

The Steel Guitar in Early Country Music
Part Two: Jimmie Rodgers's Steel Guitarists
Chapter Four: Lani Uluni McIntire
Section Three, Segment Two: McIntire's Career From April-December 1937

This ongoing series of articles has been examining the ten steel- and resonator-guitarists who recorded with American country-music pioneer **Jimmie Rodgers** (1897-1933) between 1928 and 1933. (The first solo “hillbilly music” star, Rodgers did much to popularize the acoustic steel guitar through his twenty-nine sides including the instrument.)

The current chapter (ongoing since June 2009) has been detailing the life of Honolulu-born guitarist/vocalist/bandleader **Lani McIntire** (1904-1951), who led an anonymous backing-group (including a steel guitarist) which accompanied Rodgers on six Victor sides in Hollywood, California in early-summer 1930 (including the premiere recording of McIntire’s “The One Rose [That’s Left In My Heart],” composed with Los Angeles writer Del Lyon).

The preceding installments detailed McIntire’s career through early-April 1937, including his performances and probable recordings with Hawaiian steel guitar virtuoso **Sol Hoopii**, his first marriage, his appearances on Los Angeles radio with the **Harmony Hawaiians**, including his brothers **Dick** and **Al** (on steel guitar and string bass, respectively) and **Danny Kuaana** (on ukulele), and his recordings with Rodgers.

Section Three, Segment One (in the December 2009 issue) discussed McIntire’s 1934 gigs at San Francisco’s Kalua Club (with electric steel guitarist **Bob Nichols** and ukulele-player/falsetto-vocalist **George Kainapau**), his mid-1930s marriage to **Mattie Virginia Jeanes**, and his August 1935 recordings with his **Hawaiians** (including Nichols and Kainapau and likely **Andy Iona** on string bass). The article also detailed the first four months of McIntire’s “breakout” year of 1937, in which he made his first Decca recordings, backed **Bing Crosby** on “Sweet Leilani” and “Blue Hawaii,” and appeared at Hollywood’s **7 Seas** restaurant.

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In late April 1937, McIntire made six more Decca recordings in Los Angeles with his Hawaiians, featuring McIntire, Kainapau, and Nichols in the vocal-trio role mentioned in Segment One. The sides included a recording of Jack Coale’s altered twelve-bar blues “**My Tropical Garden**” (juxtaposing choruses featuring the trio’s call-and-response vocalizing with choruses spotlighting Nichols’s steel guitar), as well as two recent Johnny Noble songs (“**When Hawaii Calls**” and “**That’s the Hawaiian in Me**”).

In June, McIntire received a fortuitous break when he was chosen—along with Irish-Hawaiian vocalist **Ray Kinney** (1900-1972)—to perform with Andy Iona’s Hawaiian band for the opening of New York City’s **Hawaiian Room**, an experimental South-Sea-Island-themed supper club created in the basement of the **Hotel Lexington** on Manhattan’s east side. (McIntire and Iona were “discovered” at the 7 Seas by a talent scout employed by the Hawaiian Room’s manager, who had come to the venue to assess Kinney.)¹

The *New York Times*—reporting on the Hawaiian Room’s opening three days after the fact—relayed that “Andy Iona’s Hawaiian band twang[ed] out lush and languid music amid strictly tropical surroundings . . . [including] **Meymo [Ululani] Holt** [Kinney’s sister-in-law], a tawny dancer in a red skirt,” adding that “a realistic decor of grass huts and artificial rain complete[d] the picture.”²

In early August, the *Times* announced that “the Hotel Lexington has found its summer Hawaiian Room so popular that it intends to keep it Hawaiian indefinitely.”³

By September 3rd, McIntire had returned to Los Angeles, where he recorded seven more Decca sides with his **Hawaiians**. “**Ku’u Lei**” (which McIntire co-composed with John Kamano) and “**Kaneohe**” (an Abbie Kong/Johnny Noble song about the coming-of-electricity to Oahu’s East Shore) feature McIntire, Kainapau, and Nichols’s three-part vocals; the sides also included two tangos (“**La Cumparsita**” b/w “**La Rosita**”), with Nichols leading on steel.

Eight days later, the Hawaiians backed **Bing Crosby** on four more Island-themed sides, including “**Sail Along Silv’ry Moon**” (#4 pop in 1937), featuring McIntire, Kainapau, and Nichols backing Crosby with “ooohs” in call-and-response fashion, while McIntire contributes intermittent fast, rippling guitar-fills (as he also does on “**When You Dream About Hawaii**”). Recordings of two recent Harry Owens songs (“**Dancing Under the Stars**” and “**Palace in Paradise**”) rounded out the session. “Paradise” includes Kainapau performing eight bars of wordless, falsetto-register vocalizing (perhaps representing the narrator’s calling-out of his “sailed-away” lover’s “lovely name” from the shore?).

