

# Manhattan's Hula Haven

## During its swank life span from 1937 to 1966,

the Hawaiian Room in New York City's Lexington Hotel offered every hula girl's dream gig. It wasn't just the \$60 per show compared with the \$.60 per hour in the pineapple canneries back home, it was the mystique of the city itself. Talent came from around the world to try to make it in NYC. Were the dancers really a part of that destiny? It seemed so. Celebs and high rollers couldn't get enough of the hip-swinging hapa-haole hula performers in snazzy cellophane skirts, swaying to a full orchestra in front of the likes of Liz Taylor and Sammy Davis, Jr.

The fascination between the audience and the dancers was mutual—perhaps because, yes, Manhattanites are technically islanders, too. “People would hug me after the show and say, ‘I loved your dancing, so beautiful that it made me cry,’ and I would ask, ‘Is that good or bad?’” laughs hula dancer Angie Ortiz Costa, who says she was a “Hawaiian hillbilly” when she first padded into the Lexington Hotel lobby in 1963. It was September, and she was toting two suitcases of mu'umu'u—barefoot and wearing no coat. At the first dress rehearsal she roared with laughter at the false eyelashes glued to the faces of other dancers. “No way I'm wearing those,” she said. But within weeks of arriving she did just that. The city was all about embracing glamour: visiting the Met, ordering escargot and champagne for breakfast, shopping Saks Fifth Avenue (where the self-described Hawaiian hillbilly spent her first paycheck on a leopard-skin coat). The living wasn't always easy, though. Contracts ran out and weren't immediately renewed. Times were when some bunked six to a floor in the apartments of already established transplants from the Islands, who showed the newcomers how to make poi from flour.

For those determined to make a Hawaiian home in an



unlikely setting, things had a way of working out. Some of the kāne, for example, rented a boat and went fishing on Sheephead Bay, breaking into the “Hawaiian War Chant” when the bites weren't happening. Te Moana Makolo, who was at the room from 1962 to 1966 as choreographer and de facto cast chaperone, recalls the first night she ventured shyly into the Basin Street East jazz club near the Lexington: She was noticed and nicknamed “my butterscotch kid” by none other than Ella Fitzgerald,

who thereafter saw to it that Te Moana had a front-row seat. Angie reportedly drew some flirtatious looks from Frank Sinatra but decided not to reciprocate and returned to Hawai'i after a six-month stint. She loved hula and wanted to do it everywhere and every day, she explains, not just in rarefied moments onstage.

Others, like Te Moana, stayed for years. But as all good things must come an end, nightclub orchestras became as outdated as the descriptions on the Hawaiian Room drink menu (“Tikis are Hawaiian gods—if you can't be one, drink up and feel like one”). It was 1966, and floor shows seemed as flouncy as poodle skirts. Liverpool had arrived and disco was around the corner. When Te Moana got word that the Hawaiian Room was closing, she was wistful. Today, in lieu of pictures, she cherishes memories. One of them comes courtesy of the night all the lights went out in a massive power failure that darkened most of the Northeast. “I thought it would be scary getting to work, but I had to get to the club,” she remembers. Out in the streets, she discovered, strangers were helping one another. People were singing on the sidewalks. She could see the stars against the pitch-black sky. And all of New York City contained a familiar energy: aloha. **HH**

*To celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the opening of the Hawaiian Room, the Hula Preservation Society is sponsoring a photo exhibit at Honolulu Hale, Aug. 27 to Sept. 21*

[ Story by Liza Simon ]

PAU HANA