time here this was it. So I went to school, and wanted to be an attorney.

Where did you live when you first got to the island?

Manoa Valley. Not far from here. [CHUCKLE] Not far from your studio.

Do you remember the street?

Yeah; Hillside Avenue.

Beautiful place to live.

Yeah, it was.

And you know, UH went fine for you? What were you majoring in?

Law; I wanted to be a lawyer. And in my first year, I had a speech teacher who said, You have a nice voice, you should get in the radio guild.

Now, was that the first time you'd been told you have a nice voice?

Yeah; yeah.

I'm amazed.

Well, in a farming town, they don't [CHUCKLE]—

They don't care how deep your voice is.

But I'd never been in a speech class before, either. So I joined the radio guild, and got interested in being a radio announcer. So the end of my first year, I auditioned for KGU, and didn't make it as a junior announcer. So I went to work at Tripler Hospital, mopping floors. I mopped every stairway in Tripler Hospital.

[CHUCKLE] Why do you think you didn't get the job as a freshman?

Well, it was pretty competitive. There were only, like, just a handful of radio stations there. KGU, KULA, KGMB; that was about it. And a couple of language stations.

So good experience, but off you went to mop the floors.

Yeah, so I went back to school. And I'd go home every night and read the newspaper aloud, and talk, and read stories. Nobody was around, I'd just read every night aloud. So anyway, come the following June, I went back to KGU and got a job. I really got into it. I became a staff announcer at KGU. This was before disc jockeys really.

Were you always reading, or did you make up what you were saying?

I would do a little bit of news. And you come in between network programs and get a station break, and maybe a thirty-second commercial. [CHUCKLE]

And you're operating the equipment as you're speaking too?

Yeah. It was on the third floor of the Advertiser Building. And the tower was on top of the building that was the antenna for the radio station. I did just about everything. We recreated baseball games. Joe "Rack 'Em Up" Rose, and Carlos Rivas, and Frank Lenny were also in the same game. But I was Joe's board operator. He'd be in the other room, and he'd get teletype reports of what was happening with the baseball game, New York Yankees in Boston, or whatever, and he'd recreate these games. And I had three turntables or four turntables. One was just a regular crowd, another was excited crowd.

[CHUCKLE]

One was boos, and the other was a 7-Up vendor. Get your 7-Up.

[CHUCKLE]

'Cause that was one of the sponsors. So you'd hear this guy in the stands selling 7-Up. [CHUCKLE]

And who was making the crack of the bat?

Joe would do that.

And he would do that live?

He had one of those pieces of wood that drummers use sometimes. And he'd hit that with a pencil. [CHUCKLE]

Wow. Those were the days when we didn't get those games piped in.

Oh, no. They were all delayed, and it was just recreated. The only way you could get it here was shortwave, and that was kind of expensive, I guess, or it wasn't that clear. So they all recreated these games. [CHUCKLE]

And nowadays, people are used to consolidated radio stations with the same voice, recorded on channels throughout the nation. But in those days, it was all one of a kind and local.

It was quite glamorous, too. I remember being nervous the first time the microphone opened, and I had to say, This is KGU in Honolulu [CHUCKLE], high atop the Advertiser Building. Things like that.

Did you attract fans?

Not then. A little bit, maybe. People were interested, enamored with radio announcers, even then, although we didn't say that much sometimes. [CHUCKLE]

News, sports recreations, a little bit of music. That was radio back in the 50s. Tom Moffatt was just beginning to see how the power of radio could influence the tiny community that was Hawaii.

Now, at KGU, I fell in love with being a commercial announcer. So when school started in the fall, I decided I was learning more at KGU than I was at the University of Hawaii, so I stayed on as a radio announcer. And I remember coming home, and remember meeting Ella Fitzgerald at KGU. And we had some tickets for her concert that night at McKinley High School auditorium. And I went home to change. And in the letterbox was a draft notice. You will report to ... and so that was the end of my radio career at KGU. So I remember learning it that night, but I went to the concert and saw Ella Fitzgerald at McKinley High School. [CHUCKLE]

Did she pack it?

Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. [CHUCKLE]

McKinley High School?

M-hm. And many years later, I would present her in concert. [CHUCKLE]

So where did you go to report for the draft? Where did you serve?