Later in September, McIntire returned to New York to take over directorship of the Hawaiian Room orchestra from Andy Iona.⁴ McIntire’s Hawaiian Room contract called for him to maintain an ensemble of at least ten musicians,⁵ which he formed by combining his Hawaiians with the trumpet-player, three tenor sax players, pianist, and drummer from Iona’s band.⁶

On October 17, McIntire and his older **Hawaiians** quartet backed a *second* hillbilly-music performer, Louisiana singer/guitarist (and burgeoning politician) **Jimmie Houston Davis** (1899-2000) on four sides at a Decca session in New York.

Davis—the eventual two-time governor of Louisiana—had been signed to Decca in the fall of 1934, and recorded fifty-eight sides for the label’s “Hill Billy” [*sic*] series (in Chicago, New Orleans, Los Angeles, and Dallas) prior to meeting McIntire.⁷ The Davis/McIntire session was the first time either musician had recorded at Decca’s Midtown Manhattan studios, apparently then-located on the tenth floor of a building on West 57th Street.⁸ (Journalist George Tucker likened Decca’s [main?] studio to “an immense padded cell,” relating that “the walls and ceiling are muffled in heavy draperies to achieve the desired acoustical affect.”)⁹

One notes that the Davis/McIntire recordings were made—unusually—on a Sunday, the one day the Hawaiian Room apparently eschewed live music.¹⁰

Davis and the Hawaiians recorded an eclectic quartet of songs, including:

- * The current pop hit “[Have You Ever Been in Heaven](#)” (recorded in the preceeding month-and-a-half by American bandleaders Ben Pollack, Bunny Berigan, and Henry “Red” Allen)
- * A remake of Davis’s best-known hit up to that time, “[Nobody’s Darling But Mine](#)” (originally recorded by Davis c. two-and-a-half years earlier, with Warren Pottinger on Dobro guitar)
- * “[The Greatest Mistake of My Life](#),” by Welsh singer/songwriter Jimmy Mesene (Davis and the Hawaiians’ recording was perhaps the first American cover of Mesene’s melancholy waltz-ballad, covered by Mesene himself—as well as British bandleaders including Bert Ambrose, Jay Wilbur, and Joe Loss—earlier in 1937.)
- * Sylvester Kalama and Jack Alau’s popular 1905 Hawaiian waltz-song “[One, Two, Three, Four](#)” (which—according to T. Malcolm Rockwell’s *Hawaiian and Hawaiian Guitar Records, 1891-1960*—had been recorded by over fifty different Hawaiian-related acts by the time of Davis the Hawaiians’ cover (including Toots Paka, Frank Ferera, Segis Luvaan, and Daniel Arnau).

Interestingly, Decca chose to release the Davis/McIntire recordings in their “Popular, Dance, and Vocal” (as opposed to “Hill Billy”) series.

By early-November 1937, McIntire’s reputation at the Hawaiian Room had spread such that *New York Times* entertainment critic Jack Gould was prompted to remark that “in support of Hawaiian music in its current feud with Cuban rhythms for popular favor, Lani McIntire and his Aloha Islanders are doing nobly in . . . [the] Hawaiian Room of the Lexington.”¹¹

On November 17, McIntire made his first recordings with his full Hawaiian Room ensemble.¹² The six sides—credited to **Lani McIntire And His Orchestra**—included a hard-swinging cover of Johnny Noble and Sonny Cunha’s “[Hula Blues](#)” (which McIntire had likely recorded as an instrumental some ten-and-a-half years earlier with Sol Hoopii), as well as a recording of Charles Kaapa’s 1928 hula “[Hame Pila](#)” (“Snappy Instrument”),¹³ featuring plenty of “snappy” steel-guitar soloing from Bob Nichols, in the introduction and between each of the four verses (apparently sung by Nichols).¹⁴

On December 1—nearly seven-and-a-half years after Jimmie Rodgers and Lani McIntire recorded “[The One Rose](#)” (and over four-and-a-half years after Rodgers’s death)—their July 7, 1930 recording was finally released by Victor. (Rodgers’s biographer Nolan Porterfield explains that Rodgers’s recording-supervisor, Ralph Peer, “forgot that the agreement with McIntire called for the record to be released within a year after it was recorded,” and that “when Victor . . . failed to issue [the recording] . . . on time, McIntire took the tune to another publisher [Shapiro and Bernstein], who succeeded in having it recorded by a number of big-name artists.”)¹⁵

Porterfield notes—with irony—that “the one side which might have been Jimmie Rodgers’s best claim to pop fame suffered the ignominy of being issued as a ‘cover’.”¹⁶

By December 5, **Leialoha** had taken over from Meymo Holt as the Hawaiian Room’s hula-dancer.¹⁷

During the afternoon of December 10, McIntire and his Hawaiians backed **Ray Kinney** on six sides at Decca’s New York studios (with Danny Kuaana replacing George Kainapau on ukulele).¹⁸ (George Tucker observed the recording-session, which he detailed in his syndicated column carried by American newspapers in late December/early January.)

