

Lexington's Hawaiian Room showcased isles in New York

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Jun 15, 2012

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*courtesy lexington hotel*The Hawaiian Room in New York's Lexington Hotel was the first of its kind on the mainland in 1937. Soon, however, nearly every large city had a Hawaiian- or Polynesian-themed restaurant or bar. The Hawaiian Room's performers included Ray Kinney, his orchestra and the Aloha Maids.

Beginning in the 1920s, a wave of fascination with Hawaii and Polynesia swept the United States. From the mid-1930s until the 1960s, Hawaiian- and Polynesian-themed showrooms, restaurants, bars and hotels sprang up around the country. Nearly every large city had one.

The first was at the Lexington Hotel in New York City, which opened a Hawaiian Room 75 years ago next week on June 23, 1937.

The hotel is on Lexington Avenue and 48th Street in Midtown Manhattan. Charles Rochester was the manager when it opened, and it had a large, unused basement. Rochester decided to open a

Hawaii-themed restaurant there.

Adria Imada, an assistant professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, San Diego, wrote in her journal article "Hawaiians on Tour: Hula Circuits through the American Empire" that the Hawaiian Room was a "supper club for dining, dancing and live performance. Walking into the large circular room decorated with tropical palms and murals of Diamond Head and Waikiki Beach, patrons were greeted with a flower lei, albeit a paper one."

The Hawaiian Room offered twice the salary Hawaiian entertainers could earn at home. This attracted the very best, including Alfred Apaka, Kui Lee, Emma Veary, Mona Joy Lum, Mahi Beamer, Hilo Hattie, and bandleaders Ray Kinney, Andy Iona, Johnny Pineapple (David Kaonohi) and Lani McIntyre.

A menu from the 1950s listed curries, Hukilau fish, Mandarin steak, chicken Momi, almond duck, shrimp and scallops Hanalei, exotic drinks and much more. Prices ranged from \$3.35-\$7.95.

Despite beginning in the middle of the Great Depression, the Hawaiian Room thrived. More than 500,000 people dined there in its first two years and the room grossed more than \$1 million (more than \$15 million today).

The success of the Hawaiian Room created copycats in San Francisco, Hollywood, Chicago, Denver, Buffalo, Minneapolis, Cleveland, New Orleans, Detroit, Fort Lauderdale and even London, Tokyo and Mexico City.

Manoa resident Liz Bailey remembered going to the Hawaiian Room with her parents in 1937.

"I was just 13 years old. I had a brand-new dress and patent leather shoes. I remember dancing with my dad, with my feet on top of his. The Hawaiian music was exotic and marvelous. The floor show was a big occasion."

State Sen. Kalani English said "the Hawaiian Room was the hub of all things Hawaiian in the Big Apple, and these people were the ambassadors of Hawaii to America." The Hawaiian Room called itself "Hawaii's eastern outpost."

"From 1937 to 1966, the Hawaiian Room served as a gathering place for those with Hawaii ties to share the knowledge and broaden the exposure of the Hawaiian culture and practices throughout the East Coast. This further reinforced the appeal and fascination Americans continued to have with Hawaiian mele and hula."

"When I first went to New York to work at the Hawaiian Room in 1963, I was totally unprepared," said Torea Costa. "I didn't even have a jacket. My mother and I had not realized New York would be freezing cold.

"I'd walk down the street smiling at people, and soon there'd be a parade of stalkers following me! The other girls had to teach me not to smile at strangers. What a shock that was.

"The Hawaiian Room was overwhelming to me at first. It had a huge stage and a huge band. I thought to myself, 'You hit the big time.'"

Many of the girls attracted the attention of celebrities. Frank Sinatra pursued Costa, but she had no interest. Lum remembered being backstage when the maitre d' told dancer Iwalani Lum-King that Marlon Brando was on the phone for her.

Lum recalled that Lum-King said "hello."

"Then there was a pause as, I assume, Brando was speaking, asking her out."

"I no like," Iwalani replied, hanging up.

"'What?' The other girls said. 'Don't you know who that was?'" Lum-King ended up marrying golfer Chi Chi Rodriguez.

"Over its 30-year run, the Hawaiian Room brought the beauty and romance of the islands to those who could not travel here," English said. "It provided Hawaiian ambience and scenery, dress and cuisine and above all, Hawaiian hula and mele."

By the 1960s, jets brought travel to Hawaii within reach of the middle class. People could come to the islands and get the real thing, and most of these themed restaurants closed.

The Lexington's Hawaiian Room closed in 1966 because of a fire. An era came to an end.

Next week, I'll share some of the interesting stories from a few of the Hawaiian Room singers and dancers.

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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