Janet Borgerson and Jonathan Schroeder, University of Exeter

Hawaii-inspired music marketed via popular record albums, radio shows, and Hollywood film soundtracks aided Hawaii’s transformation in the popular imagination from a mysterious ‘primitive’ paradise into the 50th U.S. state. Indeed, by constructing and capturing the temptingly tropical so-called ‘sounds’ of Hawaii on the latest hi-fi recording equipment, the music industry offered up Hawaiian music as an achievement of modern technology, promoting these U.S. islands as an acoustic, as well as a tourist, paradise. Popular Hawaiian music’s marriage of stereo technology and so-called authentic sounds produced a repertoire of songs, a musical identity, and an auditory brand asset, creating a potent force and a performative example in the sonic branding of Hawaiian paradise. Indeed, what became known worldwide as Hawaiian music still provides a soothing soundtrack for South Pacific holidays, backyard luau parties, or ironic late night lounging.

The Hawaiian record album formed an important stage of Hawaii’s construction as a conceptual resource, just as pineapple, sugar and battleships played important roles at earlier stages. For decades the iconic Hula girl and her musical accompaniment have formed the foundation of a strongly appealing Hawaiian identity, making Hawaii instantly recognizable the world over. Contemporary efforts to re-establish ‘authentic’ Hawaiian motifs in Hawaii, too, draw upon a concocted image (Halualani 2002). Informing even native islanders’ conceptions of Hawaiian identity, these images fall under an ontological shadow. Hawaii remains an important tourist destination, strategic military outpost, and ‘tropical paradise’. Reflected in such record album titles as ‘Island Paradise,’ ‘the Lure of Paradise,’ and ‘Hawaiian Paradise,’ Hawaii has been represented as paradise on earth. Western Judeo-Christian culture gives paradise two central meanings: the Garden of Eden and heaven. Record album covers emphasize the former, featuring the women of paradise clad in ‘native cloth,’ peering out from palm fronds, sensually frolicking in the ocean tide. Indeed, a Hawaiian vacation might be considered the ultimate American consumer product – allowing anyone who can afford a ticket to participate in the neo-colonial project through a re-creation of discovering Hawaii.

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

Hawaiian records – cover art, liner notes and song lyrics – often reflect a dominant cultural view of the exotic other. Interestingly, the typical themes and tropes displayed in Hawaiian record albums — paradise, escape, sexuality, tropicality, going native — are present in many marketing campaigns for products ranging from suntan oil to corporate relocation. Thus seemingly innocuous material artifacts create and maintain a discourse — produced through the use of models, poses, and conventions from art history and advertising design. Record albums are useful sights for material culture studies for several reasons. First, they are durable. Records from the 1950s remain widely available today, collected and coveted by consumers, and recirculate as retro icons. Used records are sold by the thousands in vinyl stores, at record fairs, and on the Internet; and, surprisingly, vinyl has rebounded as a viable niche within the music industry. Furthermore, old records are often re-released on compact disc, thus enjoying a new life. Although images from 1950s and 1960s advertisements usually appear hopelessly dated, record cover designs enjoy new life on compact discs that cash in on ironic trends or retro fashions. Second, as consumer artifacts, records and CDs exemplify crucial material practices, such as identity building, collecting, and invoking nostalgic reverie. Third, record cover design was a driving force for graphic art during the decades after World War II. Many leading artists and graphic designers produced record covers, some of which are considered collectible classics.
Musical versions of Hawaii show up in the iconic Kodak Hula Show and the Webley Edwards' Hawaii Calls Show. Both of these popular tourist attractions released multiple tie-in record albums. The Kodak Hula Show was created to provide 'authentic' Hawaiian scenes every day for tourists and promoted the sale of Kodak film. Such a well-established attraction provided a comfortable familiarity for anxious visitors who, having purchased the album, had essentially already seen the experiences they themselves would have and the pictures they would take (Buck, 1993; Costa, 1998; Wood, 1999). Hawaii Calls live show, radio program and record albums attracted avid fans, and claimed Hawaiian authenticity for their Tin Pan Alley-originated music. Most songs were 'adapted', written, and recorded by white men who asserted authorship, copyright, and hence, royalties for this so-called 'authentic' Hawaiian music.

