

LONGstorySHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



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But a lot of the young kumu hula, who are now old kumu hula, weren't so keen on what I was doing. They thought it was the black period of Hawaiian music, you know, where our kūpuna had been tricked, and we had gone into the territory and lost our identity. And there was some ill feeling at that particular time. But as they got older, and as people learned more about all of this, they began to accept it. And now, it's revered. And now, you see it at the Merrie Monarch, and you know, it's found its place.

He kept the music of Hawai'i's past alive and meaningful for future generations. Territorial Airwaves radio host Harry B. Soria, Jr., next, on Long Story Short.

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. For forty consecutive years, Harry B. Soria, Jr. has hosted Territorial Airwaves, weekly radio show featuring vintage Hawaiian music recorded between 1915 and 1959.

You're in the Territory with Harry B.

Soria first launched Territorial Airwaves on KCCN in 1979 with the late radio legend Jacqueline "Honolulu Skylark" Rossetti. It's the longest-running radio show in Hawai'i airing at this time in 2019 on AM 940, as well as on TerritorialAirwaves.com. Soria continues to preserve and share rare and otherwise forgotten recordings of Hawai'i's past in a collection that now numbers more than ten thousand vinyl records. The territorial era music he passionately advocates is also referred to as hapa haole music, or a merging of Hawaiian and Western music.

Hawaiian music is always a reflection of the Western musical influences of the decade. So, whether it's big band swing, whether it's calypso, whether it's Jawaiian now, whatever it is, it's always a reflection of what's on the mainland, and it's coming in and affecting the youth, and they're listening to it. You know, Richard Kauhi was a reflection of Nat King Cole and all of that. You know, there's always some influence coming in which was persuading the youth to change the way they expressed Hawaiian music.

When a young person comes to you and says: Why should I listen to Territorial Airwaves?, what do you tell them.

It's actually been the other way around. People say: Oh, you know, I was born in 1998, but I listen to Territorial Airwaves. And I'm amazed. You know, they're young musicians, they ask for songs to put on their records. There's this curiosity where they're interested in language, hula, you know, all of the performing arts, and they realize that the older music is where it all is.

And there's no direct connection to the people performing it, but you're the link.

I guess that's it. Yeah. 'Cause the aunties and uncles are all gone. You know. I mean, when I play voices on my show—You're in the Territory with Harry B, this is Andy Cummings or whatever—well, they're long gone. They've been gone forever. But they still live on my show. They still talk to you every week. One thing about radio, when the record's playing, that's when you hear the real story. So, the challenge is to, decades later, remember the story that was told off-air by the person who has passed on, and share it with the contemporary audience in a meaningful way. So, it is challenging, but for some reason, all of these things stay with me.

You remember all those conversations.

I think it goes back to my father telling me: This used to be that, that used to be this.

As a child, Harry recalls that his family moved into the very first block of homes in the new housing subdivision of 'Āina Haina in East Honolulu. He attended public schools in the district all the way through his graduation from Kalani High. Here's a stunning fact: for one hundred years, there's been a Soria working in Hawai'i radio, three generations, starting with Harry G. Soria, then Harry B. Soria, Sr., and currently Harry B. Soria, Jr. Together, they're called The First Family of Hawai'i Radio.

Well, Soria is Spanish. They emigrated from Spain to Bordeaux, France, and then to Saint-Domingue, which is the Dominican Republic today, and then to New York City in 1791.

Became Americans then?

Yes. So, just twenty years after the revolution, we were there, some of the earliest Spanish. We kept moving westward, and my grandfather came to Berkeley, California to represent a company, brought his family, and then came over from Berkeley to Honolulu in 1919.

Talk about traveling; that's a lot of movement.

Yeah. So, this is our centennial, our hundredth year in Hawai'i.

1919 was the year he set foot here.

Yup. He very quickly got involved with Marion Mulrony of KGU Radio, the first radio station that started in 1922. And he became the solicitor, and very successful for decades.

What is a solicitor? Attorney?

A time salesman.

A time salesman. Okay; so he sold radio ads?

Yeah, yeah; the very first. And Dad eventually broke in as a personality. So, he became, you know, Going To Town With Harry Soria, or Voice of Hawai'i, or all these specialized shows that my grandfather created to feature him. And so, he became a radio star in the 30s.

