

# LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



**TITLE: Hawai'i's Golden Age of Entertainment**

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

There was a lot of it.

**Showrooms?**

Because, you know, Duke Kahanamoku's was a supper club. Don the Beachcomber was a supper club.

**What a different time that was.**

Yes; yes.

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.

When I was at the Kahala, I used to tell people: Hey, go see Brother Don Ho, go see Al Harrington. I says, The Surfers, you know, I said, The Society of Seven. I said: We got some of the greatest shows in Hawai'i.

**We often hear about the Golden Age of Hollywood. Today, younger people may not realize that Hawai'i had its Golden Age of Entertainment, though ours was mostly on stage instead of on the big screen. Coming up on Long Story Short, we will revisit the days when live music filled the showrooms of Waikīkī with three of the musical talents to command those legendary stages.**

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

**Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. On this edition of Long Story Short, we travel back to the Golden Age, an exciting time when live entertainment lit up hotel showrooms,**

**when beautiful Hawaiian songs and popular performers backed by live orchestras drew tourists and locals to Waikīkī, night after night. To recall this bygone era, we feature encore interviews with three musical icons who helped define that time: Emma Veary, Marlene Sai, and Danny Kaleikini. These stars are considered by many to be among Hawai'i's showbiz royalty. They were staples of the local entertainment scene, and their stellar careers spanned continents as well as decades, from World War II into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.**

**In 2008, we visited with Emma Veary, who spoke of how she began her professional career when she was still a child. Her career took off, just as the era that would be called Hawai'i's Golden Age was getting going. Decades later, Veary would still be headlining at the Halekulani and Royal Hawaiian, and her gorgeous voice would earn this elegant performer the nickname Hawai'i's Golden Throat.**

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 that didn't have a lot of money, wow. 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 Wai'alaie 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, a 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.

### **Aw ...**

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 Hawai'i, Liberty, Queen's, King's, Palace, Pawa'a Theater, Kewalo Theater. These are all no more.

**They weren't movie houses? They were musical acts?**

They were movie houses. No, they were movies 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, in theaters?**

Well, 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 Theatre so many times. And then, while I was going through that phase in 1941, Joe Pasternak came to Hawai'i 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 8<sup>th</sup> of December in 1941. And the 7<sup>th</sup>, the war started. So, he called me and he said to my mom: Does she still want to come? So, my mother said: You have to ask her. So, I got on the phone; I said: Well, Mr. Pasternak, inasmuch as there's a war going on, I'd rather stay home with my family. So, I lost out on that one.

**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, maybe the first headliner at the Halekulani Hotel.**

Yes, yes. They didn't ever have an act there. And Hal, Aku, my husband 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 we decided we wanted to leave that venue and come to Waikīkī. 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 on either side of the—it was an H like that, the piano here, the piano there, and I had a round 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 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 Waikīkī. 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 and come in to the show. I said: So, I'm not gonna go sing until you put that silly thing out.

**So, they wanted to block you from the beach.**

Yeah.

**Even though it was an outdoor venue.**

Yeah; because the people would look in.

**Well, I have a different point of view on that. My vantage was, I was one of the beach people.**

Right, right.

**You know, the rubber raft.**

Right.

**The kids, and the young adults who were taking advantage of the free music in Waikīkī. You could go up and down the beach, and sit on the sand.**

I used to call them my scholarship crowd. And eventually, they all came in. And they would come in and have dinner, and see the show.

**And that was a phenomenon that I think a lot of people have forgotten or didn't know. When there were live showrooms in Waikīkī, and there were the cheap seats on the beach.**

Right, right, right. But you know, I felt like: Hey, where would I be without these people? 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, the Coral Lanai where you performed?**

Yes, it was the Coral Lanai. Yes.

**It wasn't the House Without A Key; it was Coral Lanai.**

No; it was Coral Lanai. Yeah. Because the House Without A Key is next door, was next door; yeah.

**And then, you were headliner at the Monarch Room as well, at the Royal Hawaiian.**

And then, after I left there, I went to the Monarch Room and performed there for a number of years. And that was interesting; that was very interesting. Of course, there, I had a big orchestra, which was another style of work. Because the other, I had either

two pianos or a 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 hear. Or course, everybody wants to hear Kamehameha Waltz, because that was a signature song.

