

GUEST: EMMA VEARY 1
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Emma Veary, the beautiful singer who was known as “Hawaii’s Golden Throat,” performed in the most prestigious venues in Waikiki and socialized with Hollywood celebrities. Today, Emma Veary remains a Hawaiian musical treasure.

Aloha no; I’m Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. And I’m very pleased you’re joining me for this *Long Story Short* with the elegant Emma Veary. We’ll sit down with her to share stories next.

Emma Veary began performing at the age of 5 and came of age during World War II. She would headline at the top venues in Waikiki – the Royal Hawaiian and Halekulani Hotels. And she performed in New York City. Today, she lives a quiet life near family members on Maui and recalls small-kid-time in a loving Hawaiian household in Kapahulu.

Your mom was full-blooded Hawaiian?

Yes, she was full-blooded Hawaiian.

What about your dad?

Daddy was hapa. And we always said he had this much Hawaiian in him, you know. But um, he had some half-brothers. So I was always saying, Well, it’s either whole or nothing. [CHUCKLE] Rotten kid. [CHUCKLE]

Your dad worked at the harbor? Honolulu Harbor.

Oh, yes, Dad worked for Young Brothers. He was a tugboat captain. And I always tell everybody, Do you know I knew Mr. Jack Young, and Jack Young, Jr. who owned Young Brothers? Because we used to go down with Dad all the time.

Today, we don’t think of them as real people. It’s a corporate name.

Yes. No, we knew them. And so we’d go down there, we’d play pool with the guys. I’m an old garbage mouth as a result of that. Hanging around with the stevedores and the tugboat guys, you know; oh, boy, I have to watch it. But we used to go down there and play. And Mom would go do her business, she’d come get us, and we’d go home. And the nicest thing about that when he was working there, Dad ran the pilot boat. And in those days, Dad would take his tugboat, go Aloha Tower, pick up the pilot, and take him out to Diamond Head. And so as kids, we would go down with Dad, and he’d say, All right, be quiet. And we’d sit in the back of the tugboat. You know, and it was just so much fun. And on moonlight nights, it was just great. We all used to sing all the time. And because nobody had any money, what do you do? You sit down and you enjoy yourself and play music, and sing and dance. And of course, because we were from a poor family, we always had an ukulele. My brother used to play the ukulele, my sister danced, and I sang. And that was our entertainment, that was what we did because we didn’t have money. You know. And the neighborhood kids, we had a little thing going where, in those days, they had Party Pack, which was a drink like a Coke. And it was a tall bottle, and they had strawberry, root beer, and orange. And they would give you a dime a bottle, I think, or five cents a bottle. So the neighborhood kids would collect all of these bottles, and on the weekend, we’d take it all down to Koga Store [CHUCKLE] down the street, and get our money, and pool all of our money together and say, Okay, we’ve got so much money. We can go to Hawaii Theater or Princess Theater. But if we ride both ways—‘cause we were in Kapahulu, now; if we ride both ways, we cannot have no popcorn or crack seed. So let’s take a vote. Maybe we ride one way, and we walk home; then we can have our crack seed.

That’s a long walk home.

So we’d go. We’d go to either Hawaii Theater or any of the theaters in town, which are no longer there, except Hawaii Theater. And we’d see our movie; and then we would play all the way down Kapiolani Boulevard, all the way to Kapahulu.

And how old were you then?

Up to Winam. We were just—oh, my; we were like twelve, thirteen and ...

That’s a nice little workout.

Yeah. We’d play all the way home. You know, and at that time, there weren’t many buildings on Kapiolani Boulevard. And it was just papyrus and coral. But we would just play all the way home, and then we’d peel off

and say, See you. You know, when we'd get to Winam Avenue in Kapahulu, peel off and say, Okay, we'll see you at school.

What was the rule about when you had to get home?

Our rule at home was we had to be home, bathed, and ready to have dinner at five-thirty.

Why, was that when your—

That was just—

--dad came home—

--the rule.

--or something?

Yes. Because Dad came home from work at that time, and we'd all sit down and have dinner. And we were all in our pajamas, getting ready to go to sleep, you know, after that. Do your homework.

M-hm. You didn't think you were missing out on anything material when you were a kid?