So, your grandfather created the shows as a way to sell commercials, and your father provided the content for the shows.

Yes; exactly. My father would jury-rig things and make the first remote broadcast, or the first shortwave broadcast, or whatever he could figure out.

And this was in the days before television. Radio was huge; right?

It was everything. Yeah.

That's what people depended on. So, was your dad a star?

At that time, yes. Yeah; I have a lot of his publicity pictures and so forth. And he was the first guy with his name on a show, Going To Town With Harry Soria. And he was the first personality that was known outside of Hawai'i, because he was known as The Voice of Hawai'i. So, there was recognition transpacific wise. So, it made for a very heady time in the 1930s, but when World War II came, it was all over. After that, the war, when he returned, he was—

When he returned from fighting?

Well, he was a censor for the electronic calls, long distance phone calls and so forth. So, when he returned, he was immediately activated in the Navy Intelligence to be running this particular division. And after that was over, he was in management and sales after that. My mom was a war widow. She was in her early twenties. She left Washington, DC, came all the way across the nation, demonstrating business machines for the women now entering the workforce during the war. At the end of war in '46, she was assigned to Honolulu to Fisher Printing, and she was supposed to demonstrate the addressograph and the new machines. And her first client was my father, who was trying to put together what would be like a Midweek today. It didn't go, but you know, he was trying to get it off the ground. And so, she was consulting for him, and then at the end of the week, they had argued the whole week, and he said: Hey, have you gone around the island yet? She said: No, I haven't seen anything. He said: Okay, I'll pick you up. And that was it.

And there was a big age difference between them.

Yes. When I was born in '48, my father was forty-three, and my mother was twenty-four. So, they were able to bridge those generations, and I think that was part of the magic of our family.

Wow. And that worked; that May-December marriage worked.

And just held hands, walked around the block every night.

Long into their marriage?

All the way through their marriage; never stopped. Yeah; very much in love. My parents bought one of the very first homes in 'Āina Haina, on the very first street, Papai. And it was one of the first ten houses. And we have a photo of nothing but this little street with a few houses on it. My father was a Shriner, and we had lots of parties. That was a side thing going on. And Shriners had lots of parties. So, we had Andy Cummings playing for dancing in our lanai, and I sat in the living room and talked to Duke Kahanamoku,

Wow.

We had all these people who, I found out later, were very important celebrities, but they were also part of the Shrine organization. So, because of that, I got to meet everybody in our home, and it was kind of amazing to look back later and realize who I'd actually spent time with as a young boy. I think the cleverest thing he did was, I was pretty young, still in elementary school, and he brought home a reel-to-reel tape recorder. And he said: Here, this is how you use it; why don't you try and make a show, an adventure series. You know, like I watched on television, the serials. So, sound

effects, and voices, and imitating things. And he told me that the biggest thing that he worried about was that his son would have mic fright. And so, he wanted me to get used to the sound of my own voice on this tape recorder, so that I wouldn't be intimidated by a PA system or a tape recorder, or any other form of electronic recording.

Do you think he saw you going into broadcasting, the way he and your grandfather did?

You know, I don't know. I wonder about that, because—

Pretty subtle, but—

Very subtle.

Yeah. But he did want me to get over that. To him, mic fright was a big deal. You know, he didn't want that. And if you think, in the 50s, where there were very few microphones and opportunities, it'd be easy to have mic fright.

Oh, yes.

So, he had this fear that, I don't want you to be afraid of a microphone. And that seemed to be very, very important to him. So, we addressed that very early on.

Harry B. Soria, Jr. did not immediately follow his father's footsteps into Honolulu radio broadcasting. Despite being introduced to the microphone at a young age, he did take his father's advice and earned a college degree in business, and then had a career in credit collections. Along the way in 1976, he found something in an old overlooked storage crate that would transform his life.

And then, suddenly in '76, the renaissance was happening, and my father said: Hey, you want to see this box of things I have? They're in the garage, and I have to get rid of 'em, we've moving. So, I went through, and here's the contents of his entire office at KGU that he put into a shipping crate on December 8, 1941. So, at one point, Dad pulled this paper tape out. It was carbon paper; it wasn't plastic tape. It was on a reel, and he cued it up on an old machine. And there was Alvin Isaacs and his group. One of the songs had never been heard, and it was about the interisland airport, and it was a comedy song. So, I initially thought: Oh, this would be a great record. So, I approached Mike Kelly and Jerry Santos and the gang, and asked them if they would want to release it on their label. But happily, they said: You should talk to Skylark, 'cause that's more of a radio vehicle. So, I went to Sky, and I showed her something, and we transcribed it. And Skylark heard it, and she was just amazed by it. So, she started playing it on the radio, and it became a big hit.

