BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Benny Kalama, 70, musician

"My grandmother had a piano, home. So I used to go next door. . . . Eleven o'clock, 11:30 at night, dang-dang-dang-dang. You know, I believe the only way you can be good, you have to practice. And I practice."

Benjamin Kapena Kalama, Hawaiian-Portuguese, the oldest of John and Violet Kalama's seven children, was born on June 19, 1916 in North Kohala, Hawai'i. At the age of six he moved to Kalihi, O'ahu, where he stayed for the next twenty years.

Kalama received his education at Kalihi Kai Elementary, Kalākaua Intermediate, and McKinley High School where he graduated in 1935. Kalama's musical talent was developed at Kalākaua School as he played with the school band and symphony. In high school he was already arranging music and playing with several casual bands.

When Kalama finished school he was an accomplished musician. He was hired by Leonard "Red" Hawk to perform at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. He continued in Waikīkī with Don McDiarmid's band, Alfred Apaka, and Andy Bright. His musical career has included Mainland tours, radio programs, and several record albums. Kalama has performed steadily in Waikīkī for the past fifty years.

Kalama married Charlotte Sue Bates in 1940. They have a son and two daughters. Today Kalama enjoys his family, including grandchildren and great-grandchildren, at his Lanikai home. He remains active in music, playing with Sonny Kamahele at the Halekulani Hotel and performing accompaniment on an occasional record album or movie soundtrack.
IH: This is an interview with Benny Kalama at his home in [Lanikai], O'ahu on April 29, 1986. Interviewer is 'Iwalani Hodges.

Okay. We'll start out by first asking where you were born.

BK: Kohala. North Kohala.

IH: And when was this?

BK: Nineteen sixteen. June the 29th.

IH: What were your parents doing at the time?

BK: I know my father was working for somebody.

GK: He was chauffeur for the doctor? That's why you're named after the doctor?

BK: Dr. Bond.

GK: Benjamin Bond.

BK: You know the Bonds of Kohala?

GK: There's a Bond Museum in Kohala. The son is still a doctor.

BK: I'm named after the old doctor, Bond. Benjamin Bond.

IH: Oh, and he used to chauffeur for him?

BK: Yeah, my father was.

IH: And your mother?

BK: Oh, she's just housewife. I don't know how she got over . . .
GK: Grass shack wife. (Chuckles)

BK: I don't know how she got into Kohala.

IH: Oh, you folks were living in a grass shack at the time?

BK: No, no. No.

(GK laughs.)

BK: We lived in Kokoiki. The Lincoln family live right across of us. Right now there's 'Upolu Point. The Korean kim chee factory is on the property there. People just moved in, I don't know who.

GK: You see, what it was originally, was . . .

BK: Nine years.

GK: What do you call the kind from the mountain to the ocean? What do you call da kine? The land from the Great Mahele? What do you call it when you have so much land?

BK: The king gave.

GK: Um, you know, what you call it? The Hawaiian word? The, um--anyway, it was a land grant. And it was from the mountain to the ocean [i.e., ahupua'a]. Do you know Kohala?

IH: No.

GK: Do you know [where] the coast guard station is now, that was the Kalama land. Then they condemned it. They took the land away from the Kalamas and they gave 'em five little acres in the middle of nowhere. And that's all. They had hundreds of acres of land.

BK: That's going down to Mahukona, where the boats used to pick up the sugar bags. Now it's all wreck over there now, nothing.

IH: And so how long did you live there?

BK: Shee, about---I came to Honolulu, I think I was about six years old, around there.

IH: So do you remember Kohala when you lived there?

BK: Just little bit. Just faintly. I know the school was across. There's no school now anymore in our property there. Yeah, Napua Stevens' grandfather was a policeman over there. I remember Old Man Bell, yeah.

IH: Did you start school in Kohala?

BK: I really don't know. I don't think so.
IH: And then, why did you folks move here?

BK: Oh, my brother Frankie came up there. I was staying with my uncle Paul Kealamakule, eh? He was a custodian at Kohala High School. I didn't like the family. They all spoke Hawaiian and they were kind of strict.

IH: Your uncle's family?

BK: Yeah. Everything have to be in their place and you don't touch this. And so, I went to my--I got in touch with my grandfather and he wrote to my mother. So my mother went up and picked me up, brought me to Honolulu.

IH: Oh, but your parents came first before you?

BK: No, no, no. They were divorced.

GK: They got divorced. My grandmother [i.e., BK's mother] came back to O'ahu.

BK: My mother went up there, and picked me up, and brought me back to Honolulu.

GK: She left him and the second one, my other uncle, the one after him, Uncle Frankie, up in Kohala. And then, she came back with my Uncle Johnny, the third one. And then, he [BK] wanted to come home, so he got in touch with Grandpa, and he brought him home. My grandmother went up and brought him home, but left my Uncle Frankie over in Kohala. And then, he [BK] wanted to come home, so he got in touch with Grandpa, and he brought him home. My grandmother moved up to Kohala, she couldn't speak Hawaiian but that's all they could talk. So she had to learn Hawaiian. Because she just knew those dirty Hawaiians was talking about her.

(Laughter)

GK: And you know Pordagees. So that's how my grandma learned how to speak Hawaiian.

IH: (Speaking to BK.) So, when she left you behind, then you stayed with your father?

GK: Uncle.

IH: Oh, your uncle up there.

BK: Well, my grandfather. I stayed with my grandfather. Then I don't know how I went to stay with my uncle. He was kind of old, my grandfather was sickly. So I went to stay . . .

IH: But they were Hawaiian?
BK: Oh, yeah, they're all Hawaiians.

IH: And they were really strict, you remember that.

BK: Yeah. Kealamakules. That's the family from Kona, too. What do you call that entertainer? "Ma ku'u poli mai 'oe," the composer? Lei Collins, eh? (She is part of that family.)

GK: Ah, Lei Collins.

IH: Okay, you say they were strict. How were they strict?

BK: Oh, your dishes got to be here. You don't do that, you don't do that. Very strict. I know there's some words in Hawaiian. Minamina or I don't know what you call that. Certain words. They don't want you touch this, touch that.

GK: Only with you or with all the kids?

BK: Well, I know I was staying there. Then later on, Leina'ala—you know Haili?

GK: Yeah.

BK: The mother was staying there with them.

GK: 'Cause that's family, too.

BK: Yeah. Her mother. And Joe Diamond—you know Joe? Kaimana. He's the bass player. That's my cousin. He grew up with my brother Frankie.

IH: Okay, so when you came back to Honolulu, then you stayed with your mother?

BK: My mother, yeah.

IH: And your brother? Johnny?

BK: My brother Johnny, yeah. And my stepfather, he was a chief in the navy from Boston. From Worcester, Massachusetts, anyway. And with my grandfather's . . .

GK: In Kalihi.


IH: Whereabouts in Kalihi?

BK: Colburn Street.

GK: By the prison [i.e., O'ahu Community Correctional Center].
BK: Then Watertown. We used to live Watertown, too. That's on the military. Was very nice over there in Watertown.

IH: Watertown was all military?

BK: Mostly the military people over there. And Medeiros family used to have all the jitneys, you know. Used to cover all—during the war, the jitneys to Pearl Harbor. Cabs. The Medeiros family. I remember them. The Wills. The Lopes family.

IH: Where exactly was Watertown located?

BK: That's where Hickam Field is. To go to Pearl Harbor, there's only two ways you could go to Pearl Harbor. You got to go Pu'uloa Road. That's the only way you could go to Watertown and Pearl Harbor. Another way is the Red Hill. There's a little road that [went] through the plantation and Filipino camps. That's the only way you can go to Pearl Harbor. There's no outlet.

(Those days there was no Dillingham Boulevard. Queen Street went all the way from Downtown and ended where O'ahu Prison was. And was all rice fields after that. The prisoners used to have taro patches. They grew their own food. But Queen Street was disconnected between Waiakamilo and Iwilei Roads. And there was all bushes between.)

IH: But the prison was always there? Same place?

BK: Yeah, same place. Soon as you pass the O'ahu Prison, was the road end, Queen Street. And I seen them build the street. You know, the Dillingham Boulevard.

IH: Oh, so you were living there at that time?

BK: Yeah. Saw them [while we were] playing down at the railroad tracks. You want to go to Pearl Harbor, like that, you can walk through the railroad tracks.

IH: Oh, that's how you folks went to Pearl Harbor?

BK: No, if you want to do. When we were kids, we used to go down there.

IH: Uh huh, yeah, as kids.

BK: I remember going down to—before it was John Rodgers Airport. There was a little hangar, an old barn, and there was two airplanes there. Old Jennys from the First World War. I used to go there and try to clean. I was so interested in airplanes. I was a little kid, you know. Clean. Yeah, then later on, that's when they had that flight, the (Commander John) Rodgers, you know. On the plane, where they landed out in the ocean, almost got lost. That's why they named it John Rodgers—Honolulu Airport. Rodgers.
And they found them after so many days, they were drifting on a seaplane.

IH: Oh, yeah? Is that the one they had to pull in? Did they pull it in?

BK: I really don't know, but they found the plane out in the ocean. And not very far. It was just a dirt road, a little dirt field. And later on, down by Kewalo Basin, where that... What you call that shop in there now?

GK: Oh, Ala Moana Fish [Farmers] Market?

BK: Market over there. There used to be another airfield there later on, years after that. Used to be an airfield.

IH: Okay. You lived in Kalihi first?

BK: Yeah. Kalihi, then we moved to Watertown...

IH: And then you went to Watertown?

BK: Yeah, then came back.

IH: Were you going to school at that time already?

BK: Ah, at Watertown, I don't think so I went to school. Could be. I was about...

IH: Because I know they had a Watertown Elementary.

BK: Yeah, yeah. There's a little school over there, that's all.

IH: Yeah.

BK: The ocean there was old piers from way before the First World War. And all the little tugboats all sunk. Was sure a nice place, old Watertown. And Fort Kam was on your left side. Fort Kamehameha was military.

IH: Did you folks go fishing out there?

BK: Well, I was a young kid, but I used to--there's a lot of sharks there. The sharks didn't bother us because those days mules used to die. They used to kill the mules and they used to throw the mules in the ocean. It's the mouth of Pearl Harbor. So those sharks are well fed. We used to be out there in the middle of Pearl Harbor in little rafts. I remember my mother used to give me dirty lickings when I went out there. But the sharks, they didn't bother us. But we were lucky. Watertown was a very nice place.

IH: About how long did you live there?
BK: Oh, I really don't know. I was a little kid. Joe Diamond's mother was living across. And the Lopes--Al Lopes--the football player lived across. But they were little babies when I was there. But it was nice. But I grew up mostly in Kalihi.

IH: Mm hmm, on Colburn Street?

BK: Colburn Street, yeah.

GK: That whole Colburn Street was all the Pordagee side of the family. They all lived on that street. My grandma and her sisters and brothers lived on that street.

BK: All our family, the Portuguese side, was over there. The Dawsons and McIntoshes.

GK: Good Pordagee names--Dawsons. (Chuckles)

BK: Yeah. Andrades (next to the "Holy Ghost," or Catholic Church). All my Portuguese family lived there. Then I went to Kalihi-Kai School. You know, and I saw the first--from New Zealand, that plane that flew from New Zealand to Hawai'i, the Southern Cross. Yeah, we climbed the roof of the school to try to see how close we can get to the. . . . Yeah, the Southern Cross flew over. This about 1920-something.

Then when the radios first came to Hawai'i, I remember my Uncle Sonny Cabral, on the crystal set, and then we used to listen to KGU when it was the first station. We figured, getting higher, the better the reception, so we used to climb the mango tree way up on the top. And I was a little kid. Boy, I got---my uncle pull my ears and get up there with me. We used to listen. First thing, a radio tube would come in, he would build. He only went to sixth grade, but I don't know how he can read the diagrams. He used to build our own [radio]. Used to bust the telephone to get just the earphone, you know, the ear thing to listen.

IH: That's your uncle, you said?

BK: Yeah, my uncle. Just sixth grade, but he was sharp. Eleven years old, he can overhaul a car. I used to help him. Oh, I used to crawl under the car. I used to get dirty lickings from him. He's only about two years older or three years older than me, but he was sharp.

IH: What was his name?

BK: Cabral. Clarence Cabral. He lives up . . .

GK: In (Kailua).

BK: Still alive. But all the rest of my uncles and aunties--I have only one auntie alive, Portuguese, and my uncle. But it was a
great family, 'cause hardly anybody in Kalihi those days. Just one street light here, and about two blocks, another. Boy, everybody used to--ghosts. Hawaiian things, you know. This here, you watch out. You know, kiawe trees all around the neighborhood, very nice.

IH: What did your house look like in Kalihi?

BK: Just a regular house.

IH: Was it a big house?

BK: No, we had lot of bedrooms. Later on, every boy had his own bedroom. We adopted---we had six boys. Three Haoles and three Kanakas.

IH: You adopted three?

BK: No, no. My half-brothers.

IH: Oh, 'cause of your stepfather.

BK: Yeah. Then we adopted a sister. She was one of my relatives, a really pretty girl. Tiny. Then from Kalihi-Kai School . . .

IH: So you had that many bedrooms? Six or seven bedrooms?

BK: Oh, we had about six bedrooms, yeah. Then, downstairs, we had couple bedrooms. Upstairs.

IH: Oh, was up and down?

BK: Yeah. Later on, we lifted the house.

GK: The house is still there.

BK: Still there. Old house.

GK: But it's . . . The whole neighborhood is a slum neighborhood now. It's really terrible.

BK: Lot of Filipinos have moved in.

IH: But at that time, it was a nice neighborhood.

BK: Oh, very nice. Yeah.

IH: Did you have a big yard?

BK: No, it's just nice. Lot of fruit trees. Apricots. We had apricots. Lot of pears [i.e., avocado] and mangoes. All kinds of mangoes.

GK: Grapes.
BK: And we made our own wine.

IH: Oh, yeah?

GK: Those Portuguese sausage. My vovo, my great-grandmother had one of those Portuguese brick ovens in the back yard . . .

