

'Ex-Lexes' cherished time on Hawaiian Room's stage

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Last week, we looked at the Hawaiian Room at the Lexington Hotel in New York City, which opened 75 years ago this week in 1937. The room was lush with palm trees, bamboo, tapa, coconuts and even sported a periodic tropical rainstorm, said Greg Traynor, who visited with his family in 1940. The Hawaiian entertainers were the best in the world.

The Hawaiian Room was so successful it created a wave of South Seas bars and restaurants that swept the country after World War II. In this column, we'll hear from some of the women who sang and danced there. They call themselves Ex-Lexes.

"Singing at the Hawaiian Room was the high point of my life," said soprano Mona Joy Lum. "I told my mother, if I could sing on a big stage in New York, I would be happy. And I got to do that."

courtesy Mona Joy Lum, Hula Preservation Society / 1957 Some of the singers and dancers at the Hawaiian Room in the Lexington Hotel. The women relished the opportunity to perform on such a marquee stage.

Lum said the Hawaiian Room was filled every night. "It could hold about 150 patrons. There were two shows a night and the club was open until 2 a.m. I worked an hour a day and was paid \$150 a week (about \$1,200 a week today). It was wonderful.

"We rehearsed a week and a half before our first show, which was May 27, 1957. In a production show, everything was planned. Nothing was ad-libbed.

"I sang the opening, then the dancers came on, and I watched them from the sidelines. And the funniest thing happened that first night. Leialoha Kaleikini was one of the dancers. I could see a bra was hanging from her hula skirt! Somebody must have said something to her, because she backed up to a customer, who unhooked the bra."

There were other funny moments. "The knife dancers would slice a pineapple at the end of their part of the show. The juice would sometimes get on the floor and make it slippery.

"Dancer Iwalani Lum-King came down the stairs and slipped in the juice and fell on her okole. She slid all the way to the orchestra. Everybody laughed but Iwalani."

"I performed at a private party Richard Burton threw for his wife, Sybil, at the Hawaiian Room in 1958. Overnight, they transformed the room," Lum continued.

"They put in a pool, with a slide down from the lobby. All the stars had to come down that slide. The guests included Sidney Poitier, Henry Fonda, Gypsy Rose Lee, Tony Perkins and Peter Ustinov." The party was featured in Life magazine that month.

"I met Lena Horne at the party and had a chance to chat with her. She had a figure like you wouldn't believe. It was like she was poured into her dress. She was a very classy woman and I was in awe of her."

TeMoana Makolo was a dancer at the Hawaiian Room from December 1962 until just before it closed in 1966.

"I was so excited," Makolo said. "It had always been my dream to be a hula dancer. If you worked the Monarch Room at The Royal Hawaiian or the Lexington, then you had made it."

"I was just 20 when I went to New York. I was a very naive, shy Kalihi girl and it turned me into a woman. New York made me grow up fast. It was such an exciting place. I met some wonderful people and I became a good businesswoman. To this day, I love New York City. Dancing in the Hawaiian Room was like living in a fairy tale. It was another world."

Makolo met some interesting celebrities in New York, including Burton, a young Barbara Streisand, Johnny Carson, Arthur Godfrey and Barbara Walters.

Across the street from the Lexington Hotel was a club called the Basin Street East. "Ella Fitzgerald was singing with the Count Basie Orchestra. One of our photographers took me there one night and introduced me to her. We became friends and she arranged for me to have a great seat every time I came in. She'd chat with me between shows and ask how my family was or if she could get me anything."

"She called me her 'Butterscotch Baby' because of my tan. Ella was like an auntie to me. She was a very down-to-earth lady and took me under her wing. I really loved her."

Torea Costa said, "Hula carried me through my life. I met some wonderful people. I wore beautiful clothes. It was a dream." After working at the Hawaiian Room, she worked at the Kodak Hula Show for 26 years, and with Lucky Luck's TV show.

Maile Loo-Ching of the Hula Preservation Society said, "Those who brought the Hawaiian Room to life carried with them the true aloha spirit from one island to another (Manhattan). They ventured far from home and brought Hawaii to the world."

"The HPS is privileged to be a part of honoring the people of the Hawaiian Room on the occasion of its 75th anniversary," Loo-Ching said. Celebratory events include a photo exhibit at City Hall in August, a panel discussion as part of the Distinctive Women in Hawaiian History program in September, and a short documentary film to debut in November.

Bob Sigall, author of the "Companies We Keep" books, looks through his collection of old photos to tell stories each Friday of Hawaii people, places and companies. Email him at sigall@yahoo.com.

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