

The Sounds of Hawaii on Shortwave

by

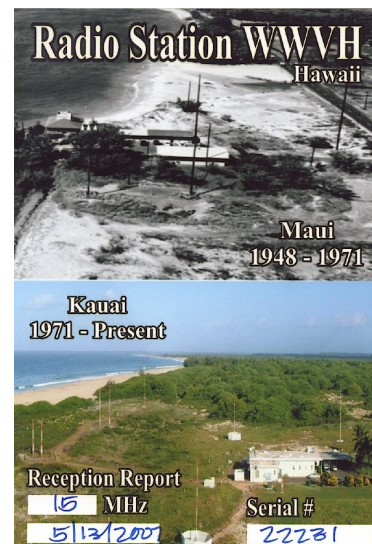
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Hawaii has always been a worthy target for shortwave broadcast DXers, in part because, notwithstanding its status as an American state, for geographical reasons it has long counted as a separate country, at least under the NASWA list.

Shortwave broadcast programming from Hawaii was first heard in the 1930s via the RCA commercial transmitters in Kahuku (Oahu). In December 1944, KRHO, one of the first transmitters constructed by the U.S. government specifically for the Voice of America, came into operation. Eventually the call letters were dropped and the station became known simply as the VOA relay station in Honolulu. It went out of service in 1969. KWHR came to air in 1993, transmitting World Harvest Radio programs, plus some leased-time programming, until it closed in 2009. And from 2000 to 2009, AFRTS programming was widely heard via the Naval Computer and Telecommunications Area Master Station located near Pearl Harbor.

The only Hawaiian “shortwave broadcast” outlet still on the air is WWVH, which is often considered shortwave broadcast because of its voice format and its intended audience (the general public). It came on the air from Maui in 1948, moving to Kauai in 1971.

Hawaii’s importance to shortwave broadcasting was principally its location, from which strong signals could be put into Asia. Despite the exotic setting, most of the shortwave programming transmitted from Hawaii—government or religious—was distinctly non-Hawaiian, reflecting little of the islands’ character or culture. There were, however, a couple of exceptions.



The Kahuku Wireless Station and “Hawaii Calls”

Usually we think of broadcasting as starting with KDKA in 1920, but there were earlier, short-lived broadcasting efforts, and before that there were other uses to which radio was put, in particular commercial messaging, either between land stations or ships or between ship and shore. The leading company operating in the United States was the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company of America, an American branch of famed British Marconi. One of the American Marconi stations was located at Kahuku, Hawaii, near the far northern point of Oahu, next to

today's Turtle Bay resort and about 35 miles from Honolulu. The Kahuku facility was set up in 1914 and was one of the stations inherited by RCA when the latter was created in 1919 to take over American Marconi. The navy had assumed control of the American Marconi stations during World War I.

Early on, Kahuku was a synchronous spark station, operating with 300 kw. on 32.8 kHz. It is said to have been the largest wireless station at the time, in part because it had its own power station, there being no electric power on Oahu's north shore. RCA replaced the spark transmitters with Alexanderson alternator technology, but Kahuku continued to operate on longwave for a while, the discovery of the long-distance transmission properties of shortwave still being some years off (early 1920s).

When shortwave was introduced, Kahuku continued to operate both marine and point-to-point services. When broadcasting grew beyond its local roots there came a need for sending program content over long distances in order to reach the broadcast networks and their standard broadcast affiliates. Part of this journey could now be accomplished by shortwave transmission between point-to-point stations, with the final leg achieved by wire connection to the network involved and thence via the network's own connections to its local affiliates. It was through this system that distant points could be connected and listeners offered the opportunity to hear programs from places they could not hear directly on a standard broadcast set.

These so-called "addressed" programs were intended for reception only by a corresponding point-to-point station and not by the general public. However, once the signals were in the air they were fair game for shortwave listeners everywhere, who enjoyed what they were hearing on HF even if they were interlopers in the whole process.