BK: We had two. Two.

GK: . . . to make their own bread. Make their own Portuguese sausage.

BK: Yeah, I had to help them make that blood sausage. When we plan to make sausage, about four o'clock in the morning, that's when they used to slaughter the pigs at the slaughterhouse. It's on Middle Street. But remember, there was no Dillingham Boulevard. You had to go around. Four o'clock in the morning, here I'm a little kid over there out in the dark and hear pigs screaming. Oh, I used to be so afraid of somebody around. But you just pick the blood free and the intestines. Free, they used to give you.

IH: But you had to be there when they slaughtered?

BK: Yeah. Now, they charge you for everything. I was the oldest, so I used to help my grandmother and grandfather. Make our own soap, everything.

IH: Do you still remember how they made the sausage?

BK: A little, yeah. With the blood, with onions, and the fat here.

GK: Garlic.

BK: Yeah, and garlic everything. Vinegar. She used to clean the intestines very clean. You stuff the thing, you know, so many of blood and all these things, and lard, the pieces of fat in there, whatever. Tie it up and hang it up. After a while, you boil it in the five-gallon pail, boil it. Then you put a lot of lard, that's where you used to store it away. The cabinet was all screen. The icebox was just a little one with a little block of ice on top. But I don't know how the food didn't get spoiled those days. Now, with our food, you put it outside, in no time [it's spoiled]. I don't know, maybe with the ingredients they put in now, eh? Could be. Was just a screen, that's all. And we didn't have much of these bugs we have today. Yeah, make your own hot water.

We have grapevines all over the yard. And I used to go and steal the grapes from my grandfather. Oh, in Portuguese, he used to scream at me. He worked for the telephone company. He was a mason for the telephone company, was an old-timer.

IH: Your grandfather?

BK: Yeah, one of the first guys.
IH: What was his name?

BK: Cabral. Manuel Cabral. He walked from Colburn Street and Mokauea [Street] to telephone company early in the morning and back home [in the afternoon]. The company had a driver and a truck to pick up my grandfather to work and to take him home. He refused, would rather walk. And he was an old man. Later in years, he still was walking before he died. Yeah, he refused to ride on that car.

IH: Why was that?

BK: He just wanted to walk. The old Portuguese, I don't know. That's why he was so strong.

IH: And where was the telephone company located?

BK: Was in town.

IH: Same place [on Bishop Street]?

BK: Yeah, and then when we made swipe and 'ōkolehao, my grandmother used to make 'ōkolehao. I used to help her. She was one of these Portuguese, like a... What do call the fortunetellers? All of her family all were fortunetellers. And she was this...

GK: Masseuse.

BK: Masseuse and they call that buche. Stomach turnover, you know?

IH: Oh, yeah, turn stomach.

BK: She used to do that. And she used a lot of the 'ōkolehao for, like we call it ingua. Like over here, there's a [sternum] over here, Portuguese (call it ingua). When you feel over here (by your chest), the thing is (a bone in the center), further down (below your chest). That's when you're sickly. And they used to use a cup with a candle to draw it up. Same with your bones.

GK: She used to massage [Queen] Lili'uokalani. And Lili'u gave her a pearl. And my grandmother [i.e., BK's mother] had it. She had this Chinese boyfriend put it into the ugliest ring you ever saw in your life. It's coming out of the dragon's mouth. It's really ugly, but it's a nice pearl. Nice pearl that Lili'u gave my vovo.

BK: Yeah. She was a great lady. Well, all the kids of my age, maybe they're little older than me and my age and little younger, she was a midwife. She was well known in Kalihi as a midwife. Very nice, very religious.

IH: That's your grandmother? She was pure Portuguese?
BK: Pure, yeah. Both of them were. They came out with the last boat. They came from Portugal. They're from San Miguel. Yeah, all of them. All the sisters and all came from.

IH: So, did she deliver you, also?

BK: No, no, no. I was--Dr. Bond. Benjamin Bond of Kohala. He was my doctor.

IH: But you got to witness all of these things, though, she did?

BK: Well, yeah, I knew what she was. She was here. When she carries a bag, you know what's going on. And all my brothers, she delivered them. In Kalihi, mostly everybody, they knew Mary Cabral. She was well known. Very religious. Mostly every day, she's in church. I used to go--I was heavy in the church, too, when I was young.

IH: What church was that?

BK: St. Anthony's on Pu'uhale Road.

IH: Oh, Catholic church?

BK: Yeah, Catholic, yeah. But my Hawaiian side, they're all Mormons. The Kaulukukuis, they're all Mormons. Kealoha Kalama, they're all Mormons. Kalihi-Kai.

IH: Were there any farms around you folks in Kalihi?

BK: No, no, no. No farm in there. Just you had the leper settlement down at the end of Pu'uhale Road. I think people still remember it. Then, in the back they have squatters there where John (and "Feet") Rodgers, the steel guitar players, they came from (Pu'uhale). And at Pier 40 there was a rubbish pile there. Kalākaua [Intermediate] School, in the back, was another rubbish pile before they built. And it was a sugar cane field near Kalākaua School. Yeah, there was sugar experimental station. I was there.

IH: What do you remember about Kalākaua School at that time?

BK: Oh, it was nice, great school. The field was nothing but rocks. We had to play football on the rocks. (Chuckles) Yeah, those days, there was no age limit in playing football.

GK: Tell her about Helen Keller.

BK: Yeah. You know Helen Keller, the blind.

IH: Uh huh [Yes].

BK: She lectured to us. Very nice person.
IH: At that school?

BK: Yeah. And we used to see old Mrs. Kawānanakoa come in every Kalākaua's birthday. The first time I seen a balalaika, you know, from Russia. Player came to Kalākaua and played the balalaika, three strings. I don't know how they can get so much music out of three strings. Balalaika. There was lot of people, Kalākaua. My grandfather was a musician. He played the accordion. When he was feeling good with the wine, you know, he played the accordion. We all sang Portuguese songs. And the violin, he would play the violin. Mandolin. Then he had a little saxophone he used to play. I don't know what happened to all the instruments when he passed away. I don't know. But he was a good musician.

IH: So, would you say, that's where you had your first influence in music, was from your grandfather?

BK: Could be. Could be, yeah. Yeah, he was good. I had an uncle, my Portuguese uncle. He used to play the steel guitar, and I used to go over his house and watch him play—the old steel guitars. They call a "gas box," just a wooden box. Those days, the picks were just like a wire just wound around your finger. That's where you pick. Now they have it just on the tip here. You know, steel guitar picks. But those days, they had it just wound around and they just pick. But they used to strum. This steel guitar, just play and sing. He was pure Portuguese. Then there's a gal . . .

IH: How was that gas box different than now?

BK: No, just a regular, the old box. Not metal, you know. Regular guitar. The old boxes.

IH: Oh, regular guitar.

BK: Where they put a piece of metal where the neck. . . . What do you call that? To raise the strings up.

GK: Frets?

BK: There's a name for the thing there, I kind of forget about it. But I used to go over there at night over his house. Close by. The family all lived close by. And just listen. I sure loved that music. My mother played slack key. And I tried, but I couldn't stand slack key because it was too monotonous. Everything is dong, dong, dong, dong, dong. You know, the same note over while you're picking the melody. So I try, try, but till today, I cannot. I don't care much for slack keys.

[Charles] "Gabby" [Pahinui] played a little different. He tuned a little slack key sometimes a little like he used to play "Trees." "Gabby" was so great. That's why I used him on the Beamer Family album. You know, "Pupu hinuhinu." When they sang the song to me,
so I had to write. Before we did the album, we got together with Harriet and with Mahi [Beamer]. They sang the songs. So I had to write all the music, but I didn't know the songs, the grandmother's songs. So I wrote all the music down, then I wrote the arrangements. Then when "Pupu," I had "Pupu," the music sound so old-fashioned. I said, "I want slack key." So I told 'em, I say, "Can I hire somebody to play slack key? I hear a slack key in there." So I called "Gabby." So we rehearsed and I told "Gabby," "This song. Da-da." You know, "Gabby" didn't read music. So, "Gabby" played, you see, the introduction of that particular song. It fit perfect. It just took "Gabby" couple minutes and he played the thing. I said, "'Gabby,' okay. We record it. You're just going to play that number and that's it." "Gabby" was a very nice person. But I fired him how many times.

(Laughter)

BK: When Jules Ah See died, everybody said, "Say, go get 'Gabby' to play."

I said, "No way. I want a guy to work every night. Not when he feels like. He's drunk, you have to look for him. No way."

So that's why I got Masao Abe. Reliable. I was so strict in music. Guy makes a mistake, oh, I would jump him. When I used to play with the violins, even with the symphony, if somebody, a violin player, would make a mistake, I used to yell, "Ey, you, you playing the wrong note."

They used to tell me, "Why don't you shut up and mind your business?"

But I just couldn't, you know. My ear. But in 1931, I started, took up the trombone.

IH: Oh, that was your first instrument?

BK: Yeah. Well, first was ukulele, a little. You know, everybody played ukulele. My family, they always had instruments. I used to hang around lunchtime, in between when the school band used to rehearse, I used to stand by the window and watch, watch. Finally, this fellow by the name of Tom Hancey, he came up to me. He said, "I've noticed you watching, listen to the band. You love the music?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "You want to join the band?"

I said, "Yeah, but I have no instrument."

He said, "Okay. We'll get you a trombone." The only thing was open, the trombone. So he said, "Here's a trombone and here's a
book. In two weeks, see if you can learn." So in two weeks I learned how to play the trombone and I became a trombone player.

IH: By reading music?

BK: Yeah. He gave me the music sheet. And you measure so many inches, you slide here. Oh, I used to drive the neighborhood crazy up to eleven o'clock at night. And dah-dah-dah-dum, puwop-puwop, you know. Till I played and I got into the band. Became a trombone [player]. Then later on in years, my stepdad had a nephew played with the Boston Symphony, so he sent me out his trombone, one of the trombones. Then I played with the faculty. With the teachers. They had a little orchestra, violins and everything. So I played trombone with them in high school.

IH: So you started in the band in Kalākaua School?

BK: [Nineteen] thirty-one, yeah. Thirty-two, then we start playing jazz music with the band. Then I went to McKinley. I went there. They had lot of good trombone players. Once they heard me playing the trombone, I became the first trombonist. Then I joined--the first year, I stayed with the band. Then the next year, I went to the symphony.

IH: In the high school?

BK: High school, yeah. And I was playing football at McKinley. Then I took up the string bass. Then I start studying all the other instruments. Then I began playing all the tubas and alto horns and all that, trumpets and all, I used to play that. Then in my senior year, they made me a captain. Then I used to conduct the symphony and the band, when we used to go right on the concert. Then I would grab my trombone. I don't know. I used to read pretty--sight reading was very good. Then I used to play . . .

IH: Did they teach you to read music in school?

BK: Oh, yeah, Kalākaua, yeah. It's all music. That's really band. This Tom Hancey, he became (band leader in 1957) at the University of Hawai'i. He gave me the scholarship, University of Hawai'i. Then he became a dean at USC [University of Southern California]. Then later on, I met him when we were with Alfred Apaka, when we were in Las Vegas on the strip. I seen him sitting down. I said, "Tom." But he was with science with this atomic. He became a scientist. And I don't know what happened. I think something must have happened. He passed away. I think through what we were doing. You know, with the experiments. Tom Hancey. He was a great man.

And McKinley [High School], was Paul Sanders. His sister was a schoolteacher, too, but she played cello. Then Margaret Way was my piano teacher and music theory. First time I went on radio, I played "Lotus Flower" on a radio station on Bishop Street. And the
first note, I went. . . . On the piano, she played introduction, the music there. I went purrowr!

(Laughter)

BK: You know, young kid, nervous. Then I continued. I played a solo. First time.

IH: That's a trombone solo?

BK: Yeah, uh huh.

IH: So you were still in high school, then?

BK: Yeah, and then with the Shriner's band. And the University of Hawai‘i used to ask me to go and play with the band at football games. I was still going to high school. They all heard about this trombone player. Then, 1934, I was supposed to go to Interlochen Music School on the Mainland. I was picked in Hawai‘i. But I couldn't go. You need so much money, eh? That was right after depression. But a trombone player Winnie Pregil, he went up there and became a saxophone player. Later on, we were with the same band with Leonard "Red" Hawk. Saxophone player, Pregil. But I couldn't go.

IH: So, even though you were active in music in high school, you still had time to do other things, like play football?

BK: Yeah, I was band captain. And I played at Kalākaua School. I was a quarterback. Bill Waley and I. Then I got hurt over there, my knee—I still suffer now—from Kalākaua School. But we won the championship. We had a great team. Then McKinley, I played. I was picked my junior year from the junior team to join the senior team. McKinley had a good year that year. They had a championship year. It took me to Maui, played at Lahainaluna [High School].

IH: But if you were the band leader, didn't they play for the football games?

BK: Yeah. Certain songs, I had to come back. I had to come there and play the trombone.

GK: (Laughs) Off the field.

IH: Off the field?

BK: Yeah. They had a song where trombone was a solo, you know. Braaah (BK makes trombone sound). I get up there and braaah. The other football player was Philip Kim. He used to come out and play.

IH: So you'd play football, and then you'd join the band?

BK: Yeah.
IH: With your uniform on?

BK: Well, yeah.

GK: Crazy, yeah?

BK: But I got hurt. I opened the first game with Punahou. I was only 140 pounds. I was a fullback. When the great halfback in Hawai'i there for three years, all-star, was... Charlie Ah Sui. When he would go out, I would move to ball carrier or fullback. In the first game we played, with the opener, I went to the line to lead the ball carrier and I ran into Leon Sterling. He was a brute. Boy, I hit him with my hip and that was it. I had to lay off football for how many weeks. I couldn't run. So that was my downfall. But after a while, later on in months, I played a little. But I was a first-team fullback. Joe Shim was a blocking half. "Skippy" Yamamoto was quarterback. See, I don't know what happened to them.