From Tucker, we learn that Decca apparently handpicked the songs Kinney and McIntire recorded (the morning of the session!), that the Hawaiians were augmented to a sextet via the addition of a vibraphonist and pianist, and that Kinney used a stopwatch when recording. Tucker also related that the recordings were made on “a 20-pound cake of green [wax] . . . about the size of a small dishpan,” while inferring that McIntire and Kuaana (as well as the vibraphonist and pianist) were avid smokers.¹⁹

The Kinney/McIntire sides included the hauntingly-beautiful “[Waipio](#),” a song from the turn-of-the-last-century extolling the beauty of the land surrounding one of the homes of Hawaiian historian John Papa ‘i’i (1800-1870), likely located on the northern end of the Waipio Peninsula, in Pearl Harbor.²⁰

Kinney first-recorded “Waipio” with Lani’s brother Dick in October 1936; on Kinney’s version with the Hawaiians, he enters midway through the recording, following a verse played by Bob Nichols and a chorus sung by McIntire, Nichols, and Kuuana.

On December 26, Jack Gould—apprising *New York Times* readers of possibilities for New Year’s Eve entertainment—re-layed that:

Recession or depression, the Lexington’s Hawaiian Room continues merrily on. . . . Lani McIntire and his Aloha Islanders [as McIntire’s large group was now known] render soothing selections from the islands but also know their way about with more jazzy numbers of the mainland. Ray Kinney is the featured singer and his voice has a decidedly restful quality after the droolings of the crooner and the barks of the professional he-men who have been flooding the market. . . .21

Sometime in 1937, McIntire also appeared as a musician in United Artists’ South-Sea adventure film *The Hurricane*; he subsequently appeared in the same capacity in MGM’s *Honolulu* (1939), United Artists’ *South of Pago Pago* (1940), and Twentieth Century Fox’s *Song of the Islands* (1942).22

Next—in Section Four—McIntire’s career from January 1938 to the summer of 1942, including the final release from his Jimmie Rodgers sessions, his 1939 -1940 recordings with steel guitarist Eddie Bush and Broadway-aspiring singer Ann Tell, and his next three Hawaiian Room residencies.

Notes

1. Gurre Ploner Noble, *Hula Blues: The Story of Johnny Noble, Hawaii, Its Music and Musicians* (Honolulu: Tongg, c. 1948) 101-02.
According to Kinney’s *New York Times* obituary (“Ray Kinney is Dead; Hawaiian Singer, 71,” 3 Feb 1972), Kinney had first come to the Mainland to perform for the opening of New York City’s Roxy Theater (in 1927).
2. “Night Club Notes,” *New York Times*, 26 June 1937.
 (“This past week . . . saw the opening of the Hotel Lexington’s old Silver Grill as a redecorated and reinvigorated Hawaiian Room . . .”)
Adria L. Imada, “Hawaiians on Tour: Hula Circuits Through the American Empire,” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 1 (Mar 2004).
 (“Ray Kinney was married to [Meymo] Holt’s older sister.”)
3. “Night Club Notes,” *New York Times*, 7 Aug 1937.
4. John D. Marsden, “The Lexington ‘Hawaiian Room’,” *Fretwire* 2, no. 5 (May 1979) 28.
5. -----, liner notes to *Tickling the Strings: 1929-1952*, Harlequin HQ CD 28.
6. -----, “The Lexington ‘Hawaiian Room’.”
7. Tony Russell, *Country Music Records: A Discography, 1921-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 301-02.
8. George Tucker, “Man About Manhattan” (syndicated column carried in American newspapers in late 1937/early 1938, also titled “In New York” and “Seen and Heard in New York”), *Prescott (AZ) Evening Courier*, 27 Dec 1937.
9. Ibid.
10. Russell 303; George Rector, *Dining in New York With Rector: A Personal Guide to Good Eating* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1939) 179.
 (“Dancing in the Hawaiian Room continues nightly until two o’clock in the morning except on Sundays, when it stops at one o’clock” [i.e., early Sunday morning].)
11. “News and Gossip of Night Clubs,” *New York Times*, 7 Nov 1937.
12. Marsden, “The Lexington ‘Hawaiian Room’.”
13. -----, liner notes to *Rhythm of the Islands: Music of Hawaii 1913-1952*, Harlequin HQ CD 92.
14. Bruce Clarke, liner notes to *When Hawaii Calls: Lani McIntire and his Hawaiians Vol. 1*, Cumquat CQCD-2753.
 (“Since the steel and solo vocals on ‘Hame Pila’ never overlap, it’s fairly safe to assume Bob [Nichols] is the featured singer . . .”)

