

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: MICHAEL TITTERTON**

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There are very few human behaviors that go back further than storytelling. It's the quintessential social act. Any time we pass knowledge from generation to generation, you know, if we don't have a written language or anything, which we haven't for most of the history ... and it's how we bond. It's a wonderful vehicle for healing, for illumination, for understanding, for being civilized. That's what life is; it's the stories we get to tell.

**Michael Titterton has been in the business of storytelling most of his life. Yet, it's only one of the many skills that he needed to transform Hawai'i Public Radio from a small faltering station into a robust statewide network. Michael Titterton, distinguished 2016 Alfred Preiss Honoree, next, on Long Story Short.**

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

**Aloha mai kakou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Michael Andrew Titterton moved to Hawai'i in 1999 to take over as president and general manager of Hawai'i Public Radio. Under his leadership, HPR expanded its reach as a vital community resource, broadcasting on every island, and serving the entire state. He stepped down in June of 2016. This conversation took place six months later, after he did some traveling with his wife, artist Madeleine McKay. Travel and moving on have always been Michael Titterton's passion. In fact, his time in Hawai'i was to be just another stop in his roaming life journey. But after ending seventeen years at Hawaii Public Radio, he's still living happily in Honolulu. Michael Titterton started out life in postwar London. He's restrained in that very English way, in the way he describes tough times.**

At the time I was growing up, the part of the east end that I grew up in was the most populated, most densely populated urban area in the world, with the exception of Calcutta. I was born immediately after World War II. And the east end of London being industrial, was an area that was a focus of attention for the German air force during World War II and so, a great deal of bomb damage. Every block, you know, for as far as I can remember had houses that were missing or that were just walls. You know, earliest memories is walking around the block and looking at houses, and into rooms that had two walls left, and the other two walls were gone, so you could look in

and see pictures still hanging on the wall, and wallpaper, and looking into people's intimate lives. And it was a routine, very routine occurrence. Never thought it was odd.

**Did you feel unsafe?**

No, not at all. Not at all.

**So, it was kind of a homogenous diverse neighborhood?**

Not that diverse; it was mostly Irish.

**And your family is, by background, Irish as well?**

No; not at all. My father is English, my mother is Welsh. So, you know, yeah, we were outliers, I suppose. But it never really seemed that way. Life was sufficiently challenging that you didn't give any thought to social standing, or any of that. It was later in life, I became acutely aware of it, and acutely aware that I was motivated to leave. I didn't want to stay there. Once I became aware that everybody didn't live this way, then I began to form the idea of a wall that I had to sort of scale and get over, and I tried all sorts of ways to do that.

**Did you feel deprived of anything as you were growing up?**

Only books. My my father was not an unintelligent man, but he was very uneducated and was quite defensive about that. And he wouldn't have books in the house.

**Oh ... and you loved books?**

Yes, perversely, as one does, you know, forbidden fruit. And ... yeah. I developed a relationship with the local library, and smuggled books into the house. And I've had a romance with books ever since. And that was how I found out, ultimately. That, and radio. That, and radio.

**That's how you found out that you were living a life that many people did not live.**

Yes, yes, yes. It was my first glimpse over the wall. And it was an intoxicating one, and it's one from which I've never sobered up, at all.

**So, how did you scale that wall to get out of the east end?**

Oh, well, I left school at fifteen, as everyone did. Moved out on my own. I did an apprenticeship as a tool and die maker. Factories, you know, was the thing. You went on the line, or you learned a trade.

**Was it expected that that's pretty much what you would do?**

M-hm; that, or become a criminal, which was quite popular option. But that was the skill that I had early on, and I parlayed that into a little business which I ran for a while, making specialty parts for racing engines. Very long story; we don't have time for that.

**Because you love autos, too; right?**

Well, it was an automobile environment. Dagenham was the principal factory area where I grew up. And that's the Ford Motor Company. And it was all about automobiles, and you know, this was the 50s. And yeah, I have gasoline in my veins, I think.

**So, you did build a business.**

I built a little business. Just a very modest thing, but it was quite successful in a surprisingly short amount of time. But I had no judgement; I was very young. And I took in a partner who brought in a little capital which I desperately needed. And he developed a romantic association with another one of the employees, and they disappeared to Australia with all the fluid assets of the company. And that got me quite vexed. And actually exhausted the last of my patience, and I liquidated everything. Sold off machinery and whatnot to make payroll, couple other people working for me. And I was reduced to a minivan and a couple of sleeping bags, and I took off to Europe. I just wanted to be anywhere other than England at that point. I was just really quite over it.