You know, I was always working. I started working when I was five. I've been singing since I was five, because I discovered that people wanted to hear me sing. And they would pay me. And being from a family who didn't have a lot of money, wow. I would—I had a special letter from the Liquor Commission so that I could go sing in clubs.

At age five?

At age five. And Mother would go with me. And I sang at all the big clubs. And at that time, later on, as time went on, all of the celebrities used to go to the Waiialae Country Club; that was the place to go. And I used to sing there on weekends. So I had the pleasure of meeting all these lovely stars. And of course, one couple that you don't know, but there was Rochelle Hudson, there was Bette Davis, and there was Dorothy Lamour. And I had the pleasure of meeting Dorothy as a child when she was a very young woman, and again when I was working at the Halekulani. One night they told me, Emma, Dorothy Lamour is here tonight. And I went, Oh, my god. So I pulled out a medley of her songs, and sang them to her, and reminded her about when we met when I was a child. And she said, Oh, my god, she says, after hearing you sing those songs, I never want to sing them again. [CHUCKLE]

Aw.

But she was such a beautiful, beautiful woman. And at that time, we had so many theaters. You can't believe how many theaters we had that had shows.

Live shows.

Live shows. There was the Princess, the Hawaii, Liberty, Queen's, King's, Palace, Pawaa Theater, Kewalo Theater. These are all no more.

They were movie houses? They were—

They were movie houses.

--musical acts?

No; they were movie houses, but they would have music you know, between the shows. Like Radio City Music Hall. You know, they would have some come on and perform in between the movies.

That was standard in those days—

Well, they—

--in theaters?

They used to have a lot of that going on; yeah. So I used to go and sing at all of these theaters. And I sang at Hawaii Theater so many times.

I know you walked back from seeing the movies when you were a—

Yes; yes.

--a kid. How did you get around in those days when you were a very young singer?

My mother was always with me. My mother always took me wherever I had to go; she was always there with me. And she used to sew my little gowns and my curls, long curls—I had long hair way down my back, and she'd make these long curls with ribbons, you know, like. And then I met—while I was going through that phase, in 1941, Joe Pasternak came to Hawaii and saw me perform somewhere, and asked me to come to Hollywood, and he would groom me to become a star. And we had said okay. And I was supposed to leave on the 8th of December in 1941. And on the 7th, the war started. So he called me and he said, you know, to my mom, Does she still want to come? So my mother says, You have to ask her. So I got on the phone. I said, Well, Mr. Pasternak, I said, inasmuch as there's a war going on, I'd rather stay home with my family. So I lost out on that one.

True; the State went into martial—

Yes.

Well, it wasn't the State then.

Yes.

It was a Territory—

Yes.

--went into martial law, and—

Right.

--blackouts.

Right. And I didn't want to be away from my family if there was a war. So I gave up that—

You must had some thoughts about that, what if.

What if.

What if.

Oh, yeah, sometimes. But I never go there. I see what's happened to so many of these kids, that were at that point in their lives going through Hollywood, and what has happened to them. [CHUCKLE] And I got, there but for me—you know, I'm lucky not to have gone through that.

And you have a very wonderful career here.

And oh, I had a wonderful—

Now, what—

--career here.

How would you describe your singing? I mean, you have—well, one, you have this wonderful, elegant look; but you have this ...

Well, I started—

--formal—

I started—

--style.

--out wanting to be an opera singer. And I had the goods to do it. And I went to New York when I was fourteen, and—all alone—and went to a girls' school. And I stayed—I talked to the International House people who just—they were apartments, it was a home or a huge place for foreign students, college students. And I befriended some college students, and then I went to see the manager of the International House and asked if they wouldn't allow me to come and stay there on weekends, because I had no family. And so they allowed me to do that. So when I wasn't in boarding school, I would be at the International House, and I discovered Broadway. And at that time, all the biggest Broadway shows were on: Carousel, Song of Norway, Bloomer Girl. All of these shows were on Broadway at the time, and I fell in love with Broadway, and decided, okay, I can sing a little bit of opera, but I'd like to sing a little bit of Broadway too. And that's how I came into being able to—fortunately, I could pull it off. I could sing a little opera, I could sing a little operetta, I could sing some Broadway, and I could sing some popular songs. Then I could combine my Hawaiian music with that, and that's how I became an act when I came home.

Now, why did you come home? I mean that's—you know, New York. If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.