Another genre of Hawaiian album focuses on the hula. The hula is a royal and spiritual prerogative, historically practiced by both men and women (Kanahele 1979). However, a profane promoted version of the hula became a necessary site on the tourists 'to do' list, and the tourism industry provided hula 'shows' in a spectacle of representation: 'These free Kodak Hula shows are staged especially for picture takers, in colorful Hawaiian surroundings, framed by the blue Pacific ocean' (from Kodak Hula Show). The hula, a term that describes a dance, a communicative practice, a system of authority and hierarchy and a discipline taught in special schools, is now most popularly associated with females dancing for male titillation. The hula dancer evokes the exotic female – primitive, different, undiscovered 'who may have the ice-blue eyes of the Scandinavian, the warm coloring of the Tahitian, the femininity of the Japanese and Chinese all apparent in the ancestry.' (Island Paradise, Webley Edwards Presents, Capitol). Body movement in dancing as a form of storytelling and epic is opposed to the literature of a written culture.

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

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

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

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

(lyrics by Coloma and Millican)

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

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

All images from the authors' collection.

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Selected References


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**MATTER IN PLACE – Aotearoa/South Pacific forum for social matters**

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Museum Studies, University of Queensland, Australia

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8 Responses to *Packaging Paradise: Sonic Branding of the South Pacific*

**Stephanie**

April 23, 2008 at 12:51 pm #

Here is yet another of these long summaries of somebody’s research. They’re far too boring for a blog. They should be drastically shortened, rewritten in language that isn’t sleep-inducing, and a link to a personal webpage provided, if people need more info.

**Patrick Laviolette (SVMC, Massey Univ.)**

April 23, 2008 at 8:37 pm #

Well, without wanting to speak on behalf of the others, I’d say that you might have a point in that the people who work on this site are not professional bloggers. So we might not be in keeping with many of the cultural rules of blogging.

But correct me if I’m wrong here, this is meant to be an academic blog, not some juvenile forum for those with hyper-short attention spans. So it’s hardly worth reiterating that the public dissemination and promotion of research is precisely what this blog is for. Perhaps if you have such highly opinionated views about how the site should be used, then you should also have the courage to identify yourself. Instead you’ve posted what is effectively an anonymous message which quite frankly I’m tempted to remove since it is inappropriately insulting to the quality of the submission that these two contributors have made.
I agree with Patrick absolutely. One of the great strengths of the Material World blog is that it provides a forum for work that doesn’t fit easily into established academic pigeonholes, and gets it out quickly too, facilitating dialogue and collaboration on emerging subjects. Plus, with the Pacific venue of the upcoming ASA, it couldn’t have been better timed for drawing our attention to contemporary visual, material and audio culture. As they say in Hawaii Stephanie – what’s the beef?

I have found a nice balance in the blog between short notices on the one hand, and longer summaries and discussions of research studies, reviews, and relevant projects on the other, so I stand by our decision to submit our so-called ‘sleep-inducing’ post (ouch!). Kaori O’Connor’s comment is a bit more heartening, and I suggest that it is this kind of productive linking between scholars who have not met and come from different disciplines that the blog makes possible in creative ways.

Emerging from the ‘Hawaiian’ record album project is my own lived experience of how these objects (including aspects such as visual representations, liner note-based historical renderings, lyrical and melodic content, impact of kodachrome color, etc.) have motivated – despite what might be recognized as any particular intentions of my own – questions and understandings, free-spirited investigations and theoretical insights and advances, over time and in varied spaces (10 years ago in a Michigan log cabin, 5 years ago in a Stockholm apartment) simply by sharing my space, and at different times being treated as utilitarian music delivery systems, reto kitsch exhibits, sources of research data, or pictures of a fantasy paradise in a moment of suspending disbelief. These transformations that continue to lead somewhere, toward others, fundamentally surprise me, revealing the incompleteness of possibility. (Go back to reading Teen Beat, Stephie.)