**Next, we reminisce with Marlene Sai. Born into the Golden Age, Sai was just seventeen when she was discovered by the up-and-coming Don Ho, and his mentorship led her to embark on a successful singing career that once seemed out of reach. During this 2009 conversation, Marlene Sai told us as a Kaimukī kid, she'd been laying the foundation her whole life to impress Don Ho, learning literally on the laps of talented musicians like her uncle, Andy Cummings, who composed some of her signature songs. Sai's journey to the stages of Waikīkī would first pass through a small club in Kāne'ohe.**

So, Uncle wanted me to listen to the song, and I said okay. And I would come home from school, sit me down on our steps outside of the house, and he'd play and 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 a signature song for you.**

It's one of the signature songs. Yes.

**How does it go?**

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 in the music business with.**

Yeah.

**He's, of course, one of the greatest hapa haole composers, ever. And he wrote Waikīki, which is another song you are known for.**

Signature; yeah.

Waikīki  
My whole life is empty without you  
I miss that magic about you  
Magic beside the sea

One day, I'm driving down Kalākaua, and I'm looking in my rearview mirror, and I see this ... 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 pull over, and I'm thinking: Who in the world is this? 'Cause I didn't recognize him. He got out of the car, came over to me. And I had the window up, and he's knocking on the 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 couldn't remember. Organ? And then he said: You came to my place with Jesse. When he said Jesse, my player, I said: Oh—

**Don Ho is at your window.**

And I'm looking at him, so I rolled my window down. And he said: I lost your number. He says: I don't know where I put the paper; I lost it. He said: I've been trying to get your phone number. So, he asked me; he says: You come down to Honey's tonight, or tomorrow night. He said: 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.

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

There was a lot of it.

**Showrooms?**

Because, you know, Duke Kahanamoku's was a supper club. Don the Beachcomber was a supper club. And the International Marketplace, where it is now, you know, as

we know the International Marketplace, 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.

**That's right.**

You know.

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

Oh, yeah. And then, down the road, Sterling Mossman was there at the Barefoot Bar.

**At the Queen's Surf.**

And you had Queen's Surf. I mean, it was all over. Across the street was the Moana Surfrider, so you had Pua Alameida 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 whirl and try it. And of course, the career was just unbelievable.

**So, you were a teenaged recording star. What if you hadn't had access to all of these wonderful people—Andy Cummings, Gabby Pahinui, and the people who perhaps they didn't—I guess, Uncle Andy coached you in so many words.**

Sure.

**But the others 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 was being given to me.

**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 Waikīkī, everybody knew your name, and many obviously still know it?**

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

**Showing respect?**

Oh, sure. But not, you know, boasting or anything.

**But they have a sense of who you are?**

They do have a sense; 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.

**Our final entertainment icon has also been around a long time. Danny Kaleikini left college to launch his career, and wound up as the longest-running showroom host at a single venue. He would also come to be recognized worldwide as Hawai'i's Ambassador of Aloha. In 2010, Kaleikini told us that long before the Golden Age of Waikīkī, he was living in Papakōlea, and his family was so poor he began working at the age of six—not performing, but delivering newspapers and shining shoes in Downtown Honolulu.**

Before I went to Kāhala, I learned from the best from Hawai'i. I started at places, and I want to thank people. Even when I was shining shoes, I used to go every Friday; right across Hawaiian Electric was Charley's Taxi. And they had jam sessions; Jesse Kalima and A Thousand Pounds of Melody.

**Wow.**

So, my brother and I, we'd go there just about five-thirty with our shoeshine box. And they would say: Hey, the two brothers from Papakōlea; come over here, sing us a song. We'd go up and there and we sing our song; 'O Makalapua. You know. And after the song, we'd pick up like two or three dollars, man, you know. Ho! So, we'd take it to Jesse; he tell: No, no, you guys take that home. And I tell you, I never forgot. Then I went to work at Waikīkī Sands. From there, Ray Kinney saw me, and he took me to the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. And he said: You watch what I do. He said: You gotta learn. Then I learned how to be an emcee. Oh, you know, I gotta thank Reverend Akaka, you know. And Danny Akaka, when I went to Kauai, was my minister of music. So, I was part of, you know, the choir. But Kahu, you know, is really the one taught me about the magic word, aloha. And the ukulele, you know, he told me the ukulele represents the world. You know, there's only four strings, but each string represents all the different people that make up our world—black, white, yellow, brown. He said: You play each string, you'll get a sound, you know, but try playing it all together, then you find a chord, then you find harmony, then we can all come together.