I reported here, and I reported to Schofield for sixteen weeks of basic training. This was during the Korean War, and we were all being shipped off to Korea. So just when we concluded our basic training, this tough old sergeant called me in and said, Look, he said, you don't want to go off to this war. [CHUCKLE] He just kinda said, Hey, you got a talent, and they need a radio announcer at Armed Forces Radio at Tripler Hospital. I'll lend you my car. He gave me the keys, and I drove to Tripler Hospital. And since I'd had some training in commercial radio, they grabbed me up right away. So I spent the next two years defending my country at Tripler Hospital. [CHUCKLE]

What were you voicing?

They ran pretty much the same things we ran at KGU. The big transcriptions, the Jack Benny Show, the Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy Show, Suspense,

Dragnet, Escape, all these shows. They were like half-hour shows. And you put a big fifteen-minute disc on, and go from that to the next one. Then come in between, and give a station break.

And that went only to the military population?

Yes, in Tripler Hospital. They called it the Bedside Network.

Only in Tripler?

Yeah.

And that was your draft service?

Uh-huh, that was it.

The place where you'd been mopping floors previously.

Yes. [CHUCKLE]

Wow. And did you do—

That was fun.

Did you do that throughout your time in the service?

Yes, I stayed there for the rest of my Army career. And then I went back to KGU. And I started at KIKI also, so I was working at three radio stations, really. I'd do my, you know, Army duty at Tripler and worked my eight hours, and then I'd work in the other stations. So I began my disc jockey career, really, at KIKI. It was kind of fun. [CHUCKLE]

Did you ever hook up with any of the guys you trained with at Schofield?

Yes. Unfortunately, I had a few days off before I had to report to Tripler Hospital. And when I did report, one of the guys was coming down on a gurney. He'd gone to Korea and got shot, and returned to the hospital already. And quite a few of them came back injured, to Tripler Hospital. At the time, a lot of the entertainers who came to Hawaii on vacation, Jack Benny and George Burns came up one time, and I interviewed them on the radio, and then they toured the different areas of Tripler Hospital, visiting with patients. Another time, Louis Armstrong came up and performed at the Post Theater. So I had the pleasure of introducing him on stage. And one of my favorite stories, I'm on stage, kinda nervous, because this is Louis Armstrong. And the place is packed, and the band is on stage and where's Mr. Armstrong? I'm looking around, and so I went out in the parking lot. There he is. The parking lot is deserted, 'cause everybody's inside. And he's with his signature handkerchief and trumpet ... rehearsing, blowing his horn. Anyway, the show got underway. It was great. [CHUCKLE] A special moment, seeing him out there he had this white handkerchief that he always used, playing the trumpet. And there he was, out in the parking lot, tuning up.

Excuse me. [CHUCKLE]

Yeah.

You're on.

[CHUCKLE]

And so, a career was born. Tom Moffatt was spinning stacks of wax, and like any good disc jockey, he was taking the musical temperature of his local

listeners, giving them what they wanted. And what they wanted was a style of music that would revolutionize radio, and give Tom his identity.

So I started this jazz show on KIKI. But I would play other things too, like you know, Nat Cole, and things like that, and Frank Sinatra. All of a sudden, I started listening to this music, and getting requests for a guy with a funny name. Elvis Presley. And I started playing his music. And that's where it exploded. All of a sudden, every kid on the island was listening, and I was the only one playing in the islands, really, I was the only one playing rock and roll. So yeah, I used to get like fifty-some letters a day [CHUCKLE] requesting. And I started doing a show from a drive-in, where Ward Warehouse is now, right by the corner of Ward and Ala Moana Boulevard. Right across from Fisherman's Wharf.

It was a drive-in restaurant, not drive-in movie, right?

No, it was a drive-in restaurant called the White Top Drive-In. It became kind of the social center of Honolulu, and I was there every night from nine o'clock 'til midnight, I think, or one o'clock.

Could people see you doing the show?

Oh, yeah. There was a fellow had a show called The Fishbowl Show. His name was Don Chamberlain. Then he left town, and this empty thing was sitting there, and they could move it around. So I turned it into Uncle Tom's Cabin. A listener once wrote and said, Uncle Tom, or something like that. I got this moniker, Uncle Tom, and they started addressing letters to Uncle Tom's Cabin. So I called the show Uncle Tom's Cabin. So that's what I called this former Fishbowl.

Then you got to perform with more than your voice. You had audiences.

Oh, yeah; yeah. And they would come, and the carhops would bring dedications from different cars.

