

LONGSTORYSHORT

with LESLIE WILCOX



GUEST: SKYLARK ROSSETTI

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Aloha no, and welcome to Long Story Short on PBS Hawaii; I'm Leslie Wilcox. The Honolulu Skylark. I remember the first time I heard her on the radio. It wasn't just the beauty of her voice, or the image of a Skylark, that held me. It was her knowledge and understanding of Hawaii people, music, history, values. In the radio industry where companies and personnel tend to come and go, the Honolulu Skylark has made a lasting impression. We'll catch up with her next.

The Honolulu Skylark is Jacqueline Rossetti. Her warm voice and warm personality became a fixture in island radio in the mid-1970s. Since then, she's been named Hawaii Broadcaster of the Year and Hawaiian Woman of the Year. And today, she lives and works on Hawai'i Island where she's known simply as "Skylark."

When people talk about you, they say, popular radio personality, Honolulu Skylark, or beloved personality. And they say something with you that I don't hear about them saying with other DJs; it's influential radio personality. What happened? What did you do?

I think I listened, Leslie. I had a passion and care for keeping our culture alive. I wanted to know why songs were written; I didn't want to just hear the songs. I wanted to talk to the composers. And so I armed myself with going out and meeting them, caring about why they wrote a particular song, what inspired them. I wanted to hear about the careers of people that I had heard their music over the years. One of my favorite people, Alvin Kaleolani Isaacs, his big band, syncopated swing era; I loved that. And so he said, Why would you want to be interested in talking to me? I said, Because you did this, you were the ambassador of good cheer in the 30s. Why did they call you that, Uncle Alvin? And so I would sit with them, and they would tell me their stories.

Well, you're going back to the 30s now. How did you know about them?

Well, because I had old 78s; I collected records. You know, Mom kept her collection, and that's what started my collection. 'Cause she would have to practice her hula to these old recordings. And so I started listening to them, and I loved the swing era, and I loved that sound of Hawaiian music with big band. And so, when I had the opportunity to seek these people out, I wanted to make sure that their stories were told, or that somebody could you know, share them with the rest of the audience so that we could all learn about that era of Hawai'i.

At that time, was there Hawaiian music on the air?

There was one station, and that's why I was so excited about getting an opportunity to work there, was KCCN. They were the only —

AM?

It was an AM station; it was from sunrise to midnight. And it went off the air at midnight, and it was an opportunity to share. And I have to laugh, because back then, it was the other side of Hawaiian music, as Krash Kealoha, who was the program director at the time, would call it. They were doing the Funky Hula, and they were doing you know, all this different kinds of hapa Haole, almost, music. And I wanted to bring back the Hawaiian, the traditional Hawaiian. I wanted to hear Genoa Keawe on the radio again, 'cause she wasn't being heard. I wanted to hear some of the traditional music.

And did they think that old school, it wouldn't —

They did.

-- draw an audience --

And they said —

-- people don't care.

No; and I kept saying, No, they do want to hear about this. I want to play chants; I opened my show every morning with a chant, because I felt that was important for us to hear that we came from, you know, beats and chanting before. And every program that I watched as a child growing up, with Aloha Festivals, you had a chanter come out and welcome everybody; and I wanted that when I performed and did my radio show. So I would open my shows with chants, and explain what those chants were about. And people started to listen, you know. They hadn't heard the language translated in quite sometime.

And then you would get a chance to do something that radio executive Mike Kelly would say, changed the radio landscape of Honolulu forever.

Is that putting it—Hawaiian music—on the FM then?

Yeah.

You know, somebody didn't want it; I don't know why. They didn't feel that Hawaiian music was worthy enough for FM, or something; I don't know. Every format had been covered in FM, but Hawaiian music. And I said, Why don't you put Hawaiian music on the FM band? And they said, Well, will you do it? I said, Absolutely. Why shouldn't it be on the FM band? Well, what kind of music would you play? Hawaiian music. You wouldn't put the chants on FM, would you? Yes, I would. You know. And so it was an opportunity to hear chanting, in stereo, and music that has been recorded in stereo for years but never on a stereo band. It was exciting. It was a wonderful time period.