**Without much more than the clothes on his back, Michael Titterton left home. He had no plan, other than to see the world. Now, he didn't have to mention to us his stint in a foreign jail over an incident involving the concentrated form of marijuana, known as hashish, but he did. Because that's part of his story, and he is a storyteller.**

I just took the ferry across to France, to Callet. And spent little over two years, I think, going from place to place. North Africa, Middle East, and Europe, Western Europe, doing odd jobs.

**What were some of your odd jobs?**

Oh, working in garages. I could always pick that up. A a job in Marselles for a while, cleaning boats, you know. I had a job on a trawler in the North Sea, and some disgusting adventures.

That you don't want to hear about. Just things like that. And then, every now and again, I'd go back to Dagenham and I'd get a job on the line at the Ford Motor Company.

**And essentially, you were always making a living with your hands.**

Oh, yeah; yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

**And what did you aspire to? Were you happy with that? Were you ...**

I was thoroughly occupied with that. It was wonderful. I was getting to see the world, or at least a part of it. And I remember a moment when I was still an apprentice toolmaker, and we'd clock in, you know. And the clock was at this counter outside where you could see up. And I was coming in for a night shift, and I looked up and I saw the moon. You know, regular old moon. But I had this moment when it occurred to me that this moon could be seen just like this by people who weren't in Dagenham, but were all over the world. And they must have thoughts just like that. And I knew I wanted to meet some of them. I couldn't meet all of them, but I'd like to meet some of them. And that we had this experience in common. And that moment has just always haunted me. I think that might have been a propellant. But I've always had this real need. It is a need to travel, and see different things. And I've been fortunate enough to be able to gratify it in all sorts of ways, some more comfortable than others.

**Well, when you approach a new city, or a new region, how do you decide you're going to see it? There are so many vantage points.**

Well, in those days, it was simply a matter of how am I gonna manage breakfast, and how am I gonna make the money to, you know, buy the next tank of gas. Or after a while, actually, I sold the van, and so, it was, you know, little more survival oriented even than that. So, it was how do I get by, especially when you don't speak the language anywhere.

**Were you all on your own?**

M-hm; for most of the time. I mean, I had the occasional traveling companion. But no, pretty much on my own.

**So, you were just living day-to-day.**

Absolutely; yeah, moment-to-moment, really.

**That's a great formative—**

It was the best time of my life.

**Was it? Even though you must have been anxious, too.**

I was anxious, I was uncomfortable, I was wet. A lot of the time it was too hot, a lot of the time I had rocks in my shoes. I mean, it was horrible by any rational measure, but it was a joyful, wonderful time.

**Because everything was new?**

Yes; yes. And there was no safety net, but at the same time, there were no barriers.

**Did you ever fall into a hole that you thought you couldn't get out of?**

Oh, yes. It happened in Morocco, and it went on for about three months. And I really didn't think I was gonna get out of that one, but ultimately did. It had to do with a camel saddle that I had, I thought, quite skillfully repackaged. Took the stuffing—you know what a camel saddle is; yeah?

**What is it?**

What is it? Well, I'm not sure I'll ever go near a camel. But it's shaped like a saddle on the camel, and it has a cushion on the top, and it's used as a piece of furniture. And tourists like to take them home and call them camel saddles. So, I replaced the stuffing in the top of this camel saddle with a quantity of very pure white hashish. You've heard of hashish?

**Yes, yes.**

Yeah. And attempted to mail it back to myself in London, and enlisted the help of a young man to do this. And he agreed, 'cause you know, you can get anybody to do anything in Morocco. And he took it into a post office with this. And I thought that would be the sensible thing for me to do. And he did, and he disappeared. Oh, he didn't disappear, he just didn't come back for a long time. And I got curious and a little antsy after a while, and I poked my head in the door and this was another moment that I shan't forget, the tableaux, this young is standing up against a counter. And as I poked my head in, I see him and the camel saddle, which has been ripped apart. And there's two or three officials behind the counter there, and the child is in the process of turning around, you know. And you know, That's the man. And that was that, really. I was the center of attention for a little while. And three months later, I find myself hitchhiking away from Tangier.

**It sounds like you were lucky to get off with three months.**

Oh, yes. I had one visitor, the young man that I'd been rooming with. And he sold my van and he got for me a lawyer, or at least some sort of representation. And I'm sure a portion of the money went to the legal representation, and another portion went to whatever happens to money that flies around in Tangier at that time. And to my immense surprise, I was in a room with uh, with a number of other people. Suddenly, I had a visit from the attorney type, and I had no confidence in this at all, but a week or two later, I was summoned into a court, with no preparation, no fanfare at all. The proceedings went on that I didn't understand a word of, and within half an hour so, I found myself back on the street. And that was that.