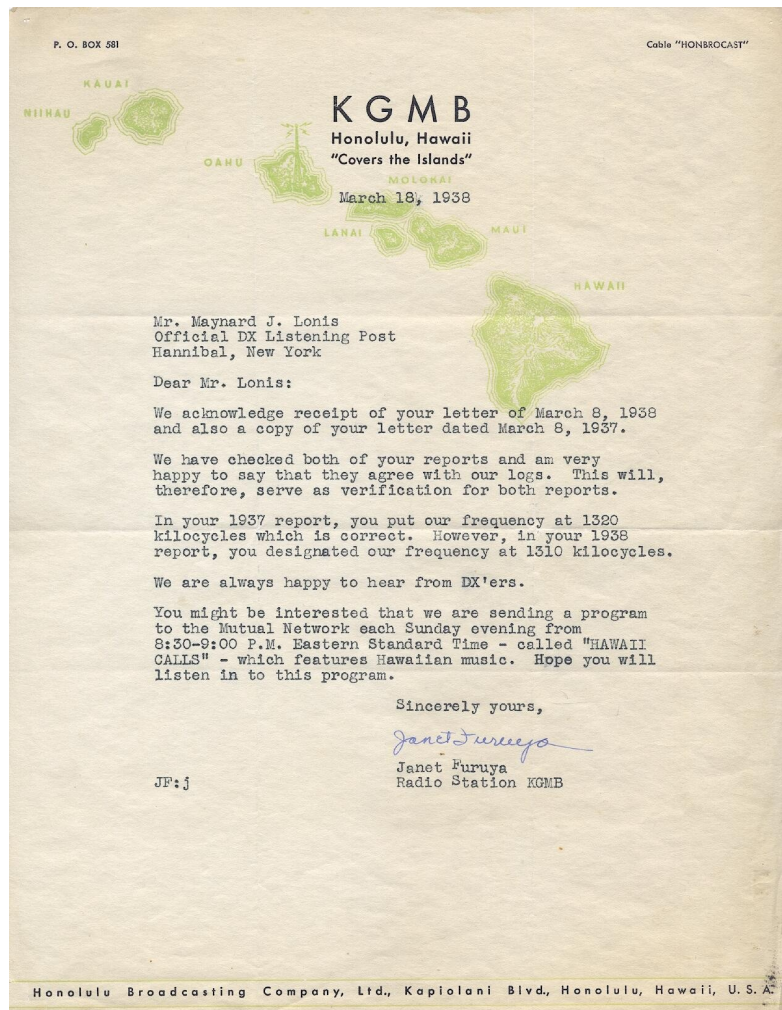
The existence of Kahuku made it feasible for broadcast programming that originated in Hawaii to reach the continental United States, and in 1935 a promoter by the name of Webley E. Edwards, who had arrived in Hawaii seven years earlier, decided to try his hand at making it a reality by founding "Hawaii Calls," a weekly half-hour program of tourist-friendly Hawaiian music. The first program was broadcast on July 3, 1935, the last on August 16, 1975. It was carried at first by California's Don Lee network, later by the Mutual network. At its peak in 1952 the program was said to be carried over 750 stations in the United States, as well as some in other countries.

Venue for the program was the Moana Hotel in Waikiki (Honolulu), where it was

broadcast live from the hotel's ample courtyard before hundreds of islanders and vacationers. Periodically it would originate from other locations throughout the islands, and from time to time big-name personalities would stop by. "Hawaii Calls" did not have advertisers as such. It was supported initially by a small stipend from the Hawaii Tourist Bureau, but soon the Hawaii legislature authorized an annual subsidy for the program (through the Bureau). Over the years, production was handled by various local stations, principally KGMB.