**Who was in your high school class that people might remember today?**

Ron Jacobs, Wesley Park. You know, Wesley was my business manager. Because of Wesley Park, and I thank him very much, he got me my job at the Kahala Hilton in 1967. He got me a contract for five years, and the rate was \$1.5 million. I was guaranteed, which was unheard of.

**What was it like? Do you remember the moment when you realized: I'm gonna play the Kahala?**

Oh, no; I was so scared. I mean, it was like One Step Beyond, you know, to go from Downtown Waikīkī. And Kahala was, you know, The Hilton International, I mean premier.

**Did you replace anybody when you went to the Kahala showroom, or did you create that showroom?**

I created that showroom. I created that room.

**So, what was the thinking process in figuring what will work in the showroom?**

Well, first of all, I said: We're too far from Waikīkī. I said: We have to work hard to get people, 'cause just to catch the taxi, and then local people said: Kahala Hilton; you know how much the cup coffee? One dollar.

**How did you draw them in? What do you think brought them in?**

I did it Hawaiian style. I mean, you know, I did it from the pupu's, and all the kanaka maoli. I mean, I used to sing, "Ua Like Nō A Like", I did "Lei Aloha Lei Makamae". But I did all the ... even like Andy Anderson was one; I love Mr. Anderson, I love his songs. And I used to sing "Malihini Mele". And then everybody used to get a bang, 'cause I used to add my own words to it. But that thing was an upbeat tune, you know.

**Real hapa haole.**

All the hapa haole songs, I tell you. And every night, I sang the Wedding Song. And the other song was either "Lovely Hula Hands", or "Beyond the Reef". Either one. Yeah; and everybody knew the song. Not only the malihini's, but the kama'aina's as well. 'Cause Lovely Hula Hands, Andy Anderson wrote that song, you know.

**So, you started out with a local crowd. And then, what happened?**

And then, the tourists started to come from Waikīkī. Then, I had to go market the show. Then I started to get the Japanese. Once the Japanese, the second show was sold out every night. Was unreal.

**And that showroom was based around you; right?**

Yeah.

**It was the cult of Kaniela.**

Yeah. I mean, I got to meet Queen Elizabeth and her husband. And Prince Charles used to stay there, 'cause he played polo, and he used to come with Princess Diana. You know, I got to play golf with President Ford. All the presidents stayed at the Kahala, and I got to meet them all. And Imelda, you know, she would come; she would stay at the Kahala Hilton, Mrs. Marcos. And she would come to my show, and she always brought like about, you know, forty to fifty people, and they had a section. And the security was tight, and everybody was comfortable and yet, uneasy because of the security and everything else.

**Was it Governor Waihe'e who gave you the title, Ambassador of Aloha?**

Yeah; in 1988. I was so honored, you know, 'cause Duke Kahanamoku has been our Ambassador of Aloha. And I had the privilege of working with Duke.

**You're still known as Mr. Aloha, the Ambassador of Aloha. What does that mean to you? Do you think of that every day?**

Oh, I'm very honored just to share this aloha, not only here, but around the world, no matter where I go. I can honestly say I've seen the world, and because of music. You know, I thank Akua, I thank God. But I go with aloha ke kahi i ke kahi, the breath of life that we share with one another.

**What is the reason the show ended at Kahala?**

They sold the hotel.

**You would have kept going?**

I would have; yeah. I even asked the people if they wanted, you know. But big management, they had a whole different outlook on what they wanted to do. It's a shame, 'cause in 1967, we could have bought the hotel for \$17 million. But nobody would lend us the money. Yeah; but you know, I look back and you know, I say I had a wonderful, wonderful stay, and I thank all the people that supported me, all the people that helped me. We all worked together as one family, you know. And I think that was the key in the success. But the secret ingredient: A-L-O-H-A. That made it work.

**Danny Kaleikini, Marlene Sai, and Emma Veary; three iconic Hawai'i performers, all members of the Hawaiian Music Hall Fame, and each honored with a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Hawai'i Academy of Recording Arts. By sharing their on and off stage stories, they help keep alive the memories of this magical time in Hawai'i. Mahalo for joining us for this reminiscent journey back to Hawai'i's Golden Age of Entertainment. For Long Story Short and PBS Hawai'i, I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.**

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