What was it like?

It was: Here comes the big mokulele. It was called The Mokulele E. And it was all about the interisland airport and the early airplanes. And it was hapa haole, it was real fun kinda lyrics. And it just took off. And so, in '78, '79, it became this big hit on the radio, a highly-requested song.

Harry B. Soria, Jr. would continue to share more forgotten vintage Hawaiian music with Jacqueline “Honolulu Skylark” Rossetti, then a young KCCN radio deejay. She immediately took interest in both the vintage records and the pre-statehood stories that Soria and his father could share with radio audiences. In 1979, Harry and Skylark co-hosted the first episode of Territorial Airwaves.

Sky recognized that we had this older music. She had a passion for 78s, but she was like twenty-three. So, she would play the records, and she'd go: This is so weird, what does this mean, why are they doing this? And I would call my father and say: Dad, they're asking a question about this song. He'd say: Oh, well, that's because we did this. And then, I would call up her and I'd say: Well, my dad says. So after a while, she would say: Why don't you come on. So, I started coming on, bring in some records. . It took off, and that was it.

The beginning of Territorial Airwaves.

Exactly.

And did your father's old office suitcase yield more songs?

It was full of records, and song sheets, and photographs, and business cards, and whatever you can think of. And he spent the time to explain each and every item to me, and kinda walk me through this history of what radio was like. So, he realized that I was interested at that point, and so, he really immersed me in everything.

And I think there are parents who want to tell their children, you know, more about their jobs, but sometimes kids aren't interested at that age. But you were.

Well, especially in our case, because there was two generations between us; right? So, he was like my grandfather.

Even though he was your father.

Yeah. And so, for me to take an interest in his life, back in his prime, was unexpected and he loved it. So, he was very proud, and he was like the consultant for the show for the first eleven years.

And it gave you reach far beyond what someone your age would normally have.

Exactly. You know, if people would ask questions, I could go right to the source. He would give me the answers.

He must have loved hearing the show.

You know, every show, every week, he would listen. And I would come home, and on my answering machine would be a critique.

Oh, on a positive way?

In a positive way. You know, this was good, but you could have ... Yeah. And then, other radio guys, legends, got involved, started supporting me. Ron Jacobs started calling me and giving me advice, and listening to the show. And occasionally, Tom Moffatt. And these guys, I had known them as a young rock and roller, so now they were giving me advice about the radio. So, it really helped that they would give me insights into their careers and what they had done.

And nobody else was doing what you were doing at that time.

No. It was unheard of, you know.

But in part, it was because it was not all that popular.

Well, we didn't even have oldies rock and roll shows yet. You know, this was oldies Hawaiian. Period.

You know, you mentioned this was right about the time of the Hawaiian renaissance.

M-hm.

The Hawaiian renaissance wasn't wild about territorial music. I mean, it was hapa haole, it was not Hawaiian, it was not authentic, it was kind of a mixture, lots of malihini references.

Luckily, I had Skylark, who was my champion, who believed in what I was doing. There's two ways to look at it. You know, some people say: Oh, they outlawed the language, and they destroyed the connection, and we lost our roots. But on the other side, without hapa haole music, we wouldn't have had that string to keep us going to this point, so that we would have a generation rediscovering Hawaiian language and writing songs again .

In addition to his weekly broadcast of Territorial Airwaves, Harry B. Soria, Jr. worked to restore rare and out of print Hawaiian music recordings based on the records he collected over the years. He re-released many of these lost albums on newer formats, like compact discs and digital music files.

Through the years, people would say: Harry, get rid of your records and put it all on tape; get rid of your records and put it on cassettes; get rid of your records and put it on CDs; get rid of your records and put it on the internet. But the point is, I've kept the source material, and I'm glad I did. Because all these other mediums have gone away. They don't last. You know, CDs, whatever; they're gone. So, by keeping the original 78s, 45s, 33s, I haven't lost my connection to the source material.