GK: When he would get hurt on the football field, my grandmother used to run on the field. (Laughs) Did you tell her about the first time he was at Kalakaua School and there was a concert or something. My grandmother went. First time she ever heard him sing falsetto. I remember her telling me she thought he was mahu.

(Laughter)

BK: Well, see, I had a high tenor voice. The school play, I took the lead. It was the "Gypsy Rover," I think it was, the school play. I had the lead part. And there was a Peggy... A Japanese girl was my leading lady. We had lot of fun. But I had a high tenor. I don't know, my mother told everybody she thought I was a ding-a-ling.

(Laughter)

BK: Then, we had a little trio, Hawaiian trio, in Kalakaua School. Prince Kawohi, everybody knows. He's on the Mainland. He used to be with Harry Owens, Prince Kawohi--Ernest Kawohionalani. Then another guy, steel guitar player, was George Ka'awaloa. Steel guitar players, I don't know, they were funny guys. He was crazy, the things he used to do in school. We all went to Kalakaua and McKinley. Then, later on, my junior year, we had a little Hawaiian group. Joe Castino on steel. And, chee, we had a whole bunch of guys. That's when I belonged to the Hawaiian Club with--oh, gee, what's her name--Ma Keppeler. She was a schoolteacher. You remember her? Very nice.

IH: So, you already had Hawaiian trios, then...

BK: Yeah, we had a Hawaiian group there in my junior year. Then old Akaka, the reverend?
GK: That Abe.

BK: Abe Akaka, he had a beautiful voice. He and his cousin Stella Young, they used to sing. We used to play for them. Then my senior year, then I used to play the piano for the classes who want to learn how to dance. You know, for couple of dollars. Then I had my own dance band. We used to play around there. Then we had a German band. We used to go to schools. I used to play, boom-boom, with a E-flat (bass). Sometimes, I play the trombone, sometimes the alto horn, um-tah, um-tah, um-tah.

IH: So, did you play with all these different groups at the same time? All these different bands?

BK: Yeah, usually was all my groups, my bands. I started writing arrangements at that time for the bands, the dance band.

IH: So music came real naturally to you, then?

BK: Yeah. Piano, I used to. . . . My grandmother had a piano home. So I used to go next door. Boy, she used to in Portuguese, curse. Oh, grumble. Eleven o'clock, 11:30 at night, dang-dang-dang-dang. You know, I believe the only way you can be good, you have to practice. And I practice. Trombone and the steel guitar. I became a steel guitar [player] overnight. Malcolm Beelby, when he had the band one time at Moana Hotel--you know, on Thursday nights we play at the Moana Hotel. And steel guitar player, I used to teach him how to read music. I was playing the bass. One night the leader came in the back of me, watching. And he said, "Benny, he's not playing what's written."

I said, "Well, all I can do, teach the guy. You know, it's up to him to practice."

So finally, then he said, "You're through. Benny, tomorrow, you're playing steel."

I said, "I don't even know how to tune the steel guitar."

So, Bobby Ka'ai, well, he came from China. All those local boys was in China. In Japan and China. So Bobby was our trumpet player and violinist. So, Bobby can play any instrument, any band instrument. Of course, he had a huge band in China. Lot of Filipino boys. They were the great musicians from Philippine Islands, and they all were in China. But Bobby said, "Well, Benny, I'll show you how to tune it."

So, Bobby loaned me his steel guitar. I stayed home all night long, learn one song. Next morning, I was playing the steel guitar. First thing, the trumpet player came out of, I think, USC. Anyways he was one of the arrangers. He wrote the steel guitar parts like you're writing for a trumpet. Nothing but sixteenth notes and eighth notes and dadadadada. I said, "Hey, wait. You
cannot play the steel guitar that way." When you play with your fingers, trombone, you know it's right there. But steel guitar, you have to look down on the strings where your positions. And you can't be playing with the band like (BK makes rapid sound). So, the only way I can do it, I used to look at my music. I used to tune the strings to it. So when came to that particular part, I would go dadadadada--I would be with them. So I used to come almost to blows with those Haole arrangers. I said, "This instrument is different. And you have to write it a little different." Then I start writing for the steel guitar and for the orchestra. At the Royal [Hawaiian Hotel].

IH: Did the steel originate here?

BK: Oh, yeah.

GK: Kekuku.


GK: Blood and Orchids.

BK: So Barney Isaacs called me. He had to do the soundtrack, so he called me to help him out, all the old songs, when they had the Massie case. So I said, "Yeah, Barney, I'll help you out." We got up there, and the guy, the producer with the money, he was just a young boy. I said, "Gee, how'd he get that money? He look like only about nineteen years old or twenty years old."

When Barney, we start recording, he [i.e., the producer] said he didn't like the steel guitar. He said, "That's cowboy music."

We told him, "No. That's the only Hawaiian music instrument there is. Ukulele is not Hawaiian. The guitar is not Hawaiian. Steel guitar is the only Hawaiian."

He said, "But I don't like the sound. It's cowboy."

So, they don't know what to do. Del Courtney said, "Well, Benny, you take the solo on ukulele."

I said, "Me? I haven't played since the Tapa Room with Apaka, the last time I played the ukulele. I play once in a while. And you know, all the solos." So I said, "Well, I'll try." So I end up playing the ukulele solos on the soundtrack. But I'm laughing, trying to play. Your fingers got to be relaxed and everything to play ukulele solos. I haven't played for years.

IH: So they took out the steel completely?
BK: Yeah. This guy. He said, "That's cowboy music." So, I don't know.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

IH: Okay, so in high school, that's when you started all these small groups, and arranging, and doing all of those kind of things.

BK: Yeah, mm hmm. Then after school, then I got into Leonard "Red" Hawk. Then after Leonard "Red" Hawk, I played some little bands here and there, some Chinese band. But Leonard "Red" Hawk was one of the top bands, those little bands that played around town, like in the '30s. Another top band was the Dragons. Used to be the Lum boys, Kalihi. They lived right next to the Kalihi Theater.

IH: Where did you play when you played with Leonard "Red" Hawk?

BK: Well, the places where the bands used to play, was Armory Hall. Then, Outrigger Canoe Club.

IH: Oh, you folks played there?

BK: Used to be dancing over there, too. The old canoe club. Yeah, then Pearl City. Pearl City . . .

IH: Tavern?

BK: No, no, no. Plantation. They used to have like a gym there. An 'Ewa Gym. That's where the local bands used to play. And Palama Gym. See 'em play. But Leonard "Red" Hawk, every Friday we used to play at the old Elks Club. The Parker [i.e., Castle], I think, used to be their home. It's torn down many years ago. And the Elks Club, we used to play there Friday nights. Then on Saturday nights, sometimes we used to go to Hale'iwa Hotel. Beautiful.

IH: So you folks just kind of moved around, then?

BK: Yeah. Every Friday was at Elks Club. Then we had like every Saturday used to be at the Hale'iwa. Then in between like we used to play at the Armory . . .

IH: Where was the Armory?

BK: Right over by the palace.

GK: 'Iolani Palace.

IH: Oh, you folks played in there?
BK: Yeah, right next, in the back, there's an armory. Was Miller Street, eh? Miller. (It's not there anymore.)

GK: Miller Street.

BK: Yeah. Used to be Armory there. That's where the Honolulu Armory was, that's the national guard. That was there. It was nice. Palama Gym was very nice, too. And Pearl City--I mean, 'Ewa Gym. Those days was very nice. No trouble. Everybody enjoyed it.

IH: When they had dances in the gyms, they just fixed it up, put in the stage, and stuff like that?

BK: Oh, no, no. Band was on the floor, same like Palama Gym, the band on the floor. People dance around you. But Armory, they had a stand there. They had the Blue Harmony. They had several bands there. I've kind of forgot some of the names.

IH: And what was Outrigger Canoe Club like at the time?

BK: Was two-story, kind of high, way up. Downstairs was used for all the bathing--you know, where the bathing rooms, all that. You shower, you change. But was very nice.

IH: And the nightclub was on the second level?

BK: On top. Yes, just the top. And that was it.

IH: Was that open-air?

BK: Yeah. Just a little lanai like. Was real nice. Then after that, we took Harry Owens' place. When Harry Owens first left the Islands. Nineteen thirty-seven, around there.

IH: At the Royal Hawaiian?

BK: Royal Hawaiian Hotel.

IH: And you were still playing with Leonard "Red" Hawk?

BK: "Red" Hawk, yeah. We were called the Waikikians. And was Johnny Pascoe and all of us. And Clarence Eben. We used to broadcast--some radio station in the back on Kapi'olani Boulevard every Monday. The theme song was "Poor Menehune." It was named after this Clarence Eben. Every Monday we used to broadcast. Then, after a couple of months, then Harry Owens came back. He stayed only a few months back here, then he left for good. Then Don McDiarmid went in. I went in with him. After Don, I think it was a band leader, Wally Lavque. Then, after Wally Lavque, I went on Ala Moana Road. I don't know if it was called Ala Moana that time. There was a Ramona Cafe. Alfred Apaka, myself, and David Kaumeahiwa, we worked there. I don't know who was the steel guitar
player. We worked there only for few months, then Andy Cummings came in.

IH: So is that the first time you played with Alfred Apaka, was at that .

BK: No. With Don McDiarmid, we picked Al. See, our first vocalist was Bill Lincoln. Then we had an audition for singers and Alfred Apaka came with a whole—Frank Shaner, a whole bunch of kids from Roosevelt [High School]. So we listened and Alfred sang. Then we got together. We said, "Now, that's the best singer." Alfred was, you know, roly-poly. You know, fat. (Chuckles) Bottom of his hair was stuck way out, stiff right up in the air. He was known as Ah Fat, those days. And Apaka joined us. Then our steel player was Sammy Chong. When we left with Ray Kinney, he changed his name to Sam Makia. That's when all the Hawaiian boys with Chinese names those days had to change their name to Hawaiian. They all did that.

IH: Oh, yeah?

BK: Like Sam Alama, his brother went up there, he changed his name to (Hal) Aloma. So became Aloma of the Seven Seas. And Henry Paul, well, his nickname was a different name. And Tommy Castro went over there. And Sam Makia, later on—I think Sam Makia's still in New York and he took over when Ray Kinney left Lexington Hotel. Sam Makia took over the band. But his name was Sammy Chong. Him and Tommy Castro, they were playing at Log Cabin, that's right next to Hawai’i Theater. There's a lane going in (i.e., Bijon Place). You know, Bethel Street and Hotel Street. And you going to 'Ewa, there's a little lane going, that's Log Cabin there. They were playing there. And right on the corner of that lane was Rialto Bar. That's where the two brothers had their little group there. It was a Hawaiian group. There's always a Hawaiian group in there. Puni Kalia. Kalia Brothers. Puni was a great steel player. He was a steel guitar player later on with Andy Cummings. He used to play harmonics. Thinking of harmonics. He'd be talking to you about the football game or baseball game full blast and he's playing the steel guitar. Later on, he became . . . We used to see him at the park. He didn't do too well, you know. Hang around Ala Moana Park. He passed away. Then on Nu'uanu [Avenue] and Hotel [Street], there was another bar there. Now it's . . .

(BK's granddaughter enters. Taping interrupted, then resumes.)

BK: So, that's where, on that corner there, that became Bill Lederer's Bar.

GK: Bill Lederer's, you know, the Hotel Street, the bar.

BK: Hotel. Hotel and Nu'uanu.

GK: The oldest bar in Honolulu.
BK: Well, it was different. There's a name for that place, a drugstore or something. But there was a little balcony right over the bar. I don't know how "Tiny" Brown can get up there. "Tiny" Brown was a huge—he was over 300 pounds. And who used to help him up there was. . . . What's the name now? That Pauline Kekahuna. They had a group there. He was a steel guitar player, "Tiny" Brown. I don't know who the other boys. Then, across the street had another group. In those days, all entertainment was in Honolulu. Then later on . . .

IH: Did you play at those bars, also?

BK: No, no. I was working at the Royal. Then when we get through—twelve o'clock [a.m.] when everything closes, see, when we get through. My night off, I used to go. Like Sunday nights, I used to go in town or Maggie's Inn where (Jacob) "Jake" Keliikoa, sometimes "Gabby" [Pahinui] be playing, "Magoon" [Gregory] be playing. And Philip was over there playing. Sam Philip.

Then next, the other place on King Street? There's a nice—what's that street going up to Punchbowl?

GK: Alakea goes up.

BK: Yeah, Alakea, upstairs was a nightclub there. Punahele was there. (He sang falsetto and played the steel guitar and mandolin.) That's where the place everybody used to go. Up there. Then after a while, my cousin Alky Dawson took it over. Everybody know Alky Dawson was a good fighter, professional fighter. And then, on the same street, you go up the street, there was a bar upstairs. Another Hawaiian group was playing upstairs. Usually military people used to go up there. Then you had Rathskeller. Downstairs, eh?

GK: Yeah.

BK: That's where sometimes "Gabby" and "Tiny" Smith, another heavyweight. Weigh 300, almost 400 pounds. He was playing down there. He used to play with Old Man [Johnny] Almeida. And when Pua and the father used to live down on Mokuaea Street down on Pu'uhale, they used to go up to the Mormon church on Kalihi Street. There used to be a little hall there. They used to have concerts over there. I used to see Pua, little boy, going up there with his father, and Tiny Smith with his overalls going up. I used to watch them going up there. Pua was a little guy. Already he was a great steel guitar player. Yeah, anyway, that's Rathskeller. That's where all the beach boys used to hang out. All the movie stars, Bing Crosby, they all used to go down there.

IH: And where was that located now?

BK: On Alakea Street. Going ma uka, on Alakea Street. King went up on your left. Later on, there was a police station down there.
That's where I had my automobile license. By the police station before they moved to Bethel Street. The old police station.

IH: What was it like in there? I know I hear a lot of people talk about that place.

BK: Oh, just a cellar there. And Herman Clark was the bouncer. You see every beach boy over there trying to do something. "Panama Dave" and "Chick" Daniels. Gee, it's hard to remember some of the names.

IH: Did they have a regular band playing there?