**You could have been left there a long time, and ...**

It was the one point at which I've ever considered suicide as a rational alternative. And in that sense, it's been extremely useful. Because, you know, life has had its bumps, as life does, but it's a wonderful thing to know, or at least believe that you know what your limits are, how bad things really have to get.

**You could have ended up locked up and wasted away.**

I could have. Yeah.

**Wow.**

Instead of in management.

**Michael Titterton next went to Greece, where he met a young American woman who traveled with him to Israel, where they both worked in a kibbutz. She returned to the United States to attend college, and he later followed.**

**So, love brought you to America.**

Yeah; yeah, pretty much. Well, I knew I wanted to come to America anyway, 'cause I just hadn't been there yet. But yeah, it was very romantic. And this young lady hitchhiked out from Oregon and met me in New York, and we spent a little while there, and I bought a car from a junkyard in New Jersey for, I think, ninety dollars; 1962 Tempest.

**But you could fix it.**

Yes, I could. Yes; I'm a very capable fellow. And fixed this thing up, and we drove it back to Ann Arbor, which was where her family was. I worked at odd jobs in Ann Arbor for a little while, and then got convinced that I really needed to investigate higher

education. So, that's what I did. And it was a little dodgy, because I hadn't finished high school in any technical sense, but found that I could go to school in Canada, which wasn't far away.

**I notice you got your master's degree in public speaking and rhetoric.**

Rhetoric; yes.

**Why did you choose that?**

Bear in mind, this is the very, very early 70s. It's 1971, actually, and coming into '72. And I knew the US was ... I mean, this was ... social mobility was here, and that's what I was really after. I didn't know it at that time, 'cause I didn't know the words. But social mobility, and meritocracy. You know, if you work hard, you can get places. And it's really what everybody dreams about, when they dream about America when they're not from here. If I was going to understand this place, the quickest way to do it might be to study the media, because that seemed to be the bottleneck through which everything passed. And it was a very busy bottleneck at that point. Watergate, for example, Vietnam War, all the unrest on college campuses. Glorious time. And all of it was being fed through a media, which was under suspicion, as much of it is now. And so, I specialized in that. Wayne State had a particularly strong rhetoric department, and that was where I found myself, with a lot of wonderfully eccentric people.

**And you'd already had experienced storytelling, because you had stories to tell along the way.**

Well, everybody does. Yeah. But I did. Just because of the basic courses that I had to then take as part of being in the rhetoric program, I began to learn something about the mechanics of storytelling, if you like, the idea of a narrative. And I was very quickly drafted into teaching public speaking. So yeah, I hadn't really thought about it, actually, as being part of the whole storytelling business, but I seem to keep coming back to that. But that's what it is. That's what life is, it's the stories we get to tell.

**And sometimes, you do things without having a name for it; right? And then, you find out—**

Oh, yes; most of the time, actually.

**Your real self keeps popping up in the form of what you do.**

Yes; that is true. That is true. But storytelling, I guess that's a lot of the attraction that I have, or that radio has for me, because it's a storytelling medium, and storytelling is ... there are few human behaviors that go back further than storytelling. It's the

quintessential social act. It's a wonderful vehicle for healing, for illumination, for understanding, for being civilized.

**And radio has that intimate quality.**

Mm. It's a one-to-one medium, and it's frighteningly intimate. And the best of radio is indistinguishable from pillow talk. It's that intimate. And that's what I love about it. I mean, what's not to love?

**Michael Titterton started his career in radio by volunteering at his campus radio station, which he helped to become one of the first national public radio stations. From this valuable experience, he went on to spend the next twenty years building, managing, and consulting for public radio stations across the United States. He was thinking of moving on to a new career, when an unexpected opportunity arose.**

**Hawaii advertised this job at Public Radio for someone to take a very troubled station and make something of it, and you said, That's for me.**

Oh; yes. And actually, it was funny the way it came about. Because I'd been consulting for a couple years, going around fixing broken stations. And that was great fun. But I'd reached a point where I thought, this Public Radio thing has been wonderful. And it really has. I mean, I've never regretted a moment I've spent with it. But I've done everything I really want to do. You know, I've been an operations manager, I've been a reporter, I've been a producer, I've been, you know, pretty much every position, and I've been building stations and running them. Time for me to go back to Europe now and reinvent myself again, and see what happens next. And I was in the process of doing that. I had my house on the market. I was winding up all my little business things. I hadn't known about the situation in Hawai'i, and I had three phone calls in the space of a few days from different people that I knew. And essentially, the message was, If you like broken stations, have I got a broken station for you. Anyway, I wrote to the folks here. In all honesty, I thought, you know, this will be one more fix-it job, and then—you know. But I came out and met with the board, and they were all very interesting people. They were clearly all agents of change. That's why they were doing what they were doing and were so committed to it. There was a real will, there was a real spirit about the organization. It just felt right. And we reached an agreement, and I came out and went with them.