Right, right, right. Well, you know, I kept going back and forth to New York, and I did a lot of summer stock there. And of course, I did do some shows here. I did at the Honolulu Community Theater. And that was after I was—let's see; was I was married at the time; yes. But I did some shows here with Donald Yap, who's still here. And loved it. And I was just going over some tapes the other day, doing Carousel with the Honolulu Community Theater.

How do you hold up?

Pretty good.

[CHUCKLE]

I'm still doing pretty good. [CHUCKLE]

And looking back at what you sounded like then, do you—were you all that, that you thought you were at the time?

You know what? I was shocked that—I was amazed. [CHUCKLE] You know how sometimes you don't know what you have, when you have it?

Right.

I was amazed with some of the things I could do vocally.

M-hm.

I still, you know, I still sing, I still work. But I miss—I always say I miss my old self. I miss my voice. It still works, it's still great, but it's not where it was because I'm not where I—you know.

Well, for those who weren't living here, or weren't alive in the 70s, your name was the class act around town. You were the headliner at the—maybe the first headliner at the Halekulani Hotel.

Yes; yes. They didn't ever have an act there. And Hal, Aku—

Your husband at the time.

I was married at the time. And I talked to him about doing the act. And so we went down and we were at the Royal Spaghetti House, and when we decided we wanted to leave that venue, and come to Waikiki. So he went and talked to the Halekulani, and talked them into putting me on the lanai there. And because of the way the room was, I said, I've got to design a stage that would work for me. So I had an H and I would put the piano in either side of the it was an H like that, the piano here, the piano there, and I had around H, and I could work here, I could work here, and I could work between the pianos. And so they built the stage that I wanted, and they built me a dressing room. And on opening night, I went to work at the Halekulani, and they had put a drape down in the back where the ocean was, to keep people from looking in. And so I said to them, Excuse me, what is that there? And they said, Well, that's to keep the people out. I said, You know, you have one of the most beautiful views in Waikiki. And I said, I want you to take that away. They said, Well, we paid five thousand dollars to build that thing. I said, Well, I don't want to go on if you're gonna have that there, because there are people passing by; they will become fans, they will become clients after and come into the show. I said, So I'm not gonna go sing until you put that silly thing up.

So they wanted to block the—

Yeah, block—

Block you—

Yeah.

--from the beach, even though it was an—

Because the people—

--outdoor venue.

Yeah, because the people would look in.

Well, it's fun—I have a different point of view on that. My vantage point was, I was one of the beach people. You know—

Right, right.

--the rug rats out there—

Right.

The kids and—

Yes; yeah.

--and the young adults who—

Yes.

--who were taking advantage of the free music in Waikiki.

I used to—

You could go up and down the beach, and—and—

I used to call them my—

--sit in the sand.

--my scholarship crowd. And eventually, they all came in. And they would come in and have dinner, and see the show. And they'd tell me, I'm the scholarship friends, you know. And I've met people on Maui; I'm friends with ali'i at—the Lavender King of Maui. And people come to up him all the time, and they know that we're friends, and I helped him get the business started. And he said, you know, people come up and say, I used to be here scholarship crowd. You know.

[CHUCKLE]

And I went, Oh, my god. **[CHUCKLE]**

That's right; they knew what time your show started, and they were there early.

And you know—

But they weren't in the—

Right, right, right.

--chairs.

And New Year's and Christmas, some friends would show up, just to be cheeky, and they'd get their wine and everything, and sit on the sand, and watch me. And I'd go, shame on you. **[CHUCKLE]**

And that was a phenomenon that I think a lot of people have forgotten or didn't know, when there were live showrooms in—

Yes.

--Waikiki, and there were the cheap seats on the beach.

Right. Right, right, right. But you know, I felt like, hey, where would I be without these people?

M-hm.

They are also people who will eventually come to see me. My fans are very precious to me. And I communicate—people call me, I talk to fans, and I have a relationship with my fans. Because I wouldn't be who I am without them.

In those days, wasn't it called, at the Halekulani—

M-hm.

--the Coral Lanai, where you performed?

Yes; it was on the Coral Lanai, yes. Yeah.

It wasn't House Without a Key; it was—

No; it was—

--Coral Lanai.

--the Coral Lanai. Yeah. Because the House Without a Key is next door; it was next door. Yeah. Yeah.