BK: Yeah, the Hawaiian boys. Like "Tiny" Smith. Sometimes "Gabby" be down there. I think "Gabby" was underage. He sneak down there and play. Then I forgot some of the other boys. That's many years. They're all gone. That was everything. There was nothing in Waikiki. Was only the Royal [Hawaiian Hotel]. Later on, Kewalo Inn. Then we had the Roof Top Garden [Downtown in the Young Hotel].

IH: And where was Kewalo Inn located?

BK: That's at the corner of Ward [Avenue] and Ala Moana Road. Right across where the sampans were. What do you call those?

GK: Tour boats.

BK: Tour boats. Yeah. That's where they have all that shops there now [i.e., Ward Warehouse].

GK: Right about where the Cattle Company [Restaurant] is now, right on that corner.

BK: Right on the corner. That's where Kewalo Inn was. And next door was all empty. That's where it was an airport later on. That was Kewalo Inn. That was the place to go. It became the biggest nightclub there, outside of the Royal.

IH: And that was during the '30s? The Kewalo Inn?

BK: Yeah, yeah. Before the war [World War II]. Then, during (the end of) the war, then came La Hula Rhumba. But we were the first club to open up during the war. We can open up from six to nine o'clock. We got to close down, eh? It's open, but we got to black out all those things.

IH: Kewalo Inn turned into La Hula Rhumba or . . .

BK: No. La Hula Rhumba was up Punchbowl [Street near Beretania Street].

IH: Okay. That's what I thought.
BK: Was up. Then you had the Blue Lei. Blue Lei was on Kalākaua. Kalākaua and Kapi'olani [Avenues]. Going up was on 'Ewa side. The Blue Lei. Then we used to go . . .

IH: Is that about where Hawaiian Town was?

BK: No. Hawaiian Town was on Kapi'olani Boulevard. It's closer to where the radio station [KULA FM-92] is, around there. Someplace around there. Then we used to go and jam during the '30s down at Pearl City Tavern. Used to go out there. All the musicians go up there and jam, and have a ball, and drink, and have fun. All the Hawaiians. Some of them. But that's the only nightclubs that we had. Except the Roof Garden, the cocktail hour at five o'clock, where you had your Uncle Billy Lee was (chuckles) there. Alfred Apaka, Sam Kaaa, Leolani Blaisdell, and Jake Carter. Yeah, then after that, the band would come in, Giggie Royce. Before that, they had Del Courtney and Hal Grayson's band. Hal Grayson played for all the school proms. Great big bands, you see. Then there was something to dance. But later on, just before the war, Giggie Royce went to the Royal. And then, the war started. I was at Kewalo Inn.

IH: So those clubs you've been talking about around town, what kind of music did they play?

BK: Hawaiian music. Only Hawaiian music. Then you had these dime and ten cents, you know, dance halls. There was one right on Bethel and Hotel Street upstairs. Right across Liberty Theater on Beretania [Street] and Nu'uanu [Avenue], there was one. Then they had some down by 'A'ala Street . . .

GK: Was all live music?

BK: Yeah, yeah. Filipinos playing and the colored boys. They were good. There's only few colored people in Hawai'i. They were the musicians. They were good fellows, very nice. There's not many--everytime we see a colored guy go back, we'd always look. See the strange people. But they were very nice. They were gentlemen.

IH: Those were those dance halls, you said? They paid the girls to dance?

BK: Yeah.

GK: Dime a dance.

BK: Dime a dance, yeah. 'A'ala Street, there was one down there. But there was one across Liberty Theater. And there was one right across on Hotel and Bethel [Streets], upstairs. I remember Charlie Pokipala was playing the bass there. Yeah, but at the Royal, was the only big time there. At the Royal, Monday nights, we played there. It was all Polynesian, the fish in the ocean. All bamboo,
the nightclub was. And at night, all you see, all the big shots from Hawai'i. I don't want to mention names. But all the Big Five and Matson people.

IH: And this is before the war now?

BK: Yeah. Thirty-eight, '39, was Harry Owens' days. Was very nice. And when you look towards Kalākaua [Avenue] from the... You see one car just going by, or two lights here going. I remember a lady wrote a song with Alvin Isaacs, "All the Lights of Waikīkī." She sat down in the dining room and seen the lights, you know, gleaming on the ocean, so she wrote this song. Tells a good story. "All the Lights of Waikīkī." When the moon comes over the mountain, you can just stand out there and look. Now you don't see anything. It's all cement. Nothing. They sure have ruined everything. They've lost the beauty of Hawai'i.

But then, on Monday nights and Tuesday nights, we used to go to Wai'ālae Golf Course. They had a club there right by the ocean. And Old Man (George) Brennan was the manager there. Later on, he bought out Kewalo Inn during the war. Him and Laws. Old Man Laws. He had a roofing business. But Tuesday nights. And Wednesday nights we come back to the Royal. And then, Thursday nights, we play at the Moana on the lanai. That's where the people, they're going to leave the next day to go back to the Mainland. So, you know, they have a farewell party on Thursday. Friday nights we go back to Wai'ālae Golf Course. And Saturday night, we come back to the Royal. After work, almost every night, I used to go to Bethel Street. There was a cafe there. I think for ten cents you can get Chinese food, a little plate here. For dollar, you can feed all the boys, you know. And all the musicians used to gather there. "Tiny" Brown. We used to... Tommy Castro and all.

IH: What was the name of that place? Do you remember?

BK: It's a funny name. It might come back later on. It's a cafe there. (Kuhio Cafe.) We used to go up there and try to sing harmony, you know. Somebody say, "Ey, let's sing this song." Like "I've Got You under My Skin." Four-part harmony. Nobody knew four-part harmony, but I used to write four-part harmony already in those days. But there was no music written up, it was by ear. Every night, over and over. Tommy Castro, "Tiny" Brown, "Gabby," and this guy Herbert Leigh-Quai, a beautiful voice. He passed away. And then, Dilly Nicholas, he was one of the... That's Maddy Lam's brother. He was the only tenor guitar player. He used to play with--Sam Kahanamoku had a group here. And the brother, Bobby Nicholas, was famous in California. Played with Lani McIntire, all those boys. They passed away. And there was a guy with long hair. We call him "Jean Harlow" after the movie actress. He left for the... His father had connection with Henry Ford, was one of the Hawaiian musicians. Henry Ford, those days, his favorite musicians were Hawaiian group. And in his will, what I was told, those boys will always work as long as there's a Ford Company. Now
they're all passed away. He was one. The other, there was couple more boys.

Then another group was Sam Amalu. They played on the radio. They had Renny Brooks there. Sometimes, Sam Kealoha, and "Chick" Daniels, sometimes. And (Sam) Colgate was another famous beach boy, Colgate. They used to play for this lady that had a beauty shop, on the radio. Renny Brooks, he was great. And Sam Amalu. Then "Chick" Daniels had a group, too, playing.

IH: So there were quite a few groups around town, then.

BK: Yeah. Well, they were from Waikīkī. That's the Stonewall boys, see. With Bobby Nicholas and all them. Well, Bobby Nicholas had a radio show. We used to go there. The old radio station was on Merchant Street. Where the Star-Bulletin, upstairs, there was a radio station. So I used to go by. I was a young kid when I went by. I was, I don't know, about sixteen, I think, or seventeen, I used to go up there and listen to those guys. Yeah, the radio. Then they had the "Ka Moʻi Coffee [Program]," [Joseph] "Little Joe" [Kekauoha], Randy Oness, Molly Cook, Alvin Isaacs, [Joseph] "Steppy" DeRego, all of them, Ray Kinney. I think Ray Kinney was emcee. It was Kona Coffee--"Ka Moʻi Coffee," eh? I think it's "Ka Moʻi Coffee." That's before the war. Then, later on, they went all to the Mainland. I think Dilly Nicholas, I think he died during the war. He was killed or something, I really don't know.

IH: Okay. I'm going to stop it here.

END OF INTERVIEW
IH: This is an interview with Mr. Benny Kalama at his home in Lanikai, O'ahu, Hawai'i, on May 13, 1986. The interviewer is 'Iwalani Hodges.

What I want to start out with first is to ask you what kind of casual entertainment there was in Waikīkī in the early years in the '20s and '30s.

BK: Well, I don't know about the '20s, you know.

IH: Well, the '30s. You started in '29. Before the war, anyway, if there was any casual entertainment. Like, you know, the beach boys used to play on the beach?

BK: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. I told you about Sam Amalu had a group. He had a radio broadcast. That was Sam Amalu. That was all beach boys like "Chick" Daniels, [Kepoikai] "Splash" Lyons.

IH: Did they ever play in nightclubs in Waikīkī?

BK: No, there was no nightclubs.

IH: Oh, there weren't?

BK: So they just played, like there was lot of the big shots, you know, in Kahala. There was always weekend jobs. It was always on spur of the moment, they would call the boys up to work. Like Sam Damon. Up Moanalua [Valley], he had all those parties. And there was all the Dillinghams, Carter-Galts, all the rich people. And the Walkers. So that's where, when they want entertainment, they used to call like Sam Amalu. Then Sam Kahanamoku had a group, too. They used to do a lot of broadcasting. Then Bob Nicholas and Dilly Nicholas. And I forgot some of the old-timers with that group. Lot of them left for the Mainland.

IH: Did they ever get called into hotel rooms to do . . .
BK: Oh, yeah, when the big shots would come in. Oh, yeah. Because they always met the beach boys on the beach, right? Sam Amalu and "Chick" Daniels and [Sam] Colgate, all the boys, and Sam Kahanamoku. They're always down the beach. David Kahanamoku, all of them. So, the people would ask them, "Say, we have a party here, cocktail party. Come up the room, play." The boys would come up. Same with--Elmer Lee had another group. He had Renny Brooks and some of the boys. I don't remember their names. But I used to see them when I was with the bands.

When Francis Brown used to come over here, he used to decorate the whole dining room with gardenias from his Waipi'o place. Just all you see is white. And there was always, Winona Love, they would feature her. Just special. He would have Winona Love. She was one of the greatest dancers. And usually Elmer Lee, the boys used to perform. And we, with the band, was always in the back, watching. Oh, I sure love to see them. They were so great, you know. 'Cause I was just a young boy. Elmer Lee. And you have, you know, the Royal Hawaiian Hotel [Girls'] Glee Club.

IH: Did you ever do any of that? Casual entertainment? Cocktail parties?

BK: Oh, with the Royal Hawaiian Serenaders, yeah, we were always there. The Royal Hawaiian Serenaders was after the war, you know. But before the war, I didn't play much Hawaiian music. I was just with bands. Till after the war [World War II], then somebody got together and called Alvin Isaacs if he can form, you know, get a bunch of boys, the top musicians. Alfred Apaka was supposed to be in that group, but he didn't want to join them. So Tommy Castro [a.k.a. Thomas Koani] was a top steel guitar player and George Kainapau and Alvin Isaacs. So they picked me. I was working for Bell Record Company. So we [the Royal Hawaiian Serenaders] were formed. I think was the Fourth of July, they had a big firecracker at the Royal, you know, out in the front there by the seawall. And they light the firecracker, it exploded, and the thing opened, and we were in there, you see.

IH: Oh! How nice.

BK: Then we were real popular. Well, this is after the war. Then we'd be performing, we get a phone call. Like Ruddy Tongg's having (a party). Andre Kostelanetz, Lily Pons (the opera singer) over there. Carter-Galts, and Dillinghams, and all the big people. They have special guests. He said, "No matter what happen, boys, even after you get through or intermission, can you folks come over and sing couple songs." Like McClean, the old Scotsman, for Bob Hope and his wife. We used to just run up there and sing couple songs. Because they just wanted to show who were in the group. We were so popular. Top group. But we'd travel. Just to sing the wedding song up in the Racquet Club in Palm Springs. Fly, all the movies and everything.
IH: When did you start traveling to the Mainland?

BK: Oh, well, the first time was 1940 with the band at the Royal [Hawaiian Hotel]. That's only three Hawaiians was in the group. Was Sam Kaapuni and Joe Cravalho. Both have passed away. But the rest was all boys from Hollywood, Haole.

IH: And what band was that? The Royal Hawaiian . . .

BK: No, that's Malcolm Beelby's band. Then after the war, then I did lot of traveling with the Serenaders for United Air Lines, you know, with Elmer Lee. Lot of fun. So, then with Apaka.

IH: When you were playing at the Royal in the '30s, where was the nightclub located?

BK: The dining room was facing the ocean. Was all Polynesian, you know, bamboo and everything. Was really like Polynesian. That's where their lawn is, where they have the luaus on Sundays. And the dining room was on your left [i.e., 'Ewa side] and looking towards Wai'anae side. It's a different dining room now. Right after the war, they tore it down. But they hardly use that room anyway because they use the one, the really Polynesian room. Then they had a dance floor in front. Then the bandstand, well, at night, they would roll the big bandstand out by the seawall facing the lounge of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. Then at night, after we're through--those days, twelve o'clock, everything gets, liquor law, everything get through. Then they roll it back. That's where Harry Owens used to play. That's where he composed "Sweet Leilani." When the hotel first--before Harry Owens--I think there was Brooks-McQuestin's band. There was a orchestra there. On the radio, I used to hear. Pua Kealoha was there with them. Then you had, regular Hawaiian group, was Alvin Isaacs, and Ray Kinney, and all of them. Ray Kinney used to sing with that band, too. And I know they must have had some other bands before that. But I know Brooks-McQuestin.

IH: And how did the people who frequented that nightclub . . .

BK: Well, those days, Matson thought of the tourists first, you know. They gave all of Hawaiian entertainment. The glee club, at night, used to serenade in the front entrance facing Kalakaua [Avenue]. They put on a show for the people. And it was all--not like Sheraton today. Boy, they all want money. They ain't spending nothing. But Matson. And the hotel, sometimes, there was a couple. I can't think of his name now, but he owned lot of movie theaters all over the country in the states. (Jack Loeb of Loeb Theaters.) Sometimes, they'd be the only couple in the whole hotel. Yeah. Till, you know, the boats would come in, then different people. Those days, money was---it was expensive to come over and people would stay here at least a month.

