

# Aloha

## ~FROM HAWAII~

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He was the King and he was coming to Honolulu — for two nights only at the former Honolulu International Center, what we know today as Blaisdell Arena. Elvis Presley’s highly anticipated concert, Aloha from Hawai‘i via Satellite, would make history as the first time a solo entertainer held a live concert broadcast internationally via satellite. That is, if they could get everything to work properly.

Event organizers weren’t sure if the satellite was going to run into any problems during the broadcast, so they built in two shows. The official concert was on Jan. 14, 1973, but there was an earlier, pre-recorded rehearsal concert on Jan. 12. Both were free to the public. They collected \$75,000 by suggested donation only. The proceeds benefited Kui Lee’s cancer fund, the late songwriter who penned “I’ll Remember You,” which Elvis had recorded a cover of and still regularly performed live.

Despite a price tag of \$2.5 million dollars (the most expensive entertainment special ever produced at the time), Aloha from Hawai‘i via Satellite was a hit. More than a billion people worldwide tuned in to see Elvis performing signature songs such as “Suspicious Minds,” “Hound Dog,” “Blue Suede Shoes,” “I Can’t Stop Loving You,” and well over a dozen other classics. A bronze statue of Elvis, sponsored by cable channel TV Land in 2007, was permanently installed as a tribute outside the arena where he performed.


This concert, along with films such as *Blue Hawai‘i*, *Girls! Girls! Girls!*, and *Paradise, Hawaiian Style* would mark a specific period of time in the King’s career. Like his stint in

the army or his deteriorating condition leading up to his death, Elvis Presley’s “Hawai‘i years” would become part of a larger cultural identity.

The same was true for Hawai‘i. The stereotypical films that painted the islands as little more than a plastic backdrop of paradise helped give rise to a call for authentic Hawaiian language, culture, and identity in the form of the 1970s Hawaiian Cultural Renaissance. The Blaisdell Arena, built in 1964 off King Street, came at the perfect time to accommodate the influx of both local acts and visiting artists during the late 1960s and early ’70s. At its forefront was late Honolulu promoter Tom Moffatt, who brought out some of the biggest names in the music industry over six decades, including Frank Sinatra, the Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Michael Jackson, Elton John, and countless others. Elvis Presley was his first.

“I remember he did ‘Hound Dog’ and then everybody’s screaming. He jumped off the stage, got on his knees with his guitar ... and the place went bananas,” Tom Moffatt told Hawai‘i News Now in an interview in the 2000s.

Moffatt had originally brought Elvis out to Hawai‘i in 1957 to perform at the former Honolulu Stadium on King Street. At the site of Old Stadium Park in Mōili‘ili today, an arena that could fit as many as 30,000 people was built in 1926. This, at a time when the island’s population was only 200,000. The stadium offered just 87 parking stalls.



It was a place for baseball and football games, rodeos, polo matches, boxing, stock car racing, hula festivals, and concerts. Babe Ruth played ball there in 1933. In 1944, Joe DiMaggio hit a homerun that, legend says, went over the left-field fence and almost killed a guy reading the newspaper on his front stoop. Back then, all the greats came through Honolulu Stadium: Joe Louis, Lou Gehrig, Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra, Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, and others. The New York Yankees, the Giants, and the Brooklyn Dodgers played exhibition games there in the 1950s.

In 1945, Irving Berlin performed there. Bill Graham hosted a sermon there to a packed house in 1958. Jack Lord traveled there with a young Christopher Walken playing a Navy seaman in a January 1970 episode of *Hawai'i Five-O*. When the U.S. House of Representatives passed the bill to grant Hawai'i statehood on March 12, 1959, the official ceremony took place at Honolulu Stadium. It was a five-hour variety show featuring 200 grass-skirted hula dancers and bands from every branch of the U.S. armed services. This was Hawai'i's stadium.

