

Ladies of the Lex



The Lexington Hotel's Hawaiian Room brought island dancers and musicians to New York City, including prominent artists like Ray Kinney and Lani McIntyre in the early years. - Courtesy: Hula Preservation Society

By Lynn Cook

In Kailua, a room full of effervescent ladies giggle and laugh. Questions bounce from one to another with lots of “do you remember?” and “I can’t believe I wore *that!*” Class reunion? No, more like a gathering of sorority sisters who belonged to the most exclusive Hawaiian club of them all. They are the Ladies of the Lex. That’s the Lexington Hotel in New York City.

The Hawaiian Room of the Lexington, in Manhattan, opened in June 1937, two years after Pan Am began their first 17-hour long commercial flights to Honolulu and child-star Shirley Temple was the hit of movie news reels, taking a surf lesson from the Waikiki Beach Boys. This year marks the Hawaiian Room’s 75th anniversary.

A very early predecessor to the Hawai’i Visitors Bureau was established in 1902, but the most convincing advertising for the Islands was likely the Lexington’s Hawaiian Room, serving up the magic of the Islands. More than 500,000 people dined and danced there in the first two years. Multiply that by the 30 years of operation and the “number of impressions,” as they say in the advertising business, is staggering.

A view of Manhattan wasn’t necessary, so the large, unused room in the hotel basement was a perfect location for the club. The Hawaiian Room decor was exotic, filled with realistic palm trees, murals of Waikiki and a

75th anniversary events

Hawaiian Room photo exhibit

> Aug. 27 to Sept. 21 at Honolulu Hale (City Hall)

> Sept. 28 to Nov. 2 at Windward Community College’s new Library Learning Commons building

Ladies of the Lexington Conversation

> Distinctive Women in Hawaiian History Sept. 15 at Mission Memorial Auditorium near City Hall, 2:30 p.m.

For information, visit Hula Preservation Society on Facebook.



thatched “grass hut” wall at the back of the ample stage, large enough for Ray Kinney’s Hawaiian orchestra and a half-dozen hula dancers, then called the Aloha Maids. The music was mentioned in newspaper social columns as being “a welcome relief from noisy swing and jazz.”

But, back to the lovely ladies trading stories at the daytime pā’ina in Kailua. Here, TeMoana Makolo, a dancer in the Hawaiian Room from December 1962 until the room was closed by a fire in 1966. “We followed the brave girls who went to New York in the ‘40s and ‘50s, but we didn’t know much more about the big world beyond Hawai’i than they did,” she says, calling her time in New York, “like dancing in a fairy tale.”

Makolo was like many of the other dancers, all young local girls who dreamed of dancing at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, but never of

New York. Soprano Mona Joy Lum wanted to sing on the big stage in the big city of New York. “It was my dream, and it came true.” She sang for Richard Burton’s private party at the club, with guests Sidney Poitier, Henry Fonda, Gypsy Rose Lee and others. The party made the pages of *Life* magazine.

Some of the girls didn’t anticipate the cold in the winter. They laugh when they talk about arriving in January with no coat. After the long flight they stepped off the plane, onto the stairs that led to the tarmac, and felt their feet stick to the metal steps. Dancer Torea Costa says she “dressed for the city” in beautiful clothes. “I walked down the street, smiling at everyone. When the crowd that followed me looked like stalkers, the other girls told me not to smile. It was so not like home.” Dancer Leialoha Kaleikini says they never had any real “man trouble” because they always traveled in twos. “If they invited us out to dinner after a show, the fellows knew we would have a friend. Just like it was dancing at home, our teachers and kumu didn’t allow us to go alone.”

The Hawai’i performers roomed in hotels, then found and shared apartments with the other dancers.

The Lexington ladies attracted many fans. Frank Sinatra liked Costa. Dancer Iwalani Lum-King got a call from Marlon Brando after the show. She hung up after saying, “I no like.” Lum-King was known for a once-only grand entrance. The fire-knife dancers would end their set by whacking a pineapple in half. The juicy fruit squirted. Lum-King glided down the Wstairs, slipped in the juice and slid all the way to the orchestra on her behind.

The showroom offered a good salary and attracted the best of the best in Hawaiian entertainers. Bandleader Andy Iona, Ray Kinney and his orchestra, Kui Lee, Clara “Hilo Hattie” Inter, Alfred Apaka, Sam Makia, Johnny Pineapple, Mahi Beamer, Emma Veary, and dancers Ululani Holt, and dancers Ululani Holt, Mapuana Bishaw, Pualani Mossman, Leialoha Kaleikini, Lei Becker Furtado and Jennie Nāpua Woodd.

At this home in Kailua, the ladies of the Lexington who live on O’ahu gather and talk of old times. Some continued their dancing and singing careers. If friends, or their former kumu call, they can be counted on to put on a dancing mu’umu’u, grab a flower for their hair and be ready to dance.

“History can slip away so easily,” says Maile Beamer Loo-Ching, head of the Hula Preservation Society. With

many pages of grant requests and many months of research, Loo-Ching has been able to gather the information before it was lost and says that sharing the spirit of aloha with an international audience in New York, the memories of these talented women are now recorded to share with generations to come. “We are lucky to have the opportunity to preserve the stories and share them with many audiences – through their photos and our film documentation of the ladies of the Lexington.”

At upcoming photo exhibitions the ladies are quick to say that they will be happy to tell their stories – even the rascal moments when a young dancer crossed her fingers behind her back and said to her dad, “Well, Moana’s dad is letting her go to New York. How come I can’t go?” Knowing full well that Moana’s dad never said yes – yet. ■

Lynn Cook is a local freelance journalist sharing the arts and culture of Hawai’i with a global audience.