IH: Did you get to know a lot of your customers?
BK: No, no. Not with the Royal. But then, at night, when we performed, that place would be packed with locals, the big shots. Like Dillinghams were young kids, right out of college. And the Walkers. Chee, another guy, I know used to love to dance. I think his name was [Alexander] Budge. He was the head of the Matson that time. And there was all the big sugar [industry] people, you know.

IH: But you didn't mingle with the customers?

BK: We weren't allowed. The manager at that time was... He looked just like Mussolini, bald head. He had one arm. We used to come on (Kalia) Road and park in the back, and walk upstairs, and go down a walk, and come outside. Not for the guests to see us. Then we'd perform. And then, when intermission, we would have to go in the back of the bandstand, facing the ocean. And when we were through, certain time, we would have something to eat, sandwiches to eat at maybe intermission, ten o'clock around there. And milk or ice cream. Then, go downstairs and get on the side. Till after the war when Pinney became manager. Then he thought we were artists. People loved us. People just crazy about the group. We used to go up the room. We used to get guests up the room just to listen to us and just have a ball, drinks and everything. Warren Pinney. But before that, no way. No way. We were just nobody. They didn't think of us like stars, you know, artists. That's how they treated us. But he had Francis Brown and Charlie Hind. You know, from the Hinds. Hind's Dairy, all that. They were the old kama'aina hapa-Haoles. They were lot of fun. And they didn't care whether they're Haoles.

IH: So they were the ones that mostly frequented the...

BK: Yeah. Well, they'd be at like Wai'ala [Country Club], the Royal [Hawaiian Hotel]. They'll come in with their cow boots, they would let 'em in. I know after six o'clock, everybody have to wear coats, you see. Till I think in the '60-something, that's when they started letting people come with aloha shirts into the Royal.

IH: And you used to also play at the Wai'ala Country Club?

BK: Yeah. And Moana [Hotel]. Like the band, on Monday night, we would work at the Royal. You have a Hawaiian floor show. Then, on Tuesday nights at the Wai'ala Golf Course. We would go there for dancing. That was all the local people out there. Then Wednesday night, back to the Royal. Thursday night, for the people that leaving, go back to the Mainland, usually we play on the lanai at the Moana. And Friday night, go back to Wai'ala Golf Course. And Saturday night at the Royal. That's where we perform, yeah. It was nice. At the Royal you can sit, and just the moon would come over you. There's hardly any cars going by, hardly any lights. Was beautiful Hawai'i. I know when people going to leave the next day, we used to sing "Aloha 'Oe," they cry and cry.

And going down, like meeting the boats. I remember, with the
bands, I used to go there and play my trombone with the bands and greet people on the tug. And sometimes, when I start playing Hawaiian music, we used to go out there, play for the people. Then, who we know or some people that ask us to go and perform. Then when they would leave, they would say, "Boys, can you folks come up in the room," their suite, "and perform." We had lot of beach boys used to do that. Then lot of the beach boys, the Stonewall Gang, [Joseph] "Steppy" [DeReg0] told you about.

IH: Yes, uh huh.

BK: They used to serenade around Waikiki. Going to Lewers [Street] from Kalakaua [Avenue] going to the Halekulani [Hotel] was all cottages, you know, both sides. Little cottages. All around there, the whole area, from Lewers Road going towards the Saratoga [Road] and around there. So the Hawaiian boys, the beach boys--"Chick" Daniels and all the gang there--they'd be on the sidewalk singing, see. They used to give them money or come in and drink, or have something to eat. The tourists loved that. As I say, they come here not for one week. They're here for a month. Those days, everybody with leis. Those days, so beautiful compared to today. Today, the hotels want you to say, "Aloha, aloha." The hotels have no aloha. They want that green money.

IH: When you said they all used to wear leis, did the hotel give them leis?

BK: No. Well, sometimes, the hotel. But there's lot of lei sellers. Leis was cheap. And when they used to go dancing, everybody used to have leis. All the people. The local ladies, gals, used to have leis. It was a must. Beautiful gardenias and pikakes, and all that. And the carnations was all local grown, up by (Koko Head). You know, going up to Hawai'i Kai there. Just when you go up to . . .

IH: Oh, by Koko Head?

BK: Yeah, Koko Head, up there. There'd be gardens there with carnations. When you pass by you can smell. Like now, they have those, all Mainland carnations now. Wherever they plant in here is from the Mainland. But you can smell when the women all come in in pikakes. Well, they [leis] were cheap. But now, there's no such thing as aloha. So, I don't know. The one who's keeping up the tourists with this kind of music like we were playing, now Sonny Kamahele playing. There's hardly anybody. Oh, at, what you call that? Banyan . . .

IH: Banyan Garden?

BK: Yeah. They have the Hawaiians. Well, Randy Lee is--you know, he runs the Willows now. He's still trying to keep. I think the Fardens are playing there. They're about the only places having the old Hawaiian. But I don't know. The old days was nice.
IH: So you think there was more Hawaiian music in Waikīkī in those days . . .

BK: Well, there was only the band at the Royal. That was all they had. Unless you hired those little bands, like eight-piece, six-piece, like the Blue Harmony, Leonard "Red" Hawk, and the KMM [Kalīhi Mutual Men's Syncopators]--Alvin Isaacs, you know, the KMM (has to do with the Mormon Church). And they had little bands here and there. Used to play at the Armory and the Outrigger Canoe Club on Kalākaua, the old place. Then I told you about 'Aiea Gym, 'Ewa Gym, the old Armory. That's on weekends, that's where. Then we . . .

IH: When you played for the gyms, was that mostly for the local people?

BK: All local. All the plantation people or whoever lived. Like in Pearl City, there was lot of local people. Well, mostly all local people working there and they were staying there. And people from Honolulu, all over. It's just they know where the dancing going to be that night. They all go over. If the bands are playing at 'Ewa, everybody would go 'Ewa. Then Armory, everybody going Armory. That's the only place that you can dance. Unless Elks Club where we used to play, that's private, only Elks member. Or we go down Hale'iwa Hotel.

IH: So in between your regular appearances at the big hotels, you also did those small gigs.

BK: Well, with Alvin Isaacs, yeah. Usually with Alvin. We used to go to like Hale'iwa for lunch and play over there, then for dinner, we go to Schofield [Barracks], play for the officers there. Randy Oness, all of us. "Steppy" DeRego, Alvin Isaacs. But I didn't play much Hawaiian music, you know. Just with Alvin. I learned all my Hawaiian from Alvin. Hawaiian music. Alvin is so great.

IH: Why is it that you played mostly big bands?

BK: Because few of the Hawaiian boys could read music. Like on bass, I read music on bass. Same with Buddy Peterson. He's another boy who can read. So, then I was lucky that I can sing a little. You know, sometimes with the bands over there . . .

(Doorbell rings. Taping stops, then resumes.)

BK: What was the last thing we were talking about? Oh, yeah, yeah. I was singing with the bands. Yeah, I was lucky. I can sing a little. So I went there. Used to have the floor show, if the Royal Hawaiian Girls' Glee Club wasn't doing the show—they do all the singing and backup for the hula dancers—or Lena Guerrero. She had another group. So if they only had a solo dancer, then I would do the singing.

(Visitors arrive. Taping interrupted, then resumes.)
BK: So I would have to do the singing like that, so I would get my bass down by the mike and sing. And the only thing we had was all Haoles so I used to write the arrangements for the Hawaiian songs so they can back me up. Because they didn't know Hawaiian music. They thought we were crazy. With Hawaiian music, there's four beats to a bar, sometimes there's two beats because of the steps. So they said, "What kind of music? This is wrong."

I said, "Wait awhile. You folks started classics before you folks played with dance. We all had to start with classics. I started playing classic music. So, classic music, if you're playing, first thing you know, you go into three-four time. So you just follow the conductor. You folks did that." I say, "Mexican music the same way. Some Spanish music—one, two, three, then boom, it goes back to one-two again." So, I used to, oh, come almost to blows with those Haoles. So I wrote the music and I knew how to write it down two-four, then go back to four-four, then write another two-four, and then you. . . . You know. I said, "Just read what's written. When you study classic, you read there. You go four-four, you go three-four, then you go six-eight time, twelve-four time. Right there. One, two, three, boom, you change your tempo. So what the hell? It's the same thing. Just read it." But I knew how to arrange, so I did it. That's why I was lucky to keep—they kept me working.

IH: Is that the reason more local boys weren't in those big bands, because they couldn't read music?

BK: Yeah, lot of them couldn't read music, yeah. Yeah, they couldn't. Of course, like [Charles] "Gabby" [Pahinui], he worked for me. I used to meet "Gabby" in a bar. He said, "Benny, too bad I didn't learn to read."

I said, "'Gabby,' you're doing perfect." He worked for me lot of years, "Gabby," on and off. But I wouldn't hire him steady, no way. I want a musician to work every night. Not one night, and "Where's 'Gabby'?"

"He's drunk someplace."

But anyway, I told "Gabby," "'Gabby,' the way you playing, if you knew music, you wouldn't sound the same. There's no feeling. Some people, they have no feeling. You have lot of feeling, aloha, for your music. So, just—you're doing fine."

So lot of them, like my steel guitar players, like when I write for floor shows, the Tapa Room, I write for all the instruments. Steel guitar, write their parts. And when I record, I write for everybody. The steel guitar, I know like Jules Ah See and Danny Stewart, they're great. I write everything down, but when we rehearse during the recording session, I'll tell them, "Now, play as written here. But here, play the way you feel." And you get the best of them, you see. And Jules Ah See was so great. Well,
he learned. He learned how to read a little. Barney Isaacs, the same way. They know a little. But Danny Stewart, he was so great. Well, he was a top musician from Hollywood. So you just get the best of them, eh?

But "Gabby," I say, "'Gabby,' no, you're lucky you didn't learn to read. You'd lose everything."

Yeah, that's about the only places in Waikīkī I knew of.

IH: Did you ever play at the Niumalu?

BK: Not the Niumalu, but the Hawaiian Village. We opened up Hawaiian Village. Well, that's after the war.

IH: But you didn't . . .

BK: No, no. I didn't know there was a Niumalu Hotel there.

IH: Oh, yeah?

BK: No, till after the war. I didn't know. I didn't know about nothing around there. Just where the Kaiser Hospital over there, the water used to go right down—the mud flats go right out to the ocean. Then you have a nightclub there. That's where Haunani used to work and her sisters. The Judd Sisters. That was called—I think I told you the name. (The Seaside Gardens.) But after the war, I know I used to go there, listen to them. But there was lot of nightclubs and liquor after the war. On John 'Ena Road, they got bottle clubs. You heard about the bottle clubs?

IH: Mm hmm [Yes]. And those only came into effect after the war?

BK: After the war. Just about the end of the war, that's when they had. Everything was open, free. And so Andy Cummings, we used to sing. Was very nice.

IH: What exactly was the bottle club?

BK: Well, you just go in and bring your own bottle. They used to have big bands and dance. You buy your mixes. You know, Seven-Up like that, that's the way they make their money. Then sometimes they have Mainland bands playing or whatever. They had quite a few [bottle clubs] here.

IH: Did you ever play in any of those?

BK: No, no. I was working all at the Royal when they had bottle clubs. Kewalo. Kewalo Inn, well, Kewalo Inn is in town now. But it's not there anymore. That's where that warehouses. You know, on Ward Street?

IH: Ward Warehouse?
BK: Yeah, all that. That's where Kewalo.

IH: Oh, Kewalo Inn?

BK: Yeah, was there. Was a service station on the corner, then going towards Waikiki, the next door was Kewalo Inn. That was popular. With five dollars, you can eat and drink and have a good time, those days, before the war. Yeah, things were so cheap. But we had other places like Pearl City Tavern before the war. They had a place there. So we used to jam session. Blue (Lei), that was on Kalakaua [Avenue]. But there were hardly any places. They had a speakeasy, Fort Ruger, by 18th Avenue, around there. Used to be a speakeasy, we used to go up there. Two brothers used to run it. It was nothing but kiawe trees and set [inside], there was a nice little place. Piano downstairs; upstairs, swimming pool and lot of gambling going on. Then up Nu'uanu there was another speakeasy. Used to be a place there where Mrs. Hall used to have hula dancers and everything. That's where--what do you call that church over there? Where all the guys with the bald heads? Hare Krishnas, eh? Yeah, there's a road [i.e., Hall Lane] going all the way in. (There was a speakeasy there, too.) And you have the Jewish church over there too, that temple, you know. But didn't have much. That's before the war. But in town, I told you, well, you have in town, all the nightclubs, all the bars and everything.

IH: When did you start recording? You said you worked for Bell Records?

BK: Oh, yeah. I was just a clerk there. You know, people wants to buy records, then I set up all the things. [Joseph] "Sonny" Nicholas. They had a bunch of musicians. We used to work. Tommy (Castro) . . .

IH: Oh, as a clerk?

BK: Yeah. Oh, yeah, I just do things in there. Record stores wanted to buy so many records, they would call in. This is after the war. Forty-six, I think it was. Yeah, Bell Records. That's when I did a recording with Alvin Isaacs. I was working there and nobody could sing. That's when Mel Peterson came to sing "Naughty, Naughty Mai Nei." He came down to record his "Naughty, Naughty Mai Nei." And all the luau, some of his songs, he just came down to record. I was working there. I was helping the guy set up. Kang, he was a great technician, recording. So, they had a song, "Hula Mai Oe." Nobody could sing it. I had laryngitis. So he said, "Benny, come in and sing this."

I said, "Oh, Alvin, I don't know how to--I cannot."

So I rehearsed with Mel Peterson, Alvin Isaacs, Jules Ah See--that's the first time I met Jules Ah See. And I don't know who the bass player was. Could be [Joseph] "Steppy" [DeReggo]. So, I ran over it and I recorded it. First thing, I had to do the
whole recording session with them.

But first recording I made was with the Harry Owens' boys when they broke up. (Freddy) Tavares, Alvin Isaacs, Randy Oness, and I think was—no, "Buddy" Peterson and myself were recorded. I think was KGMB on Kapi'olani Boulevard. That's in 1938. This Ray Andrade, later on, he took over the recordings. He made lot of money on that record.