There was a real will, there was a real spirit about the organization, It just felt right. And we reached an agreement, and I came out and went with them. Uh, as I say, Honolulu was a big surprise. I—uh, you know, you have this idea of a tropical paradise, and Honolulu is anything but. You know, it's a—it's an intense, very densely populated city with a lot of uh, um ... issues of its own. Uh, it's uh, multiethnic beyond imagination. It's uh, like all those planets that shows up in Star Wars Trilogy, you know. Um, everybody's

from somewhere else. And HPR was that way. I—when I met uh, the crew, everyone was from somewhere else. It was like taking over the Enterprise. You know, there were people from different planets. Um ... and, yeah, grateful, jump in, and uh ...

**How did you get it to rise, when it was definitely in the hole in the ground?**

[I think probably the ... the lever that had the most benefit to it was the one of taking on the challenge of convincing a community that had begun to really give up on this. You know, this is a good idea, but it's just not gonna happen. And convince them that it was a success. That it was a success. Not that it could be a success, but that it was a success. And in that first year, we did three fundraisers, and we've been doing two a year ever since.

**And were you on the desk for HPR? You were handling the pledge interviews and appeals?**

Oh, sure. Oh, yeah.

**Okay.**

Yeah, yeah; yeah. I've always enjoyed pledge drives. I get a lot of credit for being a fundraiser. I'm really not, but I love this business, and the pledge drives are a means to an end. You've got to have the money. The money is a means to an end. It's not about the money itself. And I believe in the thing sufficiently, that getting on air and begging and pleading doesn't bother me that much, because I believe in what we're raising it for. And it was successful, and it seemed to turn around the consciousness somehow. And if people believe you are a success, then they're gonna get behind you.

**And there was always another problem after the one you solved; right? Because you were facing a situation that was layered, upon layered, upon layered with, you know, obstacles, which is exactly what brought you here.**

Well, yeah. I mean, I just thought it was gonna be, you know, another quick gig in this exotic circumstance. But then, you know, the idea got hatched of, Well, we seemed to have stabilized this, now there are a number of things technically wrong with the thing. You know, the old KIPO transmitter, and the fact that we weren't heard in a great part of Oahu, much less the rest of the State. And we built the station in Hilo just because we happened to have a license that was about to expire. We were very motivated to build that station, which we did. And that got us to the point where, Well, you know—

**Let's go statewide.**

Let's go statewide; we're Hawaii Public Radio, after all, and let's try and make it so. And that was the narrative for the next two years.

**Do you reach farther than for-profit radio stations with your broadcast signal?**

Oh, absolutely; yeah. Yeah, we're the only radio station with statewide reach. Yeah; absolutely. I'm proud of what we've accomplished here in Hawai'i with the industry that I love so much. I like to think that Hawai'i is an even better place now, than it was before we developed our Public Radio the way it is. It's grown up now, it can stand on its own however many feet it has.

**Hawai'i Public Radio has received national recognition as a nonprofit organization for its achievements in news programming, fundraising, and fiscal responsibility. Michael Titterton, now HPR's former president and general manager, was awarded the 2016 Alfred Preiss Honor by the Hawai'i Arts Alliance for his lifetime support of the arts and community building. Mahalo to Michael Titterton of Makiki, Honolulu, for putting his skills and service to work for our community, and for delightfully sharing some of his many stories with us. And thank you for joining us. For PBS Hawai'i and Long Story Short, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha, a hui hou.**

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**Looking back at how much physical ground you've traveled, and then of course, how much emotional and social ground you've traveled, you've had a chance to reflect a little bit on your life, and how you were gonna be a tool die guy.**

Yeah.

**And then, with a business, and all of a sudden, you're getting a master's degree and getting into public media, and being a turnaround expert.**

Well, yeah. I never expected any of it. In terms of reflection, I'm still coming to terms with all of that. I feel enormously grateful. I mean, I don't want to be too sloppy about it, but not everybody has the breaks that I've had. And I've been fortunate. I used to think it was a rotten break, but I was fortunate enough not to be born wealthy. Life is good; life is good. It's been a fascinating journey, and it doesn't seem to be quite done yet.

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