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Leilehua Becker Furtado strikes the same pose as the picture of her when she danced at the Hawaiian Room at the Lexington Hotel in New York. Furtado sang in a band before becoming one of the earliest Hawaiian Room dancers in 1949.

TALK OF THE TOWN

The Lexington Hotel's Hawaiian Room allowed hula dancers to spread aloha and see the world

By Nina Wu
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They were glamorous, beautiful and professional. They were wooed by celebrities, written about in newspaper columns and invited to appear on television shows. More important, the hula dancers performing in the Hawaiian Room at the Lexington Hotel in New York City represented the culture of aloha on the mainland. The Hawaiian Room made its debut as an island-themed dinner and music venue in 1937, complete with palm trees, coconuts and an occasional tropical rainstorm. For the next 30 years, it would become a hot spot frequented by musicians and actors ranging from Marlon Brando to Cary Grant and Ella Fitzgerald. The Hula Preservation Society and Mayor's Office of Culture and the Arts is celebrating the 75th anniversary of the opening of the Hawaiian Room with an exhibit titled "The Hawaiian Room: Dine, Dance, Romance, The Lexington" on view at Honolulu Hale's mezzanine until Sept. 21.



Angie Costa, Leilehua Becker Furtado and TeMoana Makolo were all smiles as they reminisced about their time in the Hawaiian Room. Behind them is "The Hawaiian Room: Dine, Dance, Romance, The Lexington" exhibit at Honolulu Hale's mezzanine.

The exhibit will be open for special Saturday hours from 8:45 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. this week only as part of the sixth annual Distinctive Women in Hawaiian History Program at Mission Memorial Auditorium. The program includes an afternoon presentation, "The Allure and Glamour of Hula in New York City's Hawaiian Room at the Lexington Hotel," when some of the dancers will share their memories and some of the numbers they performed there. Exhibit photos include one of hula

Please see HULA, D3

ON EXHIBIT
"The Hawaiian Room: Dine, Dance, Romance, The Lexington"

- >> **Where:** Honolulu Hale mezzanine
- >> **When:** 7:45 a.m.-4:30 p.m. weekdays, through Sept. 21; 8:45 a.m.-4:45 p.m. Saturday only
- >> **Cost:** Free

DISTINCTIVE WOMEN IN HAWAIIAN HISTORY

- >> **Where:** Mission Memorial Auditorium, 550 S. King St.
- >> **When:** 8:30 a.m.-4:15 p.m., Saturday
- >> **Note:** Program includes presentations on Queen Liliuokalani and other 19th-century female Hawaiian leaders, "Hawaiian Room Stars" and the performers of the Glades Show
- >> **Cost:** Free, advance registration required; optional hospitality packages available from \$17 to \$50
- >> **Information:** www.distinctive-womenhawaii.org



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TeMoana Makolo stands next to a Hawaiian Room photo in which she is third from left. Makolo joined the Hawaiian Room roster in 1962 after gaining experience as a hula dancer in Las Vegas; she eventually became a choreographer for the show. Keola Beamer, kneeling in front, started out at the Hawaiian Room behind the scenes. He would go on to become the show's producer and was also a singer, dancer and emcee.

HULA: Performers fondly recall their time in New York

Continued from D1

maiden Leialoha Kaleikini Kealinui dancing with actor Sidney Poitier in 1957, and pictures from a private party thrown by actor Richard Burton for his wife, Sybil, in 1958. There's also a video of interviews with those who worked in the Hawaiian Room, which closed in 1966.

Among the isle performers to play there were Ray Kinney — who was at the club when it first opened in 1937 — Hilo Hattie, Lani McIntire, Sam Makia and Alfred Apaka. In the 1940s and '50s, cousins Mahi and Keola Beamer (uncle to the slack-key guitar master of the same name) worked behind the scenes of the show as college students in New York. Keola eventually became the show's producer as well as emcee, singer and dancer.

"These were solid hula dancers," said Hula Preservation Society Director Maile Loo-Ching. "They had that grounding and they represented Hawaii."

Getting to dance in the Hawaiian Room was seen as an opportunity for travel and wider exposure, with financial benefits. One dancer from Wahiawa described it as a journey "from the Pineapple to the Big Apple."

Angie Costa, who was just 19 years old when she was recruited to dance there in the early 1960s, recalled the culture shock of being in New York City. She was used to walking around barefoot, but there she bought a fancy pair of shoes and a leopard-skin coat to stay warm. She said she kept forgetting that smiling at men on the street



COURTESY HAWAIIAN ROOM COLLECTION, HULA PRESERVATION SOCIETY

The "Hawaiian Room Archive" contains items taken from the personal scrapbook collections of former dancers.

would be perceived as a "come-on" instead of just a friendly gesture.

She recalled that Frank Sinatra once had his eye on her at the Brasserie, a Manhattan hangout where performers would go after the show, but she declined to go out with him.

While she was a little homesick for Hawaii, Costa said she would do it all again because it gave her a new perspective of what it meant to be from Hawaii. She also loved hula in a new way and wanted to teach it to others as well as dance.

"Here in Hawaii we got it," she said. "People love our culture."

TEMOANA MAKOLO said flying off to New York to join the dancers in the Hawaiian Room in December 1962 was a dream come true. She was 20 years old at the time and already had experience as a hula dancer in Las Vegas.

"When I was growing up, hula was in my family," she

said. "I wanted to be a hula dancer, and I wanted to travel."

For the next few years, she would continue to dance and become a choreographer for the show. The dancers performed mostly hapa-haole numbers such as "Lovely Hula Hands," "My Little Grass Shack," "Return to Paradise" and "Pearly Shells."

There were variations — some cha-cha steps were added to the choreography for the "Grass Shack" number, for instance.

The dancers learned new numbers quickly and donned custom-designed costumes. Ti leaves had to be flown in and weren't available post-World War II, so plastic fringe was substituted.

It was entertainment. Lellehua Becker Furtado, whose face graces one of the ads for the Hawaiian Room, was there in 1949. The pay, at about \$75 per week, was considered very good at the time.

Furtado sang in a band before becoming a Hawaiian Room dancer and also starred in a Libby's pineapple commercial, popping out of a pineapple and singing "Ask for Libby's, Libby's, Libby's, don't forget."

A black-and-white photo in the exhibit shows her sitting backstage in costume while crocheting a bedspread in between performances.

Some dancers stayed for just six months, while others, like Makolo, stayed on for years. Sundays were their days off, but they often had gigs and other promotions. Sometimes they were hired to put on hula costumes in freezing New York winters to smile and pose for photos.

Makolo remembers putting on a Tahitian outfit for a department store promotion. Little did she know her job would be to sit in a display window for the entire day.

Though Makolo eventually returned home to Hawaii, those days in New York still live on in her memory as some of the best days of her life.

"It was like being a movie star," she said.

More than just entertainers, the Hawaiian Room performers played an important ambassadorial role for the Aloha State and helped generate interest in travel to Hawaii.

The exhibit represents only a small sampling of the "Hawaiian Room Archive," which contains items culled by the Hula Preservation Society from the personal scrapbook collections of former dancers. It is also recording oral histories on video.