IH: Weren't you on KGU radio show? "Voice of Hawai'i"?

BK: Yeah, "Voice of Hawai'i," we had a show on Sundays, like "Hawai'i Calls." We would rehearse. We had a Hawaiian group. We had a vibe player who was a piano player with Giggie Royce. His name, I think, it's Ray Andrews. Then I had three violins. The leader of the violin section was Bob McQuestin. He was a well-known violinist. But he had two ladies with him. We had a harp player, Jimmy Gally. (He was the organist) from the Kawaiaha'o Church. Then we would come on Sundays. We would follow. .. Fred Warren Pennsylvanias, we would follow them. Then, they would say, "Now, we will take you to Hawai'i."

Then, we come in, [BK sings], "Across the sea an island. ... " We had Apaka for a while, singing; Ray Andrade. I don't know how long we went on, but I did the arrangements for all the group, for the violins and everybody, harp player. And we had like Sam Kaaa, Jake Carter, myself, and "Tiny" Smith. He was about 300-something pounds. "Smitty," his name was. He used to play down Rathskeller. But it was a nice show. I remember Harry Soria was up there. Then I had a Monday night show, Bayer aspirins. With Sam Ka'apuni, myself, sometimes "Gabby" on steel. Sometimes there's Al Kealoha[Perry], Hawaiian boy, would be on steel. Then I had, oh. .. Fellow who used to play with—gee, I can't think of his name—he used to play with Andy Cummings. Then we had another guy with us on that, another steel player, on that radio show on Sundays. Was Halemanu. He composed a song, "Key in E-flat," I know. Beautiful song. But he used to come in with a bottle of maybe wine in his pocket. I said, "Oh, get out of here." Good thing Sam Kaaa can play a little steel. So Sam used to play. Same with "Gabby." "'Gabby,' get out of here." Drunk. Then we had another program with Alvin Isaacs. "Swansdown". .. Something. "Swansdown" (baking soda). I know the radio station was on Ala Moana Road. And "Steppy," myself.

Then we used to do a luncheon at the Young Hotel. Yeah, with Jimmy (Walker)—oh, was Italian fellow. He was well known, too, chee. That's where we met Mario Lanza. He was there. Very nice. I met him in Los Angeles. We had a party and he was invited. This lady that wrote with Alvin Isaacs, she wrote the English lyrics for "Nalani," which [Nat] King Cole sang. And she wrote "All the Lights of Waikiki," when Waikiki was so beautiful, you can see the moon and everything. She was just sitting down in the dining room. She seen the glitter of the lights on the water, so she wrote, [BK sings], "All the lights in Waikiki dance the hula in the sea."
That luncheon was very nice.

IH: How long were you performing on the Mainland?

BK: Oh, we used to go on tours with like the Serenaders. We'd go. The people who wanted us up there, whatever, the clubs, and the [Royal Hawaiian] Hotel would say, "Okay, boys you can go." But then, when the people back here, tourists come in, they say, "Where's the boys?" They would squawk and then we get a phone call, "Boys, soon as you through, better come right back."

Yeah, but in Spokane and in Seattle at the Olympic Hotel, we already booked there. Then when we through, then we come down to Pasadena at the Huntington Hotel. We'd stay there summertime. Then the people say--the manager would call up. Well, the manager at the Royal used to own the Huntington Hotel. Say, "Boys, you guys got to come back." Then wintertime, we go back there and stay maybe a month or two months till the people squawk, and we get back. Then, like with United Air Lines, just fly in, two days, and come back. When I made the tour of the Mainland, we went down Oklahoma, Dallas, San Antonio, all over there. Here and there.

IH: And you traveled with big bands, you said?

BK: Oh, with that band, Beelby, yeah.

IH: Oh, Malcolm Beelby's band?

BK: Yeah. I had to go. I just got married when I left. I think I got married on a Monday, and Friday I left. My wife--we bought a new home in Kalihi, down Notley Street. Brand-new home. It was cheap. Was $3500, brand-new home. You buy a Packard. Packard was the top cars--$1800. Eighteen hundred dollars, a brand-new--Packard is like a Cadillac was, (chuckles) you know.

But I don't know about any other nightclubs in Waikīkī. Was none I knew of. But I know there was always the Stonewall boys at Waikīkī Tavern, going towards Diamond Head [from the Moana Hotel]. There was always the boys out there, playing music. Then at Bethel Street, the Kuhio Café. I told you, we buy, ten cents, a little plate. And all the musicians would meet over there. Then we try to sing some songs. Everybody tried to fake. We used to try new songs. All the top boys. And sometimes people wanted music maybe about one, two o'clock in the morning. The cab driver would come over there, "Boys, some people want some music."

So we said, "Okay. Who wants to go over? Okay, we go." That's the way it was.

Then, well, they had different--like Vineyard Street, they had a gang there. I don't know, I never hang around them. I was too young. But I don't know if they had music over there. I know Harry Baty was one of them, (John) "Squeeze" Kamana. He was a
beach boy, but he hang around the Vineyard gang. So I didn't know much about them. Only met them on "Hawaii'i Calls." Well, Harry Baty's still on the Mainland. He's about the only Hawaiian boy musician from the old-timers that's still alive. The rest all passed away.

IH: Did you also work for "Hawaii'i Calls"?

BK: Yeah, "Hawaii'i Calls." I went there 1952. I was working down Don the Beachcomber's. Then they asked me to go over there, so I went. Then I started doing all the arranging for "Hawaii'i Calls." All the recordings, I did all their arranging.

IH: When you worked at Don the Beachcomber's, where was it located?

BK: Well, what's the village there? Right across the Moana [Hotel]? International Market [Place], that's where it was.

IH: Oh, so, was it always located there?

BK: Yeah. Oh, it was nicer. Just Polynesian. You know, just vegetation then. Located inside, was just all shack--you know really Polynesian shack with the thatched roofs and all that. Very nice. Don Beachcomber [a.k.a. Donn Beach] really, he spent lot of money. He just wanted to do things right, you know, no matter what it cost. He was good to us. "Boys, don't forget. When you folks want to eat, just help yourselves." Cook would cook for us and everything. And Christmas, always a chicken or a turkey, ham, everything. He had class, Don. Class. He dressed, you know, that African--you know, dress in the hunter's, go to Africa? What do you call those jackets?

IH: Mm hmm, safari jackets?

BK: Yeah. And shorts. He had class. And nothing but big shots there. And I remember the boys who used to work was David Keli, and Bright. Simeon Bright. And Jimmy Kaopuiki, over there, playing. And before them, when I was at the other hotels, I don't know who was with them before them. I know Mel Peterson was there later, Barney Isaacs was there, Alfred Apaka was there. But he had class. Boy, he didn't care much, he just wanted to see the people enjoy Polynesia. Yeah, Don.

But those days, "Hawaii'i Calls" was just packed with people, used to come in and watch, so popular. Even when in Japan, they all know who was on "Hawaii'i Calls." When I went to Japan, they found out I was there, and they come over. Like last night, two people from Japan, they said, "Oh, Kalama. Mr. Kalama, I buy your album. You very popular, Japan. Oh, you come back, come back." But "Hawaii'i Calls" did a lot for Hawaii'i.

I went to Australia one year with. . . . It was a big show. I took my show from the 'Ilikai Hotel, Lani Custino, all of us. The
manager said, "Benny, you go." Oh, they have that every year. All like these tourists, people. And there's a name for it. Sometimes it's in Hawai'i; they go to Las Vegas, everything.

IH: Oh, a conference?

BK: Not a conference. There's a name for it. And we had about twenty-two girls, dancers, from, you know—all these outsiders. Lot of them. From Miss Hawai'i, they all went over. Like Moffatt, you know, Tom Moffatt. Yeah, the wife was one. She used to work with us at the Tapa Room. And that's where I first met Helm, George Helm. Sweetie Moffatt, she call up my room. She said, "Benny, come down. We having a party. I get some wine. Some people sent couple cases." So I went downstairs and here, these Hawaiian boys there. I said, "Ey, what you folks doing down"—I didn't know who they were. George Helm start playing guitar. There was another Hawaiian boy, Izeki, or something, his name was. He's working out of San Francisco. In fact, his sister was married to Alvin Isaac's brother. They both passed away. But anyway, the Izeki girl's still alive. But I listened to this George Helm playing guitar. He sang opera songs. He was so great. I said, "Who this guy?" Yeah, George Helm, but he was a great one.

Then, on the way, on the airplane, who's sitting next to me? I think his name was Simpson, was the head of the Tourist Bureau. Simpson was his name. I told him, I said, "Mr. Simpson, why you folks taking 'Hawai'i Calls' out?"

He said, "We don't need 'Hawai'i Calls' now. People going to come to Hawai'i." You know? Already, that's what they thought. He said, "We print 'em in magazines."

I told 'em, "I don't know why you print 'em in magazines. All the magazines, the hotels are paying them to print. But they don't hear the Hawaiian music," this and that.

So he said, "Oh, they going to come to Hawai'i. We're made."

But now they're worried. Look, they hardly spend any money for advertisement for Hawai'i. Now they're starting to realize. In Florida, they spend about $15 million dollars at that particular time, way back. Now they spending more money. They think that people just going to come to Hawai'i, you not going advertise. Hyatt [Hotels], the show we were—I was with Jack Thompson. The Hyatt, three years now, they send people to Germany, the floor show. They come from the Hyatt from Maui, the musicians, entertainers. And from our show at the Moana. Now, they doing the advertising. They spending the money, but not the Tourist Bureau. But now, the Tourist Bureau [i.e., Hawai'i Visitors' Bureau], they kinda worried, boy.

IH: Did they fund the "Hawai'i Calls" program?
BK: They did. They had so much money, and the legislature gave money. The legislature was willing all the time. But I don't know the Tourist Bureau, the way he talked to me, this guy, for Christ's sake. So people still come over and say, "Well, what happened to 'Hawaii'i Calls'?"

I say, "No more." So, I don't know what happened. Maybe people, they rather listen to baseball games or rock'n'roll, like that, I really don't know.

IH: Was that program always conducted at the Royal [Hawaiian Hotel]? "Hawaii'i Calls"?

BK: No, no, no. I remember the first time I heard a broadcast from the Mainland. When you enter the Royal, old Royal--not the way it is. But even right now, when you go into the entrance to the Royal and the Sheraton [Waikiki Hotel], right on your left, beginning to the left there, was a radio station downstairs. Then one day, I went out there and was Harry Owens was broadcasting. That's the first--then I know it was "Hawaii'i Calls." Now, that's way back. But was at the Moana [Hotel later], so they always figure, oh, "Hawaii'i Calls" started at the Moana, you see. Then, after a while, it went to Hawaiian Village, Halekulani [Hotel].

IH: Oh, so it moved around then?

BK: Yeah, moved around, later on, yeah. But for years, all during the war, it was at the Moana. Later on, the other hotels wanted it, see. Then, every year we go to Kauai for that Kuhio's birthday. Then we go to Lahaina, play under the banyan tree there. Then we go to Hilo for that Merrie Monarch [Festival]. Play right across the police station, there's a big park there. Sometimes, you know, Hilo, you never know when it's going to rain. We're out there and it's pouring. Oh, gee. Then, that was it.

IH: Okay.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

IH: Can you tell me what it was like at the Hawaiian Village when [Henry] Kaiser [owned it] . . .

BK: Yeah, when Kaiser, before Hilton took over. Well, there was a Niumalu Hotel. So I was working the Moana Hotel with Andy Bright, Johnny Leal and Jules Ah See. Apaka was working at the Royal, that time, I think. Yeah, we just came back from the Mainland, something like that. Anyway, he asked me, "Benny, I'm going to open up with somebody's hotel." He didn't name the hotel. I don't think Mr. Kaiser had a name for it anyway, in the first place.
"Can you get boys together?"

So I said, "Okay." And I talked to Alfred, "This Jules Ah See is great." So I knew "Sonny" Nicholas, we worked together with Alfred at the La Hula Rhumba. "Sonny" played steel. "Sonny" was very fast. He and Jules Ah See, we had a little trio we used to play at the Halekulani. We used to serenade out in front on Saturday. After "Hawai'i Calls," we go out there. When we through, "Sonny" Nicholas didn't drink much. So he used to help carry me to Moana Hotel and work over there with me. And gee, sometimes, I be sleeping. But with my bass and the (chuckles) music is going on anyway. So, anyway, we got the boys. And I got Jimmy Kaopuiki, and "Pappy" Bowman. Used to be at the Barefoot Bar after that with Sterling Mossman. Then Pauline Isaacs. After that, she went with us with the Royal Hawaiian Serenaders to the Mainland. So we got together. We rehearsed at this Henry Kaiser's place at Kāhala. Got the boys together. We rehearsed couple times.

Then they were starting to build the Hawaiian Village. They had little bungalows, real Polynesian thatched house in the front entrance on the side. And they had the houses circle right around the swimming pool. And had torches. At night you'd think you were in Africa or someplace or in Tahiti or Samoa. Was really Polynesian. Beautiful. With the old houses, little bungalows. That's what he had around. So, anyway, that's when we came back. So, Alfred told me, "Benny, this what's going to be." So ("Sonny" Nicholas) didn't care to go with us 'cause he wanted something else. Something dependable, you know, than music. So, I think he was working with Pearl Harbor, something like that. I think so, that time. I told the guys, "Who can we get? Who's a guitar player around?"

So they said, "Well, there's a David Kupele working at the Hawaiian Village." He was running around. He was there with Niumalu when they had music around there. He was a bass player, when it was called Niumalu. So David was working for the Kaiser Company when they were trying to build the place. Working over there. He was just driving around who needs--you know, the big people, drive them around. The bosses, whoever it is. So David came up there. I met David. He didn't know how to play guitar. You know, he didn't know much about guitar, but he was a bass player. So we taught--we said, "David, you gotta play guitar." So Henry Kaiser sent us to Los Angeles. We stayed at St. Chesterfield Hotel, I think it was, right across the Los Angeles YMCA. And two doors from us was the Hollywood Boulevard. And close by was Grauman's [Chinese] Theater. So we went up there to rehearse, to form the group. Pauline ["Nalani"] Isaacs went with us and 'Iolani. Luahine, that great dancer? The ancient dancer?

