

Exotic entrepreneur
La Merina sets the
stage for Don the player
left in right channel
the musicer Perry Cook
A.A. K. Eberbach,
Fido and sax man
Rockford Holmes, Bepko
and Miriam theater
Jopaka Colon, chanteuse
and belly dancer Wilby
Chang, the ballerina
Kamaka Paga and
Impressaria Field Floyd
A.A. Lloyd Randall.



TIKI TORCH SONGS

From
the lounge clubs
of Polynesia came
the high priests of
exotica music:
Don Tiki

STORY BY BLADE STARWELL  PHOTOS BY BRAD GODA

Four stunning women saunter across the stage wearing skimpy costumes and gold high heels. They sport novelty-sized cocktail glasses balanced on their lovely heads. One glass holds a martini, another a rum concoction topped with pineapple and a tiny umbrella, the third a hoppy brew of some sort, the fourth ... well, it's not clear, but filled with alcohol of some kind for sure.

Behind the spirit goddesses struts Delmar deWilde, who looks like an unholly love child of Wayne Newton, Hugh Hefner and Jethro from *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Delmar's dressed in Las Vegas-fornal with hundreds of karats of bling dangling from his neck. He croons into his cordless microphone while cavorting with the dancers. The women gyrate, undulate and do other not-for-prime-time things that end with ate.

Closing aside, the music is what everyone's here for: The band's bassist, Hai Jeng, swings back and forth, her instrument nearly as long as she is tall. Lopaka Colon plays the guiro—no, not a Greek sandwich—a South American instrument made from a gourd. Ryoko Oka works the keys while Abe Lagriman Jr. taps the vibes. Behind them, drummer Jason Segler lays down the groove for the pulsing fusion of jungle, jazz, pop and world beat.

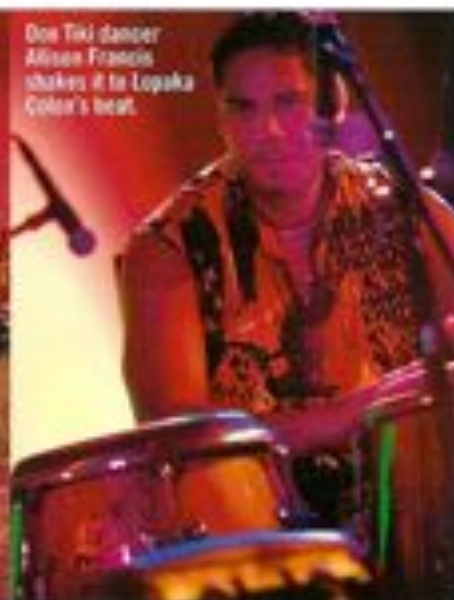
Later, the dancers will wear feather headdresses and voodoo dolls, portray a gypsy with a crystal ball, belly dancer and balance swords. DeWilde will don a red smoking jacket while one of the dancers will become a sexy demon to his lounge lizard Satan by slipping into Victoria's Secret, red horns and a tail. Malo-clad males will preen and pose.

It's Polynesian pop gone amok. It's a Stardust Lounge act in the Pacific. It's the forbidden world of Don Tiki.

*In my moodie I've been boozied
 Now I know one thing is crucial
 We could reminisce in paradise
 This is how it all began
 So catch me if you, catch me if you can
 —"Banzai Boozed," The Forbidden Sounds of
 Don Tiki (Taboo Records, 1997)*

In 1947, Norwegian Thor Heyerdahl sailed a balsa wood raft named *Kon-Tiki* from Peru to the Tiamotu Islands to prove that people from South America could have migrated to the South Pacific.

Exactly fifty years later, Lloyd Kandell and Kit Ebersbach formed Don Tiki to



Don Tiki dancer
 Allison Francois
 shakes it in Lopaka
 Colon's beat.

prove that retro, rum-soaked grooves had a place in the modern world. Kon-Tiki, Don Ho and mai tais inspired the band's name. Ten years after their first CD release, *The Forbidden Sounds of Don Tiki*, the Honolulu-based "exotica" band sails on, crewed by a rotating lineup of talented musicians, gorgeous Polynesian/jazz dancers and a fourth CD set for a 2008 release.