And then you were a headliner at the Monarch Room as well.

And then after I left—

The Royal Hawaiian.

--there, I went to the Monarch Room. And performed there for a number of years. And that was interesting. It was very interesting, and of course, there, I had a big orchestra. Which was another you know, style of work. Because the other, I had either two pianos or piano and a harp. And then I went to a thirteen-piece orchestra after that, with a piano player.

What was the most requested song when you were at the Monarch Room?

You know, everybody had their own different songs that they wanted to hear. Of course, everybody wants to hear *Kamehameha Waltz*, because that was—

That's—

--the signature song. That was the signature song.

And also, a song written by Irmgard Aluli.

Oh; *E Maliu Mai*.

Yes.

E Maliu Mai. Yes; that was also another signature song.

Emma Veary's social circle included some of the biggest names in radio and television at the time—Hawaii Five-O actor Jack Lord and his wife Marie; singer Jim Nabors; comedienne Carol Burnett; and Hal Lewis, the highest-paid disc jockey of the time, better known to radio listeners as J. Akuhead Pupule.

I remember when it was announced that you would marry Hal—

[CHUCKLE]

--Aku—

Right.

--Lewis. I—it seemed like such a mismatch, 'cause he was this—

[CHUCKLE]

--wild and crazy man, and you were this elegant, serene, beauty. How did that happen?

You know, that was so funny. I was sitting at home one day, and the phone rings, and this voice says, Hello, this is J. Aku Head Pupule. And I hung up the phone. [LAUGHS] And then he said—the phone rang again, and he says—

You thought it was a crank call?

Yeah. He says, Excuse me, he says, this is—he says, Don't hang up on me, this is Hal Lewis, J. Aku Head Pupule calling. I said, Yes, what can do I do for you, Aku? And he says, Well, I'm divorced, and I want to marry you. [LAUGHS] And I hung up the phone again. [LAUGHS] Hung up the phone again.

Did you think it was him that time, or you still thought it was a crank call?

I knew it was him, 'cause I recognized his voice. And I said, You're crazy. I hung up the phone. And so he called back, and I said, Okay, I will talk to you if you'll just be civil, and what is it that you want? He said, Well, I'm divorced, he says, I'd like to take you to dinner. I said, Okay, if you don't you know, go crazy on me, I said, I will go to dinner with you.

What did you mean, go—

Because—

--crazy on you?

Well, start talking silly, like I want to marry you, et cetera. And because he had always been good to me, on the radio. When I was singing with the symphony, and working around town, he always used to—since I was little, he used to play my whatever.

And promote you.

Music, and promote me. So he comes over, and I said, well—I told my mother and my children; I said, Well, J. Aku Head Pupule is going to take me out to dinner tonight. And they went, What? [LAUGHS] And I said, That's all right, I have to be nice; he's been nice to me all these years, you know. And so he comes to the door, and he

knocks on the door. And I open the door, and he says, Will you marry me? I slammed the door on him. It was the funniest meeting we've ever had. And finally, I said, Okay, don't talk silly; I'll go to dinner with you, let's go to dinner. We went to dinner, came home. Then he said, Well, I want to—you know, I want to meet your daughters. You know. So we went out to dinner, and he tried all of the shtick that he could. Oh, and the first night we went out to dinner, he took me—we went to the top of the Ilikai.

M-hm.

And so we get up there, and he's trying to impress me, naturally. We get up there, and the girl says, Yes? He says, I need a table; my name is J. Aku Head Pupule. And she says, I'm sorry, we don't have a table.

[CHUCKLE]

And he looks at me, and I start giggling, and he says, My name is J. Aku Head Pupule. And she said, I don't care who you are. **[LAUGHS]** She was brand new to the islands; she didn't know who he was. And he couldn't get in.

And what kind of a name is that—Aku Head Pupule?

I am hysterical.

[CHUCKLE]

I'm laughing so hard. Finally got the manager; they said, Oh, god, Hal, come on in. And they took him in. You know. But that's how we met. That's how we met. And then we took our children out, and he was a really nice man. I used to tell him, Why are you so abrasive? He said, Who the hell would listen to a nice guy; I get 'em so goddamned mad that they won't—they can't turn me off. And that's what he did.

Because they didn't know what he would say—

Yes.

--next.

Yes; yes.