IH: Oh, uh huh, 'Iolani?

BK: 'Iolani Luahine, it was. Only two girls went with us. So we went up there to rehearse. Then we started going on this morning show.
with Tennessee Ernie. . . .

IH: Ford?

BK: Ernie Ford, yeah. A TV show. There was a lot of people there. So we go on and perform. Couple times we went there.

IH: So David Kupele did go with you? He learned the guitar?

BK: Yeah. He learned to play the guitar and became a good guitar player later on. We tried to teach him, you know, as much as I knew about guitar. I knew a little bit. I could help him. So David became all right. He had lot of personality, David. Then we'd go over to Lake Tahoe just to play volleyball with the movie stars. Used to be guests of Henry Kaiser. Lake Tahoe, he had a beautiful place. We stayed there. He had a big home there. Had a pond there with trout. One day, Mr. Kaiser, I don't know where he went. He wasn't around. So, was just only us Hawaiians. Was Jules Ah See--and Jules Ah See was a nut. That's the one sang "No Huhu." You don't know what he's going to do on stage. He said, "Benny, help me." He got a bed sheet. We went down there, we scooped all of the trout. So when Henry Kaiser came back, he said, "Where's the trout?" He said, "Must be the boys."

Alfred said, "Hey, you guys took the trout?"

I said, "Jules. He and I went. I helped him."

So, Jules, you know, he knows how to cook. So we made all that Chinese [style]. So, Mr. Kaiser got somebody that came with a truck and replenished the trout.

There's all pine trees and there was a big building there for us. The girls had their own building to stay, but we had like a log cabin, two-story we had. Outside the log cabin, but inside was plush. Everything was given to us. If we wanted something special, Jimmy Kaopuiki and I, we used to get on the. . . . Jimmy'd been there before with Alfred, you see. We get on the truck, we used to go to. . . . Reno. Was sixty miles drive. We had fun, he and I, come back. We used to take the damn truck. Nobody knew where the truck was. But then we'd go back when we had to go on some shows in Hollywood and Los Angeles. Then Mr. Kaiser would call down, "Boys, I've got some people want to challenge you guys on volleyball." So we get a big airplane, four-engine airplane, just fly us just to play volleyball. Only us on that plane. Well, he treated us nice.

IH: When he treated you up there, was that to entertain or just for a vacation or . . .

BK: No, just to have fun. Yeah. Then he got us into. . . . We auditioned up in Sunset. That's a well-known nightclub up there. That's where later on in years Arthur Lyman played. But we had all
these big shots there to listen to us audition. Van Heflin was there. You know the movie star? He was there, too. So they said, "Yeah. Get these boys to Las Vegas." So we opened up at the Royal Nevada. It's not there anymore. It was brand-new. It was a new hotel. And in the main room the star was [Robert] Alda. You know, the (son is) with "M*A*S*H"? You know, the father just passed away. He was featured there. "Guys and Dolls," was featured there. Ben Blue, (the comedian), and all them. But we were in that place there. We were there one month when there was hardly--across the street was just few buildings. There was nothing in Las Vegas. The strip was just a little street.

Anyway, we opened up, I think, on a Monday night we opened up. And the agent that booked us took us up there, we were playing. Had Rene Tousette. He was the originator of cha-cha. They had this--oh, this guy's well known. He comes to Hawai‘i all the time. He writes music. But he was accordion player player there when I first seen him over there. And who's this fellow that was known for--oh, he sang with Jimmy Lunsford--with Duke Ellington's band. Herb Jeffers was featured there, too. So we came with Hawaiian. You know, in those, the lounge bands were so loud. Every casino, they had a group there playing. Everything is loud. Right across the hotel was (Louis Prima). He passed away. He was married to Keelly. Keelly, she was a part-Indian gal. Oh, he did lot of movie shots. Oh, but soon as we walk in, he said, "They must be Hawaiians." And he start playing Hawaiian music. He was a trumpet player, well known. Anyway, later on.

So the first night we opened up and everything is DAH-DAH-DAH-DAH! The noise, every nightclub, every casino, everything so loud. We came up there, Alfred is singing, "Beyond the Reef," and "Blue Hawai‘i." And first thing you know, everything became quiet. People wondering what's happening? There's no noise. And people start coming in. Then all these owners of the hotels. Over there, everybody, there's so many guys. They own half-shares of all the hotels. And I've seen Miller, every night, with maybe $60,000, $30,000 playing blackjack. And who wins him out, he buys a share. That's what they used to do over there. When you on the table and they put the seats up, only this guy's going to play against the house. That's where he try take the money away from the house so he can buy. So we hear them argue, "What's this group doing up here?" You know, to this guy. Poor guy was going to worry. What's going on? He was the agent who took us up there. And the people who audition us, they told us, send us up there. But Wednesday night, they changed the room into a Pineapple Room. We came so popular over there, all the hotels was trying to buy us. So after almost one month, this hotel and [Harry] Belafonte was (performing at) another hotel, they all tried to offer us $100 apiece added if we stay back. You know, this next hotel try to buy us. Mr. Kaiser said, "No, you folks get out of here."

So we went with Mickey Rooney up Calneva Lodge up in Lake Tahoe. Boy, Mickey was a... No wonder he hasn't got much money. I
used to see him. There was two guys that were singers there. We
were in the dressing room and Mickey had a beautiful diamond ring.
So this guy came up to him. He was like a ding-a-ling, I don't
know. He says, "Gee, Mr. Rooney, your diamond. That ring is so
beautiful. How many carats?"

Mickey look up, "You want it?" He took it off and he gave the guy
the ring. I think that's why, you know, he's. . . . He's so
easygoing, Mickey Rooney.

But we were there. Then we stayed for quite a while. For couple
months, we're up there till was ready to come back. They opened up
the hotel. So we came back and we opened up the Hawaiian Village
in 1955. I think September the 15th or 17th, we open up the place.
It was just, you know, an old place where the old Niumalu dining
room was, where the other boys, [Simeon] "Kalakaua" [Aylett] and
Billy Hew Len, those guys, used to play. We opened there. It was
the only nightclub and that place was packed every night. So then,
we start adding another guy. We brought in [Solomon] "Sonny"
Kamahele to join us. Then after that, Westin Hotels (managed) the
place. Mr. Henry Kaiser still owned it. The Westin Hotels come
out of Seattle.

IH: And they took over management, but Kaiser still owned it?

BK: Yeah, the management, yeah. And the 'Ilikai Hotel. That's, you
see, Westin Hotel. Then they have something to do with United Air
Lines, too. The president at that time was Ed Carlson. He became
the head of United Air Lines after Mr. Patterson died. Mr.
Patterson was a local boy who was born in Waipahu. He's the one--
well, the airlines was going down, down, down, so they brought Mr.
Patterson in. I don't know where he was working, in the Mainland.
So he's the one put United Air Lines on the map. That's why,
Hawai'i is the favorite for United Air Lines, you see. And Ed
Carlson—he used to come to my house. We used to have parties
here. He used to play golf out here, all the big guys. They were
nice people. They were down-to-earth.

Then, after that, they were Hilton Hotel [i.e., Hilton Hawaiian
Village]. They're strict. Yeah, the Old Man Hilton used to come
in, Conrad Hilton, have dinner. And we have to play [BK sings],
"Put your little toes, put your little toes. . . ." He used to
come with this, oh, this movie [star], this dancer, Miller. Ann
Miller. Tall. Every time he'd come to Hawai'i, he would come in.
I had to get the music and I had to write the arrangement. You
know, with steel guitars. The old man out there [dancing], as old
as he was. (Laughs) But Hilton, I stayed there till--almost
sixteen years I was there.

IH: When did it start growing from those grass shacks that it started
out to be?

BK: Well, after a while, Mr. Kaiser start building those up-rise
hotels, the big hotels. He went up. All the big hotels was built by the Dillinghams. They had a lot of the contracts. The Pacific Construction, they did. But Henry Kaiser (had his own construction company), he went up. He built because he knew. Alfred (Apaka), and myself, and Henry Kaiser, we used to go to Los Angeles, stay at the Beverly Hilton. We used to record with Alfred all at one time with Axel Stordahl, that's with the violinist. He was great. So, every morning, for breakfast he would have jerk beef, eggs, watermelon, all kind of melons. Henry Kaiser, I swear, he's a great eater. Steaks, every meal. But he's always thinking what he can build.

One time, he show me plans. He says, "Benny, what do you think of this?" A machine. You put the dog, you know, those. . . . Those big dogs, show dogs? They gave me one. Oh, the hairy white dogs.

IH: Afghan?

BK: No, no, no. Oh, gee, I can't [remember the type]. Anyway, well, the first dogs that they had. Mrs. Kaiser said, "Well, Benny, here's your dog." They gave me.

I said, "Who the hell wants to take care a dog like that? You got to get the claws. You got to do this and that. You got to. I ain't going spend money on the damn dog." So I think Kalani Simerson got that dog. One of the champions, you see, the parents, anyway.

But he said, "You see, the dog go through here [i.e., a machine] and the comb will brush, comb the dog."

I said, "Mr. Kaiser, the dogs, some their hair sticky. It'll tear the hair out of the dogs."

He said, "Oh, yeah. I never thought of that."

He was a great guy, Henry Kaiser. I told you, if there was Hawaiians really was down-to-earth, want to work, he'd have all Hawaiians work for him. But (chuckles) you know Hawaiians, you work today, tomorrow, "I'm sick," drunk or something. But he was great. But when Hilton took over, there was quite a change. But they kept paying—all the original boys with me—my Kaiser Plan we had. The original, all the boys, we didn't pay nothing. The hotel. Mr. Kaiser made the hotel pay for us.

IH: That's the medical plan, you're talking about?

BK: Medical plan. Jimmy Kaopuiki got about eleven kids. So when Hilton came over, they still had to honor the original boys. They still carried my plan. And David Kupele, Jimmy Kaopuiki, still carried. And when I was through, that was it. Now I have to pay, myself.
IH: When you say that it changed a lot when Hilton took over, what do you mean by that?

BK: Well, they were hotel people. You know, strict. The Westin Hotel, they're employees first. Like my boss, now, he's the vice-president. He started from a busboy. So they started from beginning. They wasn't handed down. But the Hilton clan, they were handed down. Like Baron is in charge. I remember, he came down one time with the football coach when he bought the San Diego team. His wife is a cousin to a good friend of mine, a Blanchard, Major Blanchard over here, marine. And another relative of hers is a great football player, "Doc" Blanchard from West Point. One of the greatest. Yeah, pretty--beautiful blonde. But they're strictly business, you see. When Mr. Hastings was the manager (of Hilton Hawaiian Village), he sent me to (the Royal York Hotel in) Toronto for a month. Yeah, we stayed there. The people wanted us. He was good. We stayed at the... What's the famous hotel? (The Waldorf-Astoria in New York.) He was the manager there years ago. It was where all the big people stays anyway. I can't think of it now. Gee, the mind go blank when you get my age.

IH: When they built the Hawaiian Village in 1955, were there any other houses in that area still?

BK: Well, you had Duke Kahanamoku's home. You know, on the corner.

IH: Oh, still there?

BK: Yeah, that home there. The corner. Was still there. And across was KDI [Kapi'olani Drive Inn], you know, all the restaurants in the old days. KDI was where that hotel there. Wailama or what you call...

IH: Wailana?

BK: The hotel, yeah. There was KDI. I know there was a restaurant there. But there was nothing around. Nothing. After a while, they built Kaiser Hospital. But later on, Kaiser took over the Kahanamoku place and they built the dome there. You know, the dome there?

IH: Mm hmm [Yes]. Was that the last house there, Kahanamoku's home?

BK: Well, they had some more there further on Lewers Road, in the back, by the fort--you know, where the military place [i.e., Fort DeRussy]. There was homes over there. There was a lane there with houses there. Cottages.

IH: That's Dewey Court?

BK: Yeah, you remember that, eh?

IH: Oh, they still had homes over there?
BK: They had. Yeah, then after a while, they phase out when they start building, you know, Mr. Kaiser took over. Yeah, Dewey Court. (Laughs) Yeah, that's where the Ni'umalu Hotel. That's where the Downings used to live. Lot of people there.

IH: So, then, after you left the Hawaiian Village...

BK: I went to 'Ilikai Hotel for a year. Took the whole show over there. Well, "Hilo Hattie" [a.k.a. Clara Inter] was with me at the Hawaiian Village. For six years, she worked with me. Yeah, Sterling Mossman, and [Hal] "Akuhead" [Lewis], [Robert] "Lucky" Luck. Yeah, Mr. Kaiser wanted to see which guy would like to take Alfred Apaka's place when Alfred passed away. But he loved "Lucky" Luck. He said, "Benny, what do you think of 'Lucky' Luck?"

I said, "He's funny."

He said, "I wish he'd work for us."

But "Lucky" Luck had a radio show. He didn't want to work (for us). Yeah, he sure liked that guy. But that was it. It grew, grew, grew, grew. That Hawaiian Village. I haven't been back there for many years. After 'Ilikai, I worked with "Sonny" Kamahele. Then I went to—what's that hotel where Palm Tree used to be? Right by the fort there. There's a little place there. Oh, this hotel. Oh, I worked there for a year. Then I went to Hale Koa [Hotel]. From Hale Koa, then I went to Halekulani [Hotel] with Ed Kenney. Stayed there. After Ed Kenney, I..... (Chuckles) After they fired Ed Kenney several times, Marlene Sai took over the show. Finally, I left her. I told the bandleader, I said, "I'll give you my notice right now."

When I left, he said, "Benny, will you stick around till the new show starts, and you can."

So he asked me to write like a barbershop arrangement for the hula dancers that she had. That's Cazimero's boys. The band there.

IH: Roland and Robert?

BK: Yeah. Bobby had those boys. He was teaching those boys. It was his dancers. Lot of them from Kamehameha School. I know Charlie was there, Filipino boy. Ka Lei something, the boys' name. They still carry the name.