For the past ten years, Don Tiki has been carrying the torch for—and now rekindling interest in—tiki lounge music, which began in the 1950s when exotica pioneers like pianist Martin Denny, vibraphonist Arthur Lyman and composer Les Baxter developed a catchy but irresistible blend of Polynesian, South American and African rhythms and melodies. Redolent of the jungle and the lounge equally, exotica music classics like "Yellow Bird" and "Quiet Village" were part of a new wave of Polynesian pop culture that crested in the '60s. (Tiki culture officially goes back all the way to 1914, when Don the Beachcomber opened the first tiki bar in L.A., and Victor Bergeron opened the first Trader Vic's in Oakland in 1937.) Don Tiki's popularity is aided by yet another wave of appreciation for the tiki aesthetic (which seems to run in cycles but never quite dies), infused now with a modern electronica/lounge chillness.

Don Tiki is still riding the wave. Last June and July, the band—orchestra, mally—held court at the Tapa Bar at the Hilton Hawaiian Village Beach Resort & Spa in Waikiki. In August, Don Tiki had a short stint as the house band for *NightTime With Andy Bumatai*, a Hawai'i-focused

talk show starring the local comedian and actor. This spring, a new program of exotica music, including tunes from Don Tiki, will be offered as part of Hawaiian Airline's in-flight entertainment.

Kit Ebersbach, hailing from the teeming jungles of New Jersey, is the band's keyboardist, composer and primary engineer. By day, he's head of Pacific Music Productions, housed in a cozy studio in downtown Honolulu. By night, Ebersbach undergoes a radical transformation into the king of smart, Perry Como (inspired by paragon '50s lounge singer Perry Como, and also by a remark from avant-garde composer Morton Feldman that when he composes music he's "dead," i.e., totally focused).

Lloyd Kandell, from the cradle of tiki, Los Angeles, runs Taboo Records out of his Black Point home in Kāhala and is the president of Kandell Advertising. On stage, Kandell is Fluid Floyd, the band's "congenial host" known on occasion to bang on a whale bone or blow a mean ocarina, a flute-like wind instrument. The name "Fluid Floyd" dates to Kandell's bodysurfing years on Kauai. (It may also have something to do with his fondness for Singapore Slings.) Kandell met Ebersbach in 1978 on Kauai while looking for a piano player. "It was the night of disco, and I was losing my mind," says Ebersbach. "I wanted to write original music."

Kandell introduced Ebersbach to the likes of Elvis Costello and the Sex Pistols. By the 1980s both men were living on Oahu, Ebersbach playing in cover bands and Kandell DJ'ing at Jack Law's Wave Waikiki.



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Tiki Torch Songs

The musical influences on Don Tiki's founding members are eclectic. For Ebersbach, it's jazz vocalists Lambert, Hendricks and Ross, Thelma Houston; jazz trumpeter, drummer, composer and big band leader Don Ellis; John Cage and Cage-influenced keyboardist Margaret Leng Tan. For Kasehell, it's Ray Charles; ska and reggae legend Desmond Dekker; Eric Dolphy (John Coltrane's saxophonist); Alice Coltrane and the late esotica patriarch Martin Denny.

"He was almost a surrogate father, very supportive, very accessible," Kasehell says. "He'd come to our gigs and show his enthusiasm." Adds Ebersbach, "He was a great man, a maestro, who performed music right up to two weeks before he died."

Denny himself appeared on Don Tiki's debut record, *The Forbidden Sounds of Don Tiki*, reprising his famous song "Esotica" and a cut penned for his beloved wife, June, called "Forever and Ever."

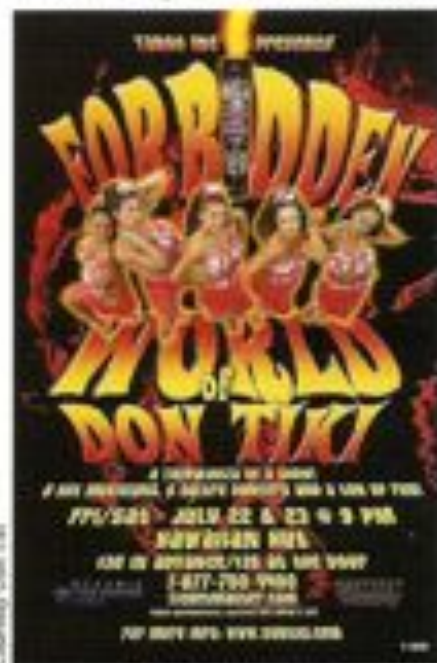
Don Tiki has attracted seasoned Hawaii's performers for both live appearances and on recordings. They include singers Teresa Bight and Jimmy Borges, Frank Orrall on percussion and 'uke whiz Jake Shimabukuro. The band's lineup has featured drummer, mallet artist and percussionist Noel Okamoto and Brazil's legendary percussionist, Galinhos de Oliveira. In the current lineup, in addition to guitar, Lopaka Colon plays congas, bongo and imitates bird calls. Lopaka is the son of Angie Colon, who handled the same duties for Denny's band. Swami James Gamco plays booburns and exotic percussion, while Rocky Holmes toots sax and flute.