A popular broadcaster today, Billy V, Bill Von Osdol, says you were his radio kumu, and he was so thrilled when you called him over to work at KCCN FM. And he said, basically, you folks built the studios.
We did. I mean, we hammered the nails, and we [chuckle] I mean, from the ground, up. It was nothing but an empty room and they said, Go put up a radio station in there; and that's exactly what we did.

And once you got this traditional Hawaiian format going, how did it do?

It did really well, Leslie. I was amazed at how many people were listening. I had no idea that the young kids would gravitate to it so well. I thought, Okay, sure, we add a little color with the Jamaican music, and you know, that will keep the young kids. And then we get the kupuna and have their style of traditional Hawaiian music. But could it actually blend, and would it actually work? And it did. We did a concert at the Aloha Tower; it was the first of many which now has become the FM100 Birthday Bashes, right? And we took over Aloha Tower at the time, 'cause it was gutted, it was empty. And I couldn't believe how many kids showed up. We thought maybe hundred kids; there was three thousand people the first concert we threw. And it was Kapena and Ho'aikane, and just our local bands. It was nobody, you know, fabulous to come and see; just kids that wanted to play music. And pretty soon, we did these on a monthly basis. And we had to move out of Aloha Tower. We just — there was no room for us anymore. And that's what started the first FM100 Birthday Bash at the Waikiki Shell.

Na Hoku Hanohano; you are a three-time award winner, and I always hear your name when people talk about the founding of the Hoku Hanohano Awards. Tell me about it.

It started as our small, little radio station promotion. We realized that, you know, in one year, we had double the amount of recordings. And I said to Krash, Look at this, we had thirty-six records this year recorded, and if next year it's up to seventy-seven. And he said, We should do something about it; we should honor these people in the recording industry. And as a small, little radio station promotion, it turned into the Hawaii Academy of Recording Arts, and we mimicked ourselves after the Grammy Awards because we thought that's what we could be, a Hawaiian Grammy Award.

Did you have a budget for it?

Oh, yeah; all of three hundred dollars. [chuckle] We had to beg and barter, and back then, we you know, went to the Ala Moana Hotel and said, Do you want to have this event? And they looked at us like, Hawaiian music? Yeah, we want to honor our Hawaiian music. And it's interesting, because people like Melveen Leed, they could walk down the street and nobody knew who they were. Now, Melveen Leed walks down the street, and she's a star. You know, and we sort of, you know, did that; we made stars of our own entertainers that were just going unnoticed in our lifestyles.

You knew Brudha Iz, Israel Kamakawiwo'ole very well. And I've read that you pointed out something about him, which is that he really didn't come prepared to the studio.

Never.

And as a result, for example, in the song that has gone platinum all over the world, you know, you hear some incorrect lyrics and —

Lots of incorrect. [chuckle]

-- consolidating lyrics. He changes chords.

Israel's own interpretation of what the song is supposed to sing like. And it's because he gets inspired, and you go into the studio, and he'll just sing whatever comes to his heart. And he must have been thirteen or fourteen years old when I first met him. And they would call me up on the radio; I wasn't at KCCN at the time. I worked at a station that — KNDI, at midnight played Hawaiian music when KCCN went off the air. And I think that's what lured them to have me come to join KCCN, was I was doing a midnight to eight in the morning Hawaiian music show. And the entertainers were calling in and — and listening to me and —

And I bet Iz called you all the time.

He did.

[chuckle]

He and Skippy.

And he continued to —

And their group.

-- do that most of his life, called —

Oh, he did.

-- folks up, and had his say.

He did. He loved radio; that kept him entertained. And he said, Come on out to Makaha; I have this group, I want you to hear us. And I went out there, and there they were; just these kids in, you know, puka clothes, and just — but their harmonies and their voices, and their family unit was so endearing, and I just loved them. And I brought them to KCCN, and did their first recording, and we started playing — this was when we could play bootleg music on the air. And so that's how they started their career.

And you went and sought them out, and they knew it.

Yeah; they did.

You gave them a voice they really didn't have. But what would move you to go all the way to Makaha to talk to a couple of teenaged boys about their music?

Once I drove into their yard, and Mama and Daddy were out on the porch, I said, Oh, my gosh, I found myself home. And I just — you know, they were just this sweet family, opened up their hearts to us, and to me, you know, and I just, you know, I felt like home.

