

Packaging Paradise: Sonic Branding of the South Pacific

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Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder, University of Exeter

Hawaii-inspired music marketed via popular record albums, radio shows, and Hollywood film soundtracks aided Hawaii's transformation in the popular imagination from a mysterious 'primitive' paradise into the 50th U.S. state. Indeed, by constructing and capturing the temptingly tropical so-called 'sounds' of Hawaii on the latest hi-fi recording equipment, the music industry offered up Hawaiian music as an achievement of modern technology, promoting these U.S. islands as an acoustic, as well as a tourist, paradise. Popular Hawaiian music's marriage of stereo technology and so-called authentic sounds produced a repertoire of songs, a musical identity, and an auditory brand asset, creating a potent force and a performative example in the sonic branding of Hawaiian paradise. Indeed, what became known worldwide as Hawaiian music still provides a soothing soundtrack for South Pacific holidays, backyard luau parties, or ironic late night lounging. The Hawaiian record album formed an important stage of Hawaii's construction as a conceptual resource, just as pineapple, sugar and battleships played important roles at earlier stages. For decades the iconic Hula girl and her musical accompaniment have formed the foundation of a strongly appealing Hawaiian identity, making Hawaii instantly recognizable the world over. Contemporary efforts to re-establish 'authentic' Hawaiian motifs in Hawaii, too, draw upon a concocted image (Halualani 2002). Informing even native islanders' conceptions of Hawaiian identity, these images fall under an *ontological shadow*. Hawaii remains an important tourist destination, strategic military outpost, and 'tropical paradise'. Reflected in such record album titles as 'Island Paradise,' 'the Lure of Paradise,' and 'Hawaiian Paradise,' Hawaii has been represented as paradise on earth. Western Judeo-Christian culture gives paradise two central meanings: the Garden of Eden and heaven. Record album covers emphasize the former, featuring the women of paradise clad in 'native cloth,' peering out from palm fronds, sensually frolicking in

the ocean tide. Indeed, a Hawaiian vacation might be considered the ultimate American consumer product – allowing anyone who can afford a ticket to participate in the neo-colonial project through a re-creation of discovering Hawaii.

In this project, we turn a critical gaze onto a veritable archive of consumer artifacts – including our collection of over 400 Hawaiian LPs that provide a wealth of data – invoking a range of issues around consumption, objectification, and representation. Album covers, liner notes, and songs provide sites for an analysis of the representation of Hawaii in popular culture around the time it gained statehood in 1959. Record albums were given away by airlines, travel agents, and tour companies as part of broader efforts to attract visitors to Hawaii, and moreover supported the nation-building radio show, *Hawaii Calls*. The record album covers and songs under scrutiny are still available, often smartly repackaged as ‘exotica,’ ‘lounge’ and ‘chill’ in CD stores worldwide.

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~~Hawaiian records cover art, liner notes and song lyrics – often reflect a dominant cultural view of the exotic other. Interestingly, the typical themes and tropes displayed in Hawaiian record albums -- paradise, escape, sexuality, tropicality, going native – are present in many marketing campaigns for products ranging from suntan oil to corporate relocation. Thus seemingly innocuous material artifacts create and maintain a discourse – produced through the use of models, poses, and conventions from art history and advertising design.~~

Record albums are useful sights for material culture studies for several reasons. First, they are durable. Records from the 1950s remain widely available today, collected and coveted by consumers, and recirculate as retro icons. Used records are sold by the thousands in vinyl stores, at record fairs, and on the Internet; and, surprisingly, vinyl has rebounded as a viable niche within the music industry. Furthermore, old records are often re-released on compact disc, thus enjoying a new life. Although images from 1950s and 1960s advertisements usually appear hopelessly dated, record cover designs enjoy new life on compact discs that cash in on ironic trends or retro fashions. Second, as consumer artifacts, records and CDs exemplify crucial material practices, such as identity building, collecting, and invoking nostalgic reverie. Third, record cover design was a driving force for graphic art during the decades after World War II. Many leading artists and graphic designers produced record covers, some of which are considered collectible classics.

On a more conceptual level, the word *album* is derived from the Latin *albus*, white, and also *albho*, white ghostly apparitions. By definition, an album is a book with blank pages for the insertion and preservation of collections, such as photographs or other keepsakes. Alternatively, an album has been defined as a blank tablet on which records or notices were inscribed, registered, or listed. In the case of ethnographic recordings, or ‘ethnic’ music, ‘album’ might evoke the white colonialist

potential of a medium that begins as a blank slate and treats the observed exotic native, often dark-skinned, as an object to be reported upon and recorded by the outside observer.

Recorded music albums are albums within albums. The black vinyl disks are inscribed with a collection of musical pieces held within another album form: two covers containing 'liner' notes, photographic or graphic images, and an index of songs. Record album images include the visual and aural: the photographs or designs on the covers collaborate with the music and lyrics inside. Record jackets, liner notes, and song lyrics instruct and inform through their representations of place, history, and culture.