And I understand you have a lot of those. How many records do you have?

About ten thousand Hawaiian.

Wow ...

Yeah.

And do you keep them in a place you won't say where it is?

No, no. In our living room, we have the working collection in big bookcases. And then, we have more in our storage lockers, so forth.

Wow; ten thousand. And some of them were given to you; right? I heard the story about you going door-to-door.

Yeah.

And saying: Do you want your old records?

Well, there was that time when nobody had a 78 rpm player anymore. And so, what I would do after work is, I had handbills, and I would drive around the communities of Kaimuki, Kapahulu, you know, wherever.

Older communities.

Older communities.

Yeah.

And I would look for a home with fruit trees and a green-and-white striped canvas awnings, so forth. And I would go up and knock, and give my handbill. And they'd say: Oh, yeah, we have that; come, you can get it.

And they have no way to play it.

No way; it's just taking up dust. So, I got lots of records that way. That was in the '78 acquisition. And then, as I went into the 90s, people said: I have all this vinyl, all these 33s; let me give it to you, I'll bring it by the station. I'll do this, I'll do that.

And nobody wanted money; they just wanted to give them to you.

Just want to hear it on the radio. You know, 'cause nobody had a record player anymore. You know, everybody was going to CD; who cared about vinyl. Now, the kids are into vinyl. So, it's gone full circle. You know? Suddenly, they all want vinyl, and they want turntables, and they want to listen to old records, and they're paying big top-dollar for them.

And your wife, she has the same reverence for the past that you do.

You know, it's amazing. We were introduced because she has a collection that she acquired in Paris, when she was living there for thirty years.

A collection of ...

Of records, vinyl, 45s and 33s, from the 1950s, that a French scientist had acquired in the 50s, and then wanted to give to her in the 90s. So, she took care of it all these years. She paid to bring it back home, when she came back home after she was widowed. And then, we had a mutual friend that said: You know, you both have these record collections; you should meet. So, we merged our collections, and we merged our life, fell in love. And her name is Kilohana, and she's a kumu hula in Paris, Rome, Mānoa, Beijing, Juneau, Alaska; all over the world. And so, we have this winter love. You know, we met late in our lives.

How long ago did you meet?

In 2015. Yeah; right after I retired. And so, we took our incomes, refinanced the home, and we have a 1931 vintage home in the back of Mānoa Valley. And we've remodeled it for aging in place, which is the thing to do. At this point, we're focusing on our nonprofit foundation, The Hawaiian Music Archives Foundation. And the idea is, now that I've turned seventy, and Territorial is forty, I don't have an heir, it's time to focus on preparing all of this for sharing with a curriculum for future generations. So, my wife and I hope to have it out there so that it's accessible, and then when the time

comes, we can just transfer it to the proper and the chosen institution to, you know, take care of it for perpetuity. If you had told me back in 1979 that all this was gonna happen, I never would have believed it. But it just seems that slowly, but surely, we've gotten opportunities, whether it was the CD series, or emceeding shows, or you know, being involved in productions, whatever it is, we were able to be part of the culture. And we went from we were this weird little thing, to now we're having Hapa Haole Hula Festivals. You know, that's quite a stretch, over the decades.

And it's because you were there, and you waited for other people to join you.

Pretty much. Yeah; that's all it took.

Territorial Airwaves. Yeah; we're Territorial Airwaves, your source for the history of Hawaiian music.

In 2017, Territorial Airwaves and Harry B. Soria, Jr. were honored with a Krash Kealoha Industry Award at the Nā Hōkū Hanohano Lifetime Achievement Awards. He's also received eight Hōkū Awards for the vintage recordings that he's helped to re-release. At the time of this conversation in the spring of 2019, Soria continues to broadcast new episodes of Territorial Airwaves to audiences worldwide. Mahalo to Harry B. Soria, Jr. of Honolulu, O'ahu. And thank you for joining us for this edition of Long Story Short on PBS Hawai'i. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Aloha nui.

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What are some of the best-known Territorial songs?

Of course, R. Alec Anderson is my favorite, because he was a local boy. He was not a mainlander. Most of the hapa haole composers are. But he was a local boy who had the ability to, in English, with some Hawaiian words, convey the meaning of, you know, the earth, the sea, the wind, all of the elements.