And you were the first to play rock and roll music on radio in Hawaii?

Yeah.

Wow.

It was fun. [CHUCKLE] It was exciting.

That must have just swept, I mean, so pretty soon, you were doing a rock and roll show?

Oh, yeah. I was into it. The jazz was forgotten. [CHUCKLE] But I still hung out with the musicians, and we used to go to jam sessions. And a good friend of ours was Joe Castro, great piano player. And his girlfriend was Doris Duke. So a couple of times, we went up to Doris Duke's home, and we'd jam all night. And I was like still the disc jockey buddy of these guys, and so we'd hang out and go to places like that. One night, we jammed all night, and she cooked breakfast for us the next morning. So we could boast that breakfast was cooked for us by Doris Duke. [CHUCKLE]

When you listen to the radio today, you'll find that most stations change their format on a regular basis. They're always searching for that sound, or personality that's going to drive an audience to their wavelength. With rock and

roll music in the 60s, there was an opportunity to grab hold of the music, the artists, the disc jockeys, and dominate the local airwaves. All it took was a visionary.

I was at KIKI, and Henry J. Kaiser, a great visionary, built the Hawaiian Village Hotel. And he wanted to have a radio station, I guess, and he saw what was happening with radio and felt he could do better. And so he built a radio station on the top floor of the Hawaiian Village Hotel. And he got J. Aku Head Pupule to be the manager, and do his morning show. Well, Aku hated rock. So, Mr. Kaiser felt that this young music should be played on his radio station, so he himself called some principals of schools to see who the kids were listening to. Well, of course, I won, 'cause I was the only one playing rock and roll. So I got hired by Henry J. Kaiser to do—

Did he call you himself?

It went through Ron Jacobs, who was working for him as a good music disc jockey with Aku. And Ron called me and said, Mr. Kaiser wants to hire you. So that's how it came together, and I met Mr. Kaiser, and it was very exciting.

[CHUCKLE]

And even though he didn't like the kind of music you'd be playing, he knew— Mr. Kaiser, he was pretty open. It was Aku.

And—

Even to when he died, up to the—Aku was like one of the top disc jockeys in the world. He was, at one time, the highest paid disc jockey performing in Honolulu, and the whole world. He even boasted, just before he died, that he never played a Beatles record. [CHUCKLE]

And Mr. Kaiser didn't say, Aku, you work for me, you're gonna play rock and roll?

No, he didn't force Aku to play rock and roll. But he said, You should have a young guy playing young music at night. So Aku went along with it.

So you had a definite franchise there.

Oh, yeah. And so, Ron was in the afternoon, and he started playing rock and roll. And then I was doing nine to midnight. And I'd do a mid-morning show also. So I was doing nine to noon, and nine to midnight.

So a pattern emerges. You work a lot. I mean, you worked multiple shifts.

Yeah. So that was my pattern, I worked two shifts. And Ron would be in the afternoon, and he was the bad guy, I was the good guy.

How did that play out?

It played out great. The roller derby was very big here in the 50s.

Oh, I remember. [CHUCKLE]

So we talked about doing a grudge match with Jacobs the bad guy, and myself the good guy. So we picked a night. It was slow at the Civic Auditorium, where the average crowd was twelve hundred people. So we worked a deal out with Mr. Ralph Yempuku, who ran the Civic, that we would get a piece of

every ticket over twelve hundred. Well, we started talking this thing up, and that night, thirty-six hundred people showed up. It was packed. [CHUCKLE]

And there's a hat story?

Yeah. This was in 1956, for the premier of "Love Me Tender" at the Waikiki Theater. Well, we set it up so I would have a teen premier on a Saturday afternoon, before it opened for the general public, just for kids. It was a Saturday morning, really, at the Waikiki Theater. And I got the hat, the actual hat that Elvis wore in "Love Me Tender". But the kids had never seen Elvis on the screen before. And so, we had this contest. I got fifty-three thousand letters ... trying to win the hat.

Fifty-three thousand.

Yeah. It was wild. It was the first time I ever heard girls scream in a theater. At a movie. That was at the Waikiki Theater.

So that was the beginning of Elvis in Hawaii.

I think so.

Just on screen.

Yeah.

And then ...