Musical versions of Hawaii show up in the iconic *Kodak Hula Show* and the *Webley Edwards' Hawaii Calls Show*. Both of these popular tourist attractions released multiple tie-in record albums. The *Kodak Hula Show* was created to provide 'authentic' Hawaiian scenes every day for tourists and promoted the sale of Kodak film. Such a well-established attraction provided a comfortable familiarity for anxious visitors who, having purchased the album, had essentially already seen the experiences they themselves would have and the pictures they would take (Buck, 1993; Costa, 1998; Wood, 1999). *Hawaii Calls* live show, radio program and record albums attracted avid fans, and claimed Hawaiian authenticity for their Tin Pan Alley-originated music. Most songs were 'adapted', written, and recorded by white men who asserted authorship, copyright, and hence, royalties for this so-called 'authentic' Hawaiian music.

Another genre of Hawaiian album focuses on the hula. The hula is a royal and spiritual prerogative, historically practiced by both men and women (Kanahele 1979). However, a profane promoted version of the hula became a necessary site on the tourists 'to do' list, and the tourist industry provided hula 'shows' in a spectacle of representation: 'These free Kodak Hula shows are staged especially for picture takers, in colorful Hawaiian surroundings, framed by the blue Pacific ocean' (from *Kodak Hula Show*). The hula, a term that describes a dance, a communicative practice, a system of authority and hierarchy and a discipline taught in special schools, is now most popularly

associated with females dancing for male titillation. The hula dancer evokes the exotic female – primitive, different, undiscovered ‘who may have the ice-blue eyes of the Scandinavian, the warm coloring of the Tahitian, the femininity of the Japanese and Chinese all apparent in the ancestry.’ (*Island Paradise*, Webley Edwards Presents, Capitol). Body movement in dancing as a form of storytelling and epic is opposed to the literature of a written culture.

The motions of the hula dancer were used to tell stories, just as in other lands the scratching of a pen on paper was used. Just how close a relationship the hula bears to great literature has never been determined. 'Just let me tell you this,' remarked one delighted U.S. sailor, watching a group of beautiful hula dancers, 'it beats reading books!'

(Liner note from *More Hawaii* in HI-FI, RCA).

Thus, Hawaiian narrative present in Hula is perceived by the Anglo male as sexy, erotic dancing for sexual stimulation. In other words, all Hawaiian 'literature' reduces to the realm of titillation, visual consumption of staged simulated pseudo-ritual. The Hawaiian cultural and sacred tradition of the Hula serves merely as erotic pleasure.

The song ‘Texas Has a Hula Sister Now’ from the LP *Come to Hawaii* is one of our favorites. The confluence of statehood, womanhood, and kinship is spectacularly suggestive, and deserves unpacking. Texas, of course, was a state – the lone star state, a big, brawny, braggart of a state. Sister, of course, is a close familial relation. Hawaii is called a Hula sister – feminizing this distant, rather small exotic new state. By linking Hula with sister, the songwriter captures much of the fascination of Hawaii. As the lyrics begin:

*The yellow rose of Texas wears an orchid in her hair
and her garland of white blossoms so sweet in the Western air
She was born of a pagan marriage of the sand and the coral sea
and she learned from the restless tradewinds that men and the wind are free*

(lyrics by Coloma and Millican)

A Hula sister identifies a being, simultaneously similar and different, that represents poles of mimesis and alterity. At once exotic and familiar, distant yet belonging, Hawaii stirs up issues of attraction and taboo. In the representation of Hawaii we often find a powerful conflation of paradise, female, and exotic with ownership, statehood, and familiarity (sisterhood).

The process of branding Hawaii produced a Hawaiian signifier that could be associated with other signs – including music, sound, and an imaginary cultural heritage. This sonic conceptual resource provides authenticity to the brand by drawing upon cultural, historical, mythical, and stereotypical notions of Hawaii, the exotic, and earthly paradise (Schroeder and Salzer-Mörling 2006). Hawaii, and what sonic branding has deemed her lilting and undulating call, lure us to an ultimate retro-escape. Hawaiian music calls forth an earlier era, invoking a complex legacy of culture and history, tourist management and nostalgic hype – perhaps vibrating through strings of a steel guitar, a ukulele, or coconut shell bongos on famous favorites ‘Little Brown Gal’ or ‘Lovely Hula Hands’ that appear on literally thousands of ‘Hawaiian’ albums.

All images from the authors’ collection.

Janet Borgerson is Reader in Philosophy and Management and Jonathan Schroeder is Professor of Marketing at the University of Exeter. They are founding members of the Information Society Network. <http://shl.stanford.edu:3455/collaboratory/Home>

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