

# Hawaiian Room Hula

A dancer recalls her fondest memories of performing at the Hawaiian Room in New York in celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its opening.

BY TIFFANY HILL

**B**Y HER EARLY 20S, TEMOANA MAKOLO had met more celebrities than most of us will ever see in a lifetime, including Ella Fitzgerald, Barbra Streisand, Richard Burton, Buddy Hackett and many more. The vivacious Makolo was a dancer and, later, a choreographer at the storied Hawaiian Room in the Lexington Hotel in Manhattan from 1962 until it closed in 1966 (because it needed fireproofing renovations that were too expensive). “I’m from Kalihi, and Moloka’i, but I always say I grew up in New York,” she says with a laugh.

At the end of this month, Makolo and her fellow dancers and singers will celebrate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the Hawaiian Room in 1937 with a free photo exhibit at Honolulu Hale.

During its 29-year reign, when it came to Hawaiian performers, the best of the best worked at the Hawaiian Room, including musician Ray Kinney, Clara Inter (aka “Hilo Hattie”), Alfred Apaka, Mona Joy Lum, Mahi Beamer and others.

“They did hapa-haole songs, ancient hula, Hawaiian-language songs,” says Maile Loo-Ching, co-founder of the Hula Preservation Society, who is helping or-

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Maile Loo-Ching, of the Hula Preservation Society, has conducted on-camera interviews with many former Hawaiian Room performers.



▲ Hawai’i dancers became sensations in New York City.

ganize the exhibition and conducting oral histories of the performers who are still alive. “They have a very gracious spirit about them, you can just imagine how they were 40 years ago,” she says.

Makolo left the Islands just after her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday for the Big Apple. “It was considered a big break to perform there,” she says. She and her colleagues performed twice a night, at 9 and 11 p.m., except on Sundays. She did both hula and Tahitian, while the orchestra and a Hawaiian band played behind her.

Her time at the Hawaiian Room was just the beginning of her dancing career. She went on to perform on the Johnny Carson Show, and danced and choreographed productions in Maryland and Puerto Rico. “Some girls did commercials, too,” she says.

One of Makolo’s fondest memories? Whenever Tony Bennett would come into the Hawaiian Room, she’d dance, by herself, to “I Left My Heart in San Francisco.” “But, we’d change the words to—I left my heart in Honolulu,” she sings.



▲ The skirts may have been plastic, but the aloha was real.

## SPECIAL EXHIBIT

*From Aug. 27 to Sept. 21, visit the ground floor of Honolulu Hale for a free photo exhibit featuring the Hawaiian Room in its heyday. On Sept. 15, a program on distinctive women in Hawaiian history, including performers, will take place at the Mission Memorial auditorium.*