Skylark's passion for the people and traditions of Hawaii resonated with listeners at a time that Hawaiian music and culture were going through a renaissance. That's when she really found her "voice."

Well, let's go back —

Okay.

-- 'til way before the Honolulu Skylark emerged. Where'd you grow up? What was your growing up like?

It was a wonderful Hawaiian family. The Mahi's are my mother's background; she had ten brothers and sisters.

Are you related to Aaron Mahi, the —

That's my —

-- former band leader?

-- first cousin. Yeah; his father and my mother are brother and sister. There were ten children in that family, and they all had four or five children each. And so we had a wonderful family home in Kalihi, where my grandfather lived, and our families built their beach house in some property that my grandmother had right across from what we call Baby Beach Park in Ka'a'awa. So our family spent weekends in Ka'a'awa and weekdays going to schools in the Kalihi area.

When you say it was a Hawaiian upbringing, what does that mean?

When you're in a Hawaiian family, you learn nurturing of values and living off the land. And we did things like hukilau and did our own imu and kalua pig, and you know, fished. And it was just a warm, family thing. We all slept together in the same beds, and we all bathed together. [chuckle] You know, it was that kind of a family.

Rossetti doesn't sound terribly Hawaiian.

No, my father's pure Italian, and Mama and Daddy met in Pearl Harbor. And he just loved our family and became more Hawaiian, almost, than my mother. She wanted to be Americanized. You know how that was —

That was the —

-- back then.

-- generation, World War II.

That was that generation. And Dad wanted to be Hawaiian; he wanted to learn to fish and hukilau, and you know, do all of those things. And so he gravitated more to being Hawaiian than Mama did. And he loved the brothers and sisters, and just got along very well with them.

And traditional Hawaiian music; when did that come into your life?

I think it had always been surrounded in my life. My father — and I have to give him credit, because he loved things Hawaiian. And during our raising up, Dad was involved with something called Aloha Week back then. And he surrounded us with just wonderful mentors that were our aunties. I didn't know that they weren't really related to us, 'cause we always had — everybody was aunty and uncle.

So your pure Italian dad —

Yes.

-- and not your full-blooded Hawaiian mom introduced —

Thank you.

-- you to this.

Yes. And he was, you know, hanai'd by Auntie 'Iolani Luahine, and Auntie Sis Wiederman, and these wonderful pillars of Hawaiian. And they nurtured my father in this business. I remember watching Auntie 'Iolani dancing at 'Iolani Palace in these beautiful Hawaiian pageants. And I said, That's what I want to do; I want to keep our culture alive.

I never saw her dance in person. Is it true what people said, that when she danced, it was as if something else was inside her, living through her?

Absolutely. Auntie enjoyed an inu, and when we were at parties, after the big pageantry, she would have an inu or two. And then all of a sudden, she'll hear a song that somebody's dancing or singing, and she became a whole different person. And you'd look at her like, what happened, what possessed her. And she'd just start dancing or chanting, or — she was just a marvelous woman. And then after it was pau, it was like, Oh, where am I?

[chuckle] And she's —

And she went back to —

-- back at the party.

-- hanging out —

Yes.

-- at the party.

Absolutely. And she was just a gracious, lovely lady.

So your dad worked for Aloha Week, or volunteered for Aloha Week?

It was a volunteer thing for over forty years of his life. He's director emeritus, if you look at the — well, I don't know where we are with that right now. That breaks my heart terribly to see an organization like that starting to fall apart on the neighbor islands. But it got to me see what life on Kaua'i was like, what life on Moloka'i was like. Because we would go from week to week to the different —

M-hm.

-- islands, meet some wonderful people who all cared about the culture. I don't know if you remember; we used to spend time at Ala Moana Park when there was an Ulu Mau Village.

M-hm.

And they had all the little places that you could go and visit and learn your culture, and pound poi, and watch them weave. It was just a marvelous time to grow up.

And later, they moved that by He'eia Kea.

He'eia Kea; but it wasn't the same as in Ala Moana Park, where it was closer to the people, and people could come and visit.

And that's what Waikiki is trying to move toward now, having lost some of that authenticity.