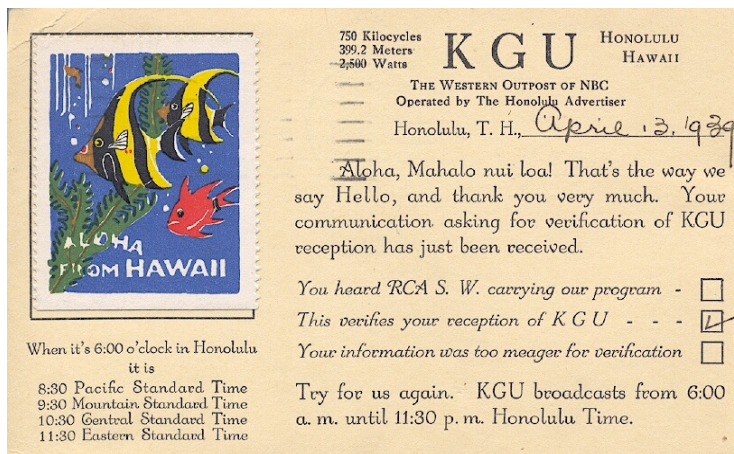
The music heard on "Hawaii Calls" was often stylized to appeal to an American audience (so called *hapa-haole* music), and sometimes it was criticized as not being sufficiently authentic. In later years it was viewed as being old fashioned.

The 1970s were difficult for "Hawaii Calls." By 1972 the number of stations airing it was down to 450. A number of factors contributed to the program's eventual demise, including changing listener tastes and the rise of television. It had lost much of its financial support, and Edwards, disabled by a heart attack in 1972, ended his stewardship of the program soon thereafter (he died in 1977). When the program came to an end in 1975 after a 40-year run, fewer than a dozen stations were carrying it.



"Hawaii Calls" put the islands on the map for radio listeners, and its success did not go unnoticed by the other networks. CBS introduced the "Hawaiian Hour" and NBC the "Voice of Hawaii" program, both half-hour shows. They originated from the islands and were also transmitted by RCA in Kahuku. "Voice of Hawaii" was produced by KGU, Hawaii's first commercial broadcaster, which from time to time arranged for some of its other programming to be transmitted from Kahuku as well. (The FCC turned down KGU's application for a license to operate its own 2 kw. shortwave station, which it had hoped to put on 11850 and 15230 kc.) In addition, Kahuku sometimes used Hawaiian music as a place marker between other transmissions.

As would be expected, Kahuku frequencies were out of band, and varied depending on the season. Among those on which the local programs were often reported were 7520 kHz.



(KKH), 11680 (KIO) and 16030 (KKP). The partner station at the other end of the transmission circuit was the RCA station in Bolinas, California (receiving site at Point Reyes).

Kahuku was also the terminus of a circuit from the mainland which transmitted programming to Hawaii for rebroadcast by standard broadcast stations there. These were usually

sent from Bolinas and picked up at the Kahuku reception facility at Koko Head on Oahu's southeastern coast.

The Kahuku site came under some measure of military control after Pearl Harbor, and at least part of it became home to the Kahuku Army Air Base, which was commissioned in June 1942. However, broadcast relays via Kahuku continued to be reported. The site is said to have remained in RCA service until 1978.

“Hawaii Calls” lives on through a plethora of CDs and oldie LPs, and memories of the two dozen “Hawaii Calls” TV programs which Edwards made in the 1960s. The radio program’s headquarters, the Moana Hotel, is now the majestic Westin Moana Surfrider, and a walk through the courtyard, which looks much as it did in 1935, still conjures up the image of Webley Edwards introducing the program with the familiar, “*This is a call from Hawaii.*”

You can listen [here](#) to a recording of the “Hawaii Calls” program of December 29, 1949.¹

¹If you want to know more about “Hawaii Calls,” and view pictures of the Kahuku station, visit these sites:

[“Hawaii Calls” \(Wavescan #518, December 5, 2004\)](#)
[Kahuku Marconi Wireless Station, Oahu, Hawaii](#)
[Marconi, America, and the Monroe Doctrine](#)
[End of World War I and the RCA Monopoly](#)
[Kahuku Marconi Wireless Telegraph Station](#)
[Maritime Radio Historical Society of America](#)