So, I wrote a barbershop thing for them. Soon as the show started, then I went right to work the next night at Beachcomber Hotel with Jack Thompson at the Bora Bora Room. I was there for six years till I retired in April. So they're not there anymore, but they're at the Moana Hotel, the whole show. So I just want to retire after my arthritis has setting in my hands. But I'm working now two nights a week with "Sonny" Kamahele (at the Halekulani Hotel). He's doing a wonderful job there. "Sonny," he wants to retire now.
I told him, "'Sonny,' you can't retire, 'Sonny.' The way you spend money, you have to work." (Laughs)

IH: How has tourism changed since you've been in Waikīkī?

BK: Well, the people before the war [World War II], lot of people didn't know much about Hawai'i. Like when I used to travel there [i.e., Mainland] before the war, they didn't know where Hawai'i was. They thought we were in Panama or someplace. But they come here. In about two weeks, they turn, like they have the Hawaiian feeling. Everybody smiles and everybody, "Aloha," this and that. Now, the hotels, they don't want, you know. Everything is money, money, business. So people go over there, they look at you. But now, at Halekulani, people come where they love the Hawaiian music. They hear, "Where this kind of music?"

People tell 'em, "Oh, go to Halekulani."

And then, some people asking for "Sonny" Kamahele, you know. "Oh, 'Sonny' Kamahele is there. Benny Kalama is there." So people come to hear us and they have that old feeling, you see. Oh, they enjoy it. They say, "Oh, thank you boys," when we pass by, intermission. "Wonderful music." But you go to other places, like back in New York. People just look at you, don't mean nothing. Like you trying to take them, or something, you see. No. People, they're not the same. They haven't got the feeling, unless they've been here before, they old-timers. Then you can tell right away. "How you, boys? Oh, wonderful music," this and that. You know they've been here before.

You find some young people. They come over, and they like the scenery, then they listen to--they never heard the other kind of music. So, they hear us; they fall in love with Hawai'i. Like there was a young couple who came one night. They were sitting outside there. So they come up and say. "Do you know 'Mama's Muumuu'?"

I said, "Yeah. I recorded that." [BK sings], "You got to see Mama's nui nui. . . . " Jules Ah See used to put a muumuu, get up and sing it and dance it. That's how crazy he was. I said, "Yeah, I recorded it."

He said, "Who're you?"

I said, "Benny Kalama."

"Oh." He said, "We've never been to Hawai'i." So they went in a music store and they seen this Hawaiian album.

I said, "Was 'Hawai'i Calls'?"

He said, "Yeah."
And they said they heard this song and they loved it.

I said, "Yeah? Well, I did a recording." I did all the arranging for "Hawai'i Calls," all the albums.

He said, oh, they fell in love. They went to Kaua'i, they came right back to see us. Now, that's their first taste of Hawai'i, so they like it. But some young people, they still love the heavy rock or something. But majority people we see at the Halekulani come over, they out there and they stay and listen to the Hawaiian music. They like it. But you go right across the street, there's a Samoan boy who plays by himself and everything is (chuckles) rock with a rhythm master. You know, you play a tape, ta-ta-ton-ta-cha.

Like I remember, my first trip on the Matson boat, I think was the Matsonia, when I first went to Mainland. The whole band went over. Sterling Mossman was on that boat. He was going back to Berkeley, back to college. See, when people get off the boat, everybody goes to meet the boats. The banks all close. All business close in Honolulu. Everybody goes and greets the boat. Everybody takes leis. You don't know nobody, but you buy a lei. Quarter a lei, quarter for two. As you walk down Bethel Street or Fort Street, there's lei sellers. You buy a lei, quarter. Who you see, you give 'em a lei. See, people out there, you look. Oh, you hear 'em, "Oh, this is lovely." Now, when I meet them at the Royal [Hawaiian Hotel], you know, they still from the Mainland. You know, they're dressed, and all. First thing you know, they're talking to us.

But on this trip, Mainland, in the dining room, we went with shorts—you know, Sterling, all of us—we're eating. And people ask us—you know, they're already been to Hawai'i a month, and everything is Hawaiian, boy. They go like us, barefooted, and ask us to sing, like "Princess Pupule" was so popular at that time. And I knew "Princess Pupule," I used to go up and sing it. They used to take me up first class and sing. Everybody used to come up there. Follow the band, you know, the group, go up there and perform. Sterling Mossman, all of us. People already been here a month, they have that Hawaiian feeling and they enjoy Hawai'i. On the boat, you see everybody, "How you, boys?" Oh, this and that. But when they come here, in the first week, nobody talk to (chuckles) you, you know. They're not friendly to us. They're from New York or wherever. Don't take long to say, "How are you, boys?" Because everybody is, "Aloha. Hi. Where you folks from?" So already they change. And when they leave, they cry and cry. When the band start playing "Aloha 'Oe," (chuckles) they cry. "We're coming back, we're coming back."

But it's a change now. Nobody with leis coming in unless certain tour come in. You know, tours come in. They have the agent go up there and put leis, that's all you see. Before, everybody used to come—I used to buy leis, go up there. I see somebody, I put a
lei. Then when the boat sails, people go up there with leis. And beach boys be up there. They meet lot of people.

IH: Was there always a group playing when the boats came in and went?

BK: Well, they always had the [Royal] Hawaiian band. But you see a Hawaiian group go on the tug to meet the boat. You see 'em coming off, come on the plank, come off. Or the boat ready to leave, in the stateroom, some of the boys, musicians, be playing. Then you see when the time to leave, you see them coming down. They get a tip or something. That's the only way. 'Cause there wasn't much work outside. There was no work in Waikīkī. Like I said, when the boys were working in Honolulu, the beach boys, they the ones that first contact with the tourists down the beach.

IH: So would you say it was unusual that you worked steadily in Waikīkī as a musician?

BK: Yeah, I was fortunate, I was fortunate. Because not many musicians like I have been in [Waikīkī]. Look at those bands I stayed there, stayed there, stayed there. They knew I knew music. That's why they hired me. I think I was fortunate. And I used to play all kind of instruments. Anything they want, I would play. Kids having a hard time now. These Hawaiian boys that playing a little rock, contemporary music, they work one week here and they're out of a job for months. Rehearse, rehearse. Maybe they have a gig here, maybe down Fort Street. Then maybe some nightclub will hire them, one, two weeks, then they out. But look, Jerry Byrd, they're working steady at the Halekulani, and "Sonny" Kamahēle. Then what do you call that--Banyan . . .

IH: Banyan Gardens?

BK: I want to say Banyan--where's Banyan Court? Is that the Moana Hotel? That's the Banyan Court, yeah?

IH: Yeah, that's the Banyan Court, uh huh.

BK: Banyan Gardens. I always mix up. Well, they're doing it right over there. My cousin Kealoha [Kalama] works there. Then they had Mike Kaawa was playing at another room. Now, Mike Kaawa, they're down at Bay View now, the golf course, I hear. He plays Hawaiian music but contemporary stuff. Cazimeros, they're playing Hawaiian. Leina'ala Kalama, she's dancing. They sing Hawaiian. They have hula dancers there. And they're doing a good job. Sometimes they go a little off, but they're keeping Hawaiian. Like the thing that they're not using, a lot of the groups, is steel guitar. I told you, that's the only Hawaiian instrument we have. Ukulele is not Hawaiian, guitar's not Hawaiian. Steel guitar, that's the only. You go to Japan. Where's the steel guitar? You go to Germany or up in Europe. Like in Sweden, like that. We see them boys. We know the steel guitar players from there. They have boys from--lot of musicians from Holland playing Hawaiian music up there. There's
a Kalima group. They're all from Holland. But lot of musicians, they're from--Indonesians. They look like Hawaiians--Chinese-Hawaiians. The steel guitar players, they're all from over there. But the first thing they ask you, "Where's the steel guitar?" The boys here, change-change-change-change-chang-chang. Sound like a bunch of Mexicans. When I went to KCCN [Hawaiian radio station], when they interviewed me, they said, "Benny, what you think about Hawaiian music?"

I said, "There's no steel guitar. There's a bunch of Mexicans playing up there." I said, "The Mexicans play, change-change-change-change and hoo-hoo!" you know, that. That's what they sound like. So I don't know why they don't use the steel guitar. And they have steel guitar concerts up in St. Louis, Missouri, every year. England, they have steel guitar concerts. And they love it. And Japan, they love the steel guitar.

IH: Do you feel that's an important part of Hawaiian music?

BK: Well, yeah, like you hear. Like you remember when KCCN was heavy with Hawaiian or only Hawaiian, this and that? And the music they play, no steel. So, when I was there, I ask 'em, "You know, you folks talking about play Hawai'i this, Hawai'i that, we going keep to the Hawaiian music, you know, this idea, but where's the Hawaiian?" The music is---there's no steel guitar. That's the only instrument we have. We never sound like a bunch of Mexicans. These kids are not using steel guitar. And they say, "Oh, we're bringing Hawaiian back, Hawaiian." They not fooling nobody. Alvin Isaacs told them. Other old-timers, Freddy Tavares, well, he was with us two Sundays ago on the steel guitar concert. He's a great steel guitarist. He's one of the inventors for Fender Company, they get steel guitars and amplifiers. They're from Maui and the brother just passed away. The brother was a federal judge, Tavares. Nils Tavares, he used to play good ukulele. They were great, they're very smart people. Well, anyway, we tell the kids, "Why don't you play steel guitar?" Like I told you about that movie, you know. They think a steel guitar sounds like it's from Nashville, all the cowboy music. No, no, it's a Hawaiian instrument. Hawaiian invented it. I don't know where it's going to end up. I think when we pass away--there's only few of us left over--I think nobody will play. Even Jerry Byrd has like Hiram Olsen and Fernandes, Kalani Fernandes. When they did my album, Jerry Byrd told 'em they going to play the old way. They said, "Well, how do you play?"

"This way, this way." But still you can hear the way the guitar was trying to play, you see. They're not playing the way we play. But anyway, but they are great musicians. If wasn't for them, get a hard time making that album. I wrote it all out. But you got Akaka, well, he's a music teacher, anyway. But they always tell, "Benny, how you do this?"

"Yeah, this way."
So when they ask the boys there, like Hiram and Fernandes, "Oh, 'Sonny' Kamahele and Benny Kalama, they play the old Hawaiian music." But we're the only ones making money, working. But when we go, nobody.

IH: So you feel that tourists, even today, come to Waikīkī, they like to hear Hawaiian music?

BK: Well, first thing they come to Hawai'i, you know, the brochures show the hula dancers. Where's the Hawaiian music? Where's the dancers? Where? You don't see them. You go to like the Rainbow Gardens where they have Tavana show there, Tahitians. They're not Tahitians, they're all Samoans over there, tak-a-tak-a-tak-a-tak-a, like Moana Hotel. You might have one hula dancer doing just a solo or doing one... I know, they do there, maybe, the "Hawaiian Wedding Song." There's a hula dancer there. That's all. The rest, tak-a-tak-a-tak-a, it's pounding your ears. Danny Kaleikini now, I hear he's going on the rocky side--rock. He have hula dancers there. That's all. Kealoha Kalama has hula. So, they're told, "Where's the music?" So, they go over there, they say, "We went over there." Even on that cruise, you know, that evening cruise, they get out there, they playing rock. And they're told going be a Polynesian cruise, the tourists. But what is that going up there? Da-da--you know, they playing rock music. And they do, maybe, "Hukilau," but everything's... Even "Hukilau" is cha-cha-cha-cha, you know, that kind of beat, contemporary.

So lot of tourists, they come here, say, "Oh, we're going to the outside islands. We don't like Honolulu." But they go outside, they're going to find the same way. There might be in Kaua'i, you might find a little hula, Kaua'i. But still, there's a lot of places play contemporary, even in Kaua'i. So, when they come to us, "You know, we've been here, been here. And the people told us to come and see you folks. We like this kind of music. We can get the same stuff better in the Mainland than over here." The kids don't realize that. But I don't know. The hotels don't give a damn. Like the Sheraton. If the guy don't make money, he's out. They don't care what kind of music. It's just money. They don't care. Not like Matson, where they wanted the local entertainers and just show the Hawaiiana to the people. This is what Hawai'i was all about. That's why it was so beautiful. But now, Sheraton, where they have to send everything back to, I think it's Massachusetts, their main office, that's what I think. They got to show all that, how much money they make, or this guy's out. I remember, I think he's retired now from Sheraton, the big guy. I think Holden, his name. One time I heard him say, "I don't care for Hawaiian music." He was the big boss, and he had his outside managers, Brogan, all those guys. Brogan didn't care, he loves Hawaiian music. But Holden, he said, "I don't care about Hawaiian music."

But "Sonny" [Kamahele] kept the Surf Room packed. Just buying drinks and having dinner, they making lot of money. But (chuckles)
"Sonny" start getting drunk. He got fired. He was with the Beachcomber. He got fired, drunk. Halekulani, (chuckles) they was going to fire him, so they told "Sonny," "Don't you drink any more in here." (Laughs) People love him. Charisma, boy, he has it. People love the guy. But they don't care. Money talks. But Matson treat the people. This is Hawai'i. And mostly all the big shots who had shares in there was all the plantations, all the big people. Castle & Cooke, and all of them. They were Matson. And in fact, the president of Matson now, Pfeiffer, Robert Pfeiffer?

IH: Yeah, Pfeiffer.

BK: Yeah, Pfeiffer. He even went school with me. McKinley. You don't have to go Punahou (chuckles) to get a good job. He's a McKinley boy. But he's a local boy. I think the family must be in the sugar business or something. That's the only way. But everything was Hawai'i. They have all that big shots in Hawai'i. But now, everything in the Mainland, Mainland, Mainland. Like the Halekulani, the Japanese own it. But they builders now. I know, one of these days, they're going to sell it to some other people. Just build and sell, build and sell. So I don't know.

IH: Okay. I think that's all the questions I have unless you'd like to add anything.

BK: Well, you got everything else before.

END OF INTERVIEW
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