Absolutely. Yeah.

So here we are; going to Kamehameha. Did they infuse you with Hawaiian?

I think there were wonderful people up there, like Auntie Nona Beamer, who was encouraging you to, you know, learn hula and to dance. And I had always been a part of the music scene. Mama was a hula dancer with Hilo Hattie, and she toured with the Al Kealoha Perry Show and danced at the Lexington Hotel in New York. And so she — you know, she always had her music with us, and she always taught us hula. And then we went to formal training in our neighborhood where we grew up in Foster Village with Auntie Rose Joshua. So we — at the age of five, we were dancing hula and chanting, and you know, uniki'd by the age of fifteen. And you know, I didn't know what that was back then, but it was just a part of how we grew up. You know, and how brothers and sisters would drum and beat the tin cans or the cracker cans in those days for the Tahitian music. And it was hula schools, where you learnt ancient hula, auana hula, Samoan dancing, Tahitian dancing, and Maori dancing.

We talked earlier about the Hawaiian renaissance. One of the highlights of that period, besides the return of traditional music, was Kaho'olawe and freeing the island from target bombings by the military. Were you involved in that?

Well, you remember the gentleman who started the theme and raised the theme of Aloha 'Aina, aloha awareness: entertainer, musician, and a dear friend, George Jarrett Helm. In fact, I named my son after him; that's how close we were. A wonderful family of Moloka'i. And you know, he could sing, and his beautiful voice would transcend to the kupuna. And then when he would talk to them about aloha 'Aina, they could relate to him. And then he started to say, This island is not a distant rock; don't bomb it. I live right there; I can hear this. It's paining me to just watch this smoke go up. Why are we continuing to do this? And it was his thought, his vision of freeing that island from the harshness of the bombing, and watching the red dirt surround the islands; it almost looked like it was bleeding, the island was bleeding of its red dirt. And he said, We've got to stop this. He went to the legislature. And I'm sure you know, people can look at the history books; he gave his life for that island. And I think we were in the early stages. Women were like Auntie Emma DeFries, who I was studying under at the time, a dear friend who I grew up with up. Auntie Frenchy DeSoto said, Do you want to go to the island? And this was in the days when nobody was going to the island; they had just arrested the nine protestors on the island, and they were giving us an opportunity to go in legally and to look at the island. And I was one of those first seventeen onboard. We were called the first warriors, as they call us today, but we went to take the kupuna to see so that they could see that it wasn't just a rock. We weren't bombing just a rock.

Did you feel any mana, or anything special on that island?

Oh, you could feel the island; you can still feel the island today if you got Kaho'olawe. It's just chicken skin. You were there with your camera; you saw how beautiful that island is. And you know, to walk the ancient trails, and to see, you know, poi pounders and shell carvings that you don't see on any other island except Kaho'olawe; it was exciting. Dr. Patrick Kirch did this whole study that we were a part of, and we looked at how the sediments of the earth and how the people — it was just m-m, magical, wonderful.

You're telling me something I didn't know. Do you think it was George Helm who bridged, you know, he went from music to cultural —

I think it was. I think he had this magical voice that could attract people to listen to him, and then he could tell his story. He could say, Hey, this island needs to stop this bombing. And I think that's the way he got the message across.

And that was a multi-generational protest and rally, and in the end, very successful.

And he —

Except —

-- got; yes.

-- now we can't free the island of all the ordnance.

[chuckle] And you know, it's sad, because here we thought that was what was going to happen with all that money being dumped into — we were gonna be able to get it all off the island. And when we were there, we had no idea we were tromping around with live ordnance on the island.

M-hm.

You know, and here we are, taking kupuna and flying them from districts. And Inez Ashdown, who was raised on the island, you know, was in our party, and she was telling the story of how the goats were here, and this water tank was here. And you know, we had no idea that we were tromping her through live ordnance. But we were so passionate, and we were so excited at the time to document these stories. And Uncle Harry Mitchell being with us, and you know, him sharing his passion for the island, because his son and — yeah, it was a wonderful time.

Rich cultural experiences have shaped Jacqueline "Skylark" Rossetti's life. Today she's a single mom living in Hilo – she wanted more a country lifestyle for her children. She's still broadcasting and still promoting the Hawaiian culture.