*You might consider yourself lucky
Just to be alive
Cause it's a full moon tonight
And it's just right for a conquering tribe
—"The Natives are Back," Skins Dip
with Don Tiki (Lullaby Records, 2011)*

Studio recordings are all well and good, but the live shows are Don Tiki's signature artistic achievement, with the costumes, the kitsch and the sultry "Restless Native" dancers choreographed by Tiana Tully. "The live shows are a wacky antidote and escape from quotidian and politically correct cares," said Ebersbach. Indeed, for as any devotee of the tiki gods knows, the iconography of tiki culture (like paintings of dancing demons worshipping bikini-clad volcano goddesses by torchlight) is about as far as you can get from an

authentic representation of Polynesia.

Example: Don Tiki's first gig was at a historic tiki bar called the Kabiki in Columbus, Ohio, in 2000. "It was wild," Kardell recalls. "You walked in and the first thing you saw was a three-story-tall moai statue, like on Easter Island, with a fireplace in the mouth and two 80-watt red light bulbs in the eye sockets. One wall was all tropical fish tank, the other a



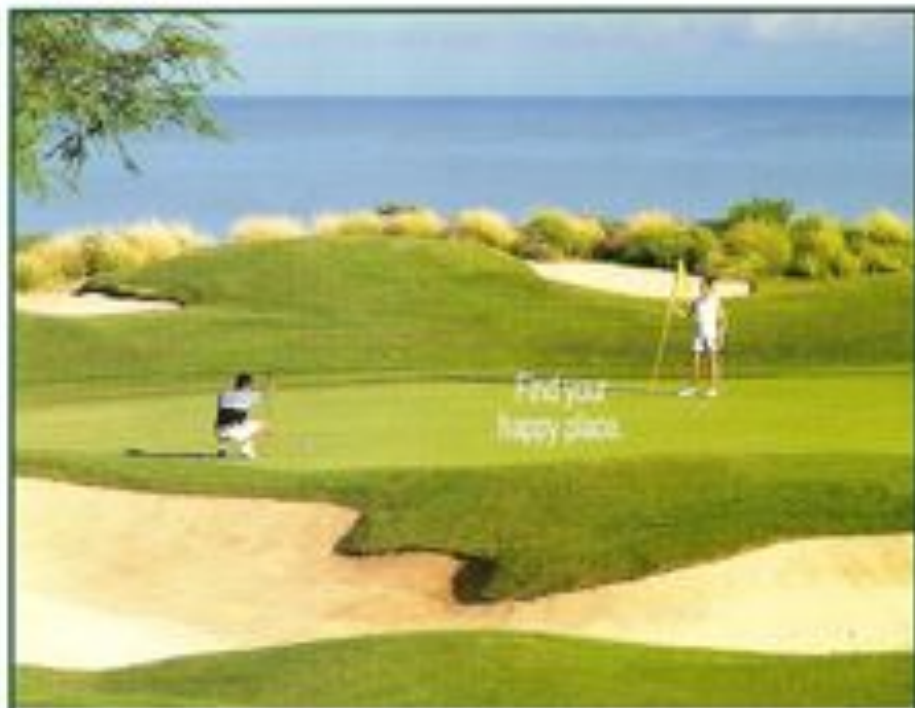
Courtesy Don Tiki

tropical bird cage." Sadly for all the lovers of lowbrow, the gig was to celebrate Kabiki's closing.

When someone's willing to foot the bill, Don Tiki has gladly flown to the gig, whether on the Neighbor Islands, the Mainland, even Europe. They've played for Microsoft employees at the Grand Wailea on Maui, a Google convention on Kauai and a Cisco Systems meeting at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel. The troupe gigs infrequently, though, in part because it's hard to get eighteen busy people together at the same time. "But we are also very selective," said Kardell. "We don't want to be overexposed." Kardell and Ebersbach have a great partnership and friendship: Kardell is the smooth talker, Ebersbach the quieter one. They