As another one of the site’s editors, I would also like to emphasise that this site has evolved organically through the generous sharing of work by its contributors. In one sense it IS like a blog because it is democratic and its content is user driven. Blogs can be serious, and academic – there is no rule that they need to have postings of a certain length or have a certain tone of voice - how dictatorial and even censorious would conforming to the commenter’s suggestions be? Indeed, one of the beauties of materialworld is that it provides an alternative space for publishing ideas in many different forms. We are not restricted by word length, image size and colour like many other more formal publications. To date we have received over 45,000 unique visitors from over 40 different countries – I wouldn’t expect all of them to love every post, but they certainly keep checking back on the site. Our postings are cited in people’s bibliographies and linked to from other websites and many ideas are generated here before they reach other venues. I would also hope that people who find posts ‘sleep inducing’ are aware they are not under obligation to read further. Janet and Jonathan – I would actually take it as a complement that someone who may come from the non-academic world or who has perhaps a shorter attention span in terms of reading was still sufficiently engaged with your research to request that it be made accessible in a different framework to her. Perhaps you could post some good websites as an appendix to the posting that might satisfy her thirst for further knowledge? By the way – great post – I really enjoyed reading it!

Traveling around the US Midwest, picking up record albums from 5 and 6 decades ago, I am still amazed with the relevance of image and information these objects offer, inspiring attitudes of wonder, questioning, investigation into histories and genealogies of material and popular culture. And not just in relation to Hawaii, obviously.

Reading this, I was reminded of a lot of mainly (electronic) dance music albums of today and past decade. Two places came to mind which are used in marketing for a lot of that kind of music – Miami and Ibiza. I did a search on a music media database Discogs (www.discogs.com). Hawaii got me 2,735 release results, granted a lot of the old records might not be in the system. The results for Miami and Ibiza are 9225 and 5859.

The connection with that city and island might be due to them all being summer resorts and a lot of album covers I checked that had images were for tropical beaches. As I am quite sure they do not share as many common characteristics as the Hawaiian symbols but nevertheless the geographical
of a beach thematic. I am quite sure they do not share as many common characteristics as the Hawaiian symbols but nevertheless the geographical identification is interesting.

I also searched some other famous cities and the results are: New York 46655 releases, Paris 30326, London 79208, Berlin 26134.

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Archives

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Packaging paradise: organizing representations of hawaii. Jonathan E. Schroeder. 1. Generally fertile with a mild climate, they are sometimes called “the paradise of the Pacific” because of their spectacular beauty: abundant sunshine; acres of green plants and gaily colored flowers; coral beaches with rolling white surf and fringed with palms; and, rising with sober majesty to solitary heights, cloud covered volcanic peaks. Hawaii’s aural image – its sonic brand – specifically designed for consumption, has been reflected in and transmitted through familiar easy listening music–created mostly by white mainland songwriters with little or no connection to the islands. Moreover, airlines With over six hundred different vodkas on the Russian market, eye-catching packaging design can help a brand both establish legitimacy and differentiate itself from the competition. Politically charged references were generally rare on vodka labels produced during the Soviet period. In the post-Soviet era, however, there are countless examples of ideologically loaded vodka labels, bottles and boxes. 2008. ‘Packaging paradise: Sonic branding of the south pacific’: http://www.materialworldblog.com/2008/04/packaging-paradise-sonic-branding-of-the-south-pacific/ Boym, Svetlana. 2001. The future of nostalgia. New York: Basic Books. Sonic Paradise. 4,640 likes · 51 talking about this. Sonic Paradise - Facebook oficial de la web #1 de Sonic en Español - http://www.sonicparadise.net. La web de noticias de Sonic Nº1 en Español. Todo sobre Sonic the hedgehog en tu idioma. Sonic Paradise shared a link. 5 November at 05:37 · sonicparadise.net. Opinión: Sega no es solo Sonic (Daytona USA). La web de noticias de Sonic Nº1 en Español. Todo sobre Sonic the hedgehog en tu idioma. See all. Posts.