You're still the Honolulu Skylark, but for the last almost twenty years, you've had a neighbor island perspective.

You know, it's interesting, because I grew up on O'ahu in a rural area, right across from Radford High School in a little village called Foster Village. And we had cow pastures in the back yard, and chickens, and so to me, moving to Hilo where my mother is from, it was almost like I had to because that's what I wanted my children to grow up knowing, was a rural area where we could have dogs and cats, and not live in an apartment or you know, the hustle and bustle of how Honolulu had changed so. And I could go down the street, wave to my neighbor, and he would wave back to me. I mean, that's what I grew up knowing. And that's what I still look at Hilo — as a wonderful place to ensure that the foundation for my children was there.

Are you happy with the state of Hilo radio?

I think it's unique; it's growing, it's changing. You know, we don't command the advertising dollars that we could get with Honolulu, but we're a unique market. And I enjoy, again, like I did with the old kupuna, going out and meeting who these people are, what they're doing. We have wonderful farmers like Richard Ha doing some wonderful things; Barry Taniguchi, who's had this store in Hilo forever. And you know, bringing that into the mix, where people can understand who our community is, is just endearing to the listeners.

Well, how optimistic are you about this Hawai'i nei?

You know, Leslie, I am very concerned about where we're going. I work — another hat that I wear, Leslie, is economic development. And I find that isn't that odd, as a Hawaiian being in economic development. But if I don't get involved and make sure that the culture is okay, then I don't feel that I've done my duty here. And Hawai'i Island Economic Development is into sustainability, is into getting back — instead of shipping everything in, growing it, making sure that our island can be sustainable. And it's hard. You know, there's lots of stuff going on that are influencing, lots of pressures with Mauna Kea issues, lots of pressure with water right issues. And we just had an earth shake in October of '06 that devastated water on our island to get the cattle fed. You know; fresh water. I mean, who is going to replace those ditches? You know. It was a wake-up call for us, on the neighbor island folks — that we've got to ensure, you know, that we're strong and healthy. You know how they say you've been at the right place at the right time? I think I was very lucky enough to be at the right place, at the right time to be able to have mentors take me in and want to train me, like Pilahi Paki is one of my — a very stalwart woman who I just admired, and who taught me so much about who we are, and what we are as a Hawaiian, and made me proud of who I was. I endear myself to people to like Moe Keale, who you know, was

this big, old bear, you know, but just had that love and aloha for people, and it transcended through his music. There's just so many people who are – influence on me, that I want to thank them for helping to shape me. Because if they didn't share their stories, I wouldn't have them to share with other people.

Of all of the musicians, the entertainers, and others you've come across in your career, who's impressed you the most?

You know, it's funny you would say that. There were people, like I mentioned earlier, Alvin Kaleolani Isaacs was a dear man who had that 30s and 40s era. And then in the 50s and 60s, I would have to say there were people like Ed Kenny and Marlene Sai, and those people and those voices that shaped Hawaiian music that I've gravitated to as dear friends. And then in the 70s, it would have to be my friend Gabby Pahinui. I loved Pops. He just transcended this down-home earthiness about him, with that little kolohe style like Israel, always getting himself in trouble with his wife. But just this raw, loving, caring person. And then, of course, my friends from when I went to high school, Robert and Roland Cazimero, and you know, we were all at school at the same time. Keola and Kapono Beamer, they were all much older than I am, but you know, that era of music too.

Skylark continues to share her voice and her stories, hosting radio shows and, for 30 years, the Merrie Monarch Festival of hula. She has a beautiful voice. And she is a beautiful voice, speaking with understanding and love of the islands. Mahalo to fellow broadcaster, Skylark Rossetti and you for joining me for this wonderful *Long Story Short*. I'm Leslie Wilcox of PBS Hawaii. A hui hou kakou!

Video clip with production credits:

How would you intro a new show that you're doing?

How would I intro? How about, From the snow-capped mountains of Mauna Kea, to the warm, sunny shores of Waikiki, you're listening to Hawaiian music that will transcend your heart and deepen your soul. I don't know; I just made something up. I didn't know what you wanted me to do! [chuckle]

I wanted you to keep going! [chuckle]