15. Nolan Porterfield, *Jimmie Rodgers: The Life and Times of America's Blue Yodeler*, new ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007) 256.

By 1 December 1937, American musicians who had covered "The One Rose" included Victor Young, Ozzie Nelson, Bing Crosby, Gene Autry, the Paradise Island Trio (with Sam Koki), Art Kassel, and Larry Clinton; British bandleaders who recorded the tune included Sydney Lipton, Jay Wilbur, Billy Thorburn, Arthur Salisbury, and George Hall.

16. Porterfield 256-57.

(As the Notes to Section Three, Segment One [included elsewhere in this issue] relate, the original Bluebird issue of Rodgers/McIntire's "The One Rose" may have sold a mere c. 7,135 copies.)

17. "News of the Night Clubs," *New York Times*, 5 Dec 1937.

("Leialoha now has the hula assignment in the Lexington's Hawaiian Room, replacing Meymo Holt.")

The author believes "Leialoha" to be the **Leialoha Hitchcock** that is the subject of a *St. Petersburg (FL) Independent* article of 4 March 1940 ("Lovely Hawaiian Gives Up Dancing, Will Be Designer") discussing a hula-dancer from the North Kona Coast of the island of Hawaii (then-married to New York socialite David White Hitchcock) who appeared in the film *Waikiki Wedding* and "danced in the Hawaiian Room of the Hotel Lexington."

18. T. Malcolm Rockwell, *Hawaiian & Hawaiian Guitar Records: 1891-1960* (CD-ROM) (Kula [HI]: Mahina Piha Press, 2007) 649; Tucker, "Man About Manhattan."

According to Tucker, a telegram from Decca to Kinney stated that "we ought to get started about 12 o'clock".

19. Tucker, "Man About Manhattan." Tucker mistakenly labels McIntire's vibraphonist as a "xylophonist"; he also refers to McIntire's small-group Hawaiians as the "Aloha Islanders" (the apparently-contemporary name for McIntire's *full* Hawaiian Room ensemble).

20. Kaiulani Kanoa-Martin, "HUAPALA: Hawaiian Music and Hula Archives" (website) < huapala.org >, s.v. "Waipio" < <http://huapala.org/Wai/Waipio.html> >; **DeSoto Brown** (great-great grandson of John `Ōi and Collections Manager, Bishop Museum Archives [Honolulu]), e-mails to the author of 10 Aug and 11 Aug 2009.

"John `Ōi had more than one house in this area. Neither exists today, so unfortunately I've never been sure where the two were. They existed up till World War II, so my father remembered them, and my mother also recalls visiting them. However, I believe the more significant one was the one located (as you surmised) on the Waipio Peninsula in Pearl Harbor. . . .

In World War II, the US Navy condemned all of the Waipio Peninsula. . . . Concurrent with that, the house must've been demolished. . . ." (Brown, 10 Aug)

"It was traditional that this was our family's song, and when it was played at a public gathering, family members were expected to stand up to acknowledge that it was being played in their honor. My great-uncle, the younger son of Irene [Ha`alou Kahalelaukoa, John `Ōi's daughter], was very wealthy, and he was known for giving generous tips to musicians to play 'Waipio'." (11 Aug)

21. "News of the Night Clubs," *New York Times*, 26 Dec 1937.

22. Porterfield 263; George Kanahela, *Hawaiian Music and Musicians: An Illustrated History* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1979) 256.

McIntire's *BMG* obituary ("Hawaiian Leader Dies" [XLVIII {Aug 1951}] 237-38 {?}]) also mentions him appearing in *Paradise Isle* (1937) and *Trade Winds* (1938). (Thanks to John Marsden for providing the author with a copy of this obituary.)

To ascertain the dates-of-recording and/or personnel on various recordings, the author consulted Rockwell's *Hawaiian & Hawaiian Guitar Records: 1891-1960* and Brian Rust's *British Dance Bands on Record, 1911 to 1945*.

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We would like to thank Anthony Lis for his ongoing series of articles that have proven invaluable to Hawaiian Record Collectors worldwide.

We have received innumerable comments and praises from the larger community of Hawaiian Musicologists commending the diligence, detail and accuracy of Professor Lis' documentation.

Colloquially:- "Bostin' job our Kid"
Pat and Basil PP the rest..