See also Dr. George S. Kanahale, ed. (revised and updated by John Berger), *Hawaiian Music and Musicians: An Encyclopedic History* (Honolulu, HI: Mutual Publishing, 2012), pgs. 267-271; Susan Smulyan, “Hawaii Calls: Transnational Radio in the Pacific World,” in Sianan Healy,

“Hawaii Calls” Reborn: KWHR and “The Sounds of Aloha”



It would be a long time after Kahuku before Hawaiian programming from a Hawaiian shortwave transmitter would be heard again. DXers were glad when they learned that LeSea Broadcasting, parent of World Harvest Radio, was planning to open a shortwave station in Hawaii, and even more excited to hear the first test signals from the new 100 kw. station, KWHR, on December 19, 1993, a week before its official opening on Christmas Day. The frequency was 9930 kHz. LeSea was already well known in shortwave circles through its operation of WHRI in South Bend, Indiana.

The Kahuku station had been located on the island of Oahu. KWHR was on “the Big Island,” also named Hawaii, with transmitters and antennas at South Point, the southernmost point in the United States, “down the road” from Naalehu on the island’s southern coast. It was just a few months after the KWHR inauguration that Hawaiian programming was again heard on shortwave, this time via “The Sounds of Aloha,” an hour-long live musical show



Bruce Berryman & David Goodman, eds. *Radio in the World: Papers from the 2005 Melbourne Radio Conference* (Melbourne, Australia: RMIT Publishing, 2005), pgs. 267-275, <http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=039259077654193;res=IELHSS>; and Robert J. & Tina M. Wiefert, “The First Years of Wireless in the Hawaiian Islands,” in *The AWA Review* (Holcomb, NY: Antique Wireless Assn., Vol. 6, 1991), pgs. 19-36.

performed at the Shell Bar of the Hilton Hawaiian Village Hotel on Waikiki Beach (once a month the program was produced on a different island). It was a Thursday evening cocktail show (6:30-7:30 p.m.), the last 30 minutes of which was taped to become “The Sounds of Aloha” radio program.



“The Sounds of Aloha” founder was William F. Bigelow, a public relations man who had experience in the radio, TV and travel industries and who had grown up listening to “Hawaii Calls.” The origins of the program go back to 1991, when Bigelow,

with the help of Ron Jacobs (who had helped launch Casey Kassem’s “American Top 40”), prepared a demo and started soliciting stations. (According to Jacobs, both the Hawaii Visitors Bureau and the Hawaiian Department of Business and Economic Development were supportive of their efforts.) The first program was aired on October 2, 1992, using the name “Hawaii Calls,” for which Bigelow had obtained a license. In January 1994 the name of the program was changed to “The Sounds of Aloha,” then performed at the hotel’s weekly Sunday brunch.

By mid-1994 the program was being heard in 29 states over twice that number of domestic AM and FM stations, including five in Hawaii. Stations in several foreign countries also picked it up, as did a satellite network. There were two shortwave airings over KWHR, both on Sundays, first at 1800 UTC on 9485 kHz. to Europe and North Africa and 13760 kHz. to Central and South America, and again at 2000 on 9930 kHz. to Asia and the Pacific.

Alas, the trail has gone cold on “The Sounds of Aloha.” It is not known exactly how long it was carried by KWHR or other stations, but reported loggings were few and its life appears to have been short. It never replicated the popularity of “Hawaii Calls.” Bill Bigelow died in 2008,² and KWHR closed down in 2009.

You can listen to a program of “The Sounds of Aloha” [here](#).



Hawaiian Village Hotel

²For more on his life, see his obituary in the [Honolulu Star-Bulletin](#) and the [Hawaii Army Museum Society News](#) (p. 6). For more about “The Sounds of Aloha,” see Ralph Chung, “Hawaii’s Music Sends Aloha Around the Globe,” *Soundsgood! Progressive Entertainment News*, April 1994, p. 1; and Ron Jacobs, “Hawaiian Airwaves,” *Hawaii Magazine*, June 1994, p. 96.