But was he really that brash?

No, he was a real nice guy. He was a really nice man. You know. But—

So did you start to feel pitter-patter and flutter-flutter, or when did the—

Oh, oh—

--romance begin?

Oh, oh, gosh. **[CHUCKLE]** But he was—you know, he was a really nice man.

M-hm. And did you have fun times together?

Oh; oh, did we have fun times together. Yes; we had a lot of fun together. But people say, Well, why did you get a divorce? I said, You know, it's very difficult when you have two people; one works during the day, the other one works at night. Hal comes home from work, he goes to play golf, then he comes home to see me. I am walking out when he's coming in; okay? When I get home at night, he's asleep. He get up, and he goes to work. There is no—how can you maintain a relationship? We managed for ten years, eleven years living that way, but it's not easy. It's not easy to maintain a relationship on that you know.

So it had nothing to do with his abrasive—

Being mean or—

--ness or—

Yeah. No, no, no, no. He—

And the story about him was that he was the—everyone said he was the highest paid disc—

Yes—

--jockey—

--he was.

--disc jockey—

In—

--in the country.

In the country; in the country. I guess in the world, if you want to go there, because we—you know, he was. Definitely.

Does that mean you got accustomed to a life of luxury?

Yes, yes, yes. But I have to tell you this; I got the—I did the down payment for our home. **[CHUCKLE]**

Just because you have it—

For—

--doesn't mean you—

For—

--keep it.

Yeah. For—also for a home in Kahala, yeah, that we loved.

And then after you got divorced—you didn't marry again?

It took me a while before I married again. I did marry one more time. Actually, I'm a mother—I have two daughters. I've got two real daughters. I got nine fake kids. [CHUCKLE] I have children from wait; two other marriages. And there are nine of them. And they still call me Mother. They all moved to—a bunch of them have moved to Maui, and what they said was, What do we call you now?

Because—

I said, What did—

--of the divorce?

Yeah. What did you call me before? I divorced your father; I didn't divorce you. [CHUCKLE] You know, so they still all claim me, so I kind of got a big bunch of kids around. They're all grown up now, with children.

The move to Maui about sixteen years ago. You live—

Yes.

--near your daughter, Robin.

Yes. Robin, interestingly enough—I have two daughters. Noe is a kumu lomi lomi; she's a lomi teacher. She has taught all over the world. She's been to Switzerland, she's been to Germany. She's taught in Japan, and she loves her work. And she has two boys. And one of them has a son. So I have that great-grandchild. And Robin, who has become a musician, and is very successful at what she does, has three children, and two grandchildren. And so we're kind of growing here, you know.

And Maui is now—Maui is a preference over Oahu at this time?

For me? Oh, yes. Yes.

And now, you are a great—

Great.

--grandmother—

Yes.

--who appears to be ageless.

[CHUCKLE]

Would you mind saying how old you are?

I'm seventy-eight.

And don't look it and—

And so—

--don't feel it?

Sh-h. I feel it. [LAUGHS] I might not look it, but I feel it. No; I'm in good health. I've never, you know, drank or smoke. I've worked, and it's managed to keep me young. Just the work itself, you know. And just the attitude that—I won't let anything pull me down. I look at the world with different eyes, you know, than when you were-- you just grow as you get older. And the aches and pains happen periodically, and you just say, Okay, so what. [CHUCKLE] Just keep going, you know.

Emma Veary, Hawaii's "Golden Throat" from the golden days of live music in show rooms up and down Kalakaua Avenue. The liner notes on one of her albums read: "Where in Hawaii can we find the class act - the best entertainment? Emma Veary at the Monarch Room of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel." Written by Emma's Kahala neighbor back then, none other than Hawaii Five-O star Jack Lord.

Mahalo to Emma Veary and to you for sharing company with me on *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou.

Video clip with production credits:

My mother was a very intelligent woman. You know, when she was a young girl, they gave her a scholarship to go to school—where was it, I guess the Mormon people, because you know, she was so bright. And she chose not to. But she was always reading, and reading. That was her thing, and she got us all reading; and my entire family reads constantly. Because of wanting to learn, and understand more about life, et cetera. And that's how—she always was that way; she always read from her childhood, up until she was, you know—still, when she lost her speech and I was taking care of her, she was still reading. You know, and writing notes to me.