Just four years after becoming the 50th state, President John F. Kennedy passed through the islands on a visit to speak about equal rights for black Americans at the Conference of U.S. Mayors held that year in Waikiki. "There is no place where it is more appropriately said and understood than in this part of the United States,"

Kennedy remarked upon his arrival at Honolulu International Airport on June 8, 1963. "This island represents all that we are and all that we hope to be. I am proud to come here."

Every American president over the past 70 years has visited the islands. Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first who, in 1934, cruised around O'ahu in an open-top touring car. Harry S. Truman took a month long vacation here in 1953. Most have visited briefly, during trips often coinciding with memorial events or to visit Pearl Harbor and the USS Arizona Memorial.

Presidents, pop stars, athletes, and actors alike all come to pay homage and bear witness to this strange little place in the Pacific of many identities. A beautiful natural wonder. An ethnic and cultural melting pot. Former sovereign kingdom. Strategic military outpost. Tragic war memorial. Wedding destination. Hunger Games arena. The Island. Jurassic Park.

Hawai'i has done well to play its role through the years, whatever that role may be. Often, these islands are viewed in snapshots or as promotional pieces. Elvis in Hawai'i: an iconic figure against an iconic backdrop. Even after the King left, that image of tropical "Blue Hawai'i" persisted — that is, until the 1980s, when *Magnum, P.I.* debuted and set a new tone that remained for years. Locals bemoan the islands' portrayal as a set piece in films like *Godzilla* or *Snatched* (usually rightfully so), but there are a



few meaningful exceptions. The notion of Hawai‘i as a bridge is perhaps never best understood than from the perspective of those who come and go from these islands.

Consider Barack Obama. When it comes to famous figures visiting the islands, the former president is perhaps the recent one we remember most — relaxing in his Kailua rental, blocking up traffic while having dinner at Alan Wong’s, and hitting the surf and shave ice with Michelle and the family. He’s here on vacation, but despite his fame, it seems inappropriate to call this a celebrity visit. We identify Obama as a local — perhaps an estranged or far-removed one, but someone still of this place. And we take pride in the notion that at the end of each year, for eight years, he returned here to unplug and recharge and gain strength before heading back to tackle the tough fights in Washington.

In this way, Hawai‘i becomes like the sun: a source for providing a great tan, yes, but also a place of powerful energy. Living here, we forget that. Sometimes, it takes a visitor to remind us of this.

Three years after her husband’s assassination, Jackie Kennedy spent seven weeks on the islands in 1966, visiting Hawai‘i Island, Kaua‘i, and Maui. Most of her time would be spent on O‘ahu with her children, Caroline and John John, with friends, swimming, and enjoying artistic endeavors. Unlike for so many other celebrities, Hawai‘i was meant as a respite for the former first lady; a place where she could learn Chinese painting and calligraphy from watercolorist and printmaker Hon Chew Hee, and receive surfing

lessons from the famous beach boys of Waikīkī, whom she met at the Outrigger Club.

At a formal party in the Kāhala Hotel one evening, Jackie’s niece, who was also visiting, pushed her brother into the pool. JFK Jr. then pushed someone else into the pool, and Jackie asked entertainer Don Ho, “Wouldn’t it be funny if we all ended up in the pool?” With that, Don lifted Jackie up and threw her in. The Secret Service was furious, but when one agent reached down to help her out, Jackie pulled him in, too. She loved it.

Amidst a life lived under such heavy scrutiny in the public eye toward everything she said, did, and wore, Jackie came to Hawai‘i and was amazed to find privacy. She was rarely stared at or stopped for an autograph, and neither locals nor tourists assaulted her with cameras. Almost no photos exist of the nearly two months she spent in the islands.

“I want to thank you for all that you have done to make this vacation such a perfect one for my children and for me,” Jackie Kennedy wrote to the editors of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin and The Honolulu Advertiser for publication in 1966, just before leaving Hawai‘i after her seven-week trip. “From Governor Burns who so kindly watched over us and asked people to help make our visit private to the driver of a vegetable truck who went out of his way to lead us several miles, when we merely asked directions, everyone in Hawai‘i has been the same.

“I hope the aloha spirit is contagious, because it could change the world.”