Well, what happened, I think, was that the following year, Elvis had an open time period, and I think Colonel Parker remembered this contest and all the fan mail that kids wrote from Hawaii. I would give Elvis' address out, and talk about Elvis, and play his records. And I think Colonel Parker remembered that. And so to fill that one date that they needed, they decided to come to Hawaii. And that's why Elvis came to Hawaii in November of 1957.

What was that like?

Oh, that was something.

Was that one of the most memorable experiences you've had?

Yes; in music. And just about one of the most memorable experiences, just introducing Elvis on stage, and watch what happened. And watch him on stage, with really no visual support that performers have today. They moved the boxing ring that they used at the old stadium, and that was his stage.

This is the old Honolulu Stadium?

Yes,. The one where King and Isenberg, there's Stadium Park there now. But I introduced him on his first concert. And here's the stage, it's a boxing ring. They'd taken the poles off, but they still had the overhead lights. That was his lighting. [CHUCKLE] The overhead lights, and that was it. And just his magnetism held that audience. Of course, he's a great performer, great singer.

Who was backing him up?

His regular guys. The Nashville guys that recorded with him, they came here and backed him up.

What did you say in introducing him?

Oh, I don't know, something. The man, you've come here to see him. And you could just feel the excitement. And I went to Colonel Parker. He said, Go up and introduce him. I said, Well, where is Elvis? He said, Don't worry about it,

don't worry about it, just go up and introduce Elvis. Oh, there was a limousine parked over by the dressing room, not the dressing room, the dugout.

So you hadn't met him at the time you were introducing him?

Yes, I had. I'll tell you that story. [CHUCKLE] That's another one. [CHUCKLE] But anyway, I introduced him. 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 the most unforgettable moment that I've ever experienced with a performer is watching him do his encore. He did "Hound Dog". Rock and roll, yeah? And he came back. And he got down on his knees on the stage, and did a slow version of "You Ain't Nothing"—real slow. And then he jumped off the stage on his knees, and down on the ground, doing "Hound Dog", slow. It was something. [CHUCKLE]

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 met the Colonel, and we'd kinda hinted there might be something like this in the works. And Don Tyler was of our guys at KPOI, and we dressed him up to look like Elvis. Ron had this convertible, a Ford convertible, hardtop convertible, top down, and got a fellow that 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 planned it. We understand that Elvis is heading for Kailua. So people would be out on the streets waiting, 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 had 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.

Tan-da, tan-da.

Oh. 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. Colonel said, 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. [CHUCKLE]

And he'd heard all about it?

I don't know how much Elvis had heard about it, but Colonel said, These boys did a nice promotion today, and I've asked them to introduce you tomorrow at

the stadium. So Mr. Moffatt's gonna introduce you in your first show, and Mr. Jacobs in the evening show. [CHUCKLE]

Wow. So you scored on that.

Oh, wow. That was a relief. [CHUCKLE] And since then, we became such good friends with the Colonel. And so subsequently, whenever Elvis came here, I was the first guy with the microphone to talk to him. And sometimes, the only one.

For a young man who grew up working on a farm in Michigan, these were heady times. Tom Moffatt was a popular disc jockey on a radio station that was dominating the airwaves. He was living in Paradise, surrounded by teenagers who hungered for the culture and the music of rock and roll. The next time we talk with Tom Moffatt, we'll see how he and the Poi Boys of KPOI Radio grabbed the local audience by giving them everything they wanted, and how Tom made a career out of feeding that hunger with more than just the sound coming out of a transistor radio. For PBS Hawaii, and Long Story Short, 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.

You had a pretty good voice too, as far as singing.

[CHUCKLE]

Tell us about making a record yourself.

This local record company owner, Bob Bertram, who went on to record Robin Luke's "Susie Darlin'", which became the first top ten rock and roll hit to make it outside of Hawaii all over the country, he came to me and said, Look, these guys can make records, why don't you? So we picked "Beyond the Reef", which was the Alfred Apaka hit song, which was very popular back in the 50s. And Mr. Bertram said, Look, you know, to push this record, you've gotta sing it when you emcee shows. Now, Alfred Apaka was the singing star of Henry J. Kaiser's Tapa Room at the Hawaiian Village Hotel. So I was all set to sing it that night, I'd rehearsed it that afternoon with the band. So I came out, the emcee of the show, and I looked down at the front row, there's Mr. and Mrs. Henry J. Kaiser, and Alfred Apaka, sitting in the front row. I didn't sing it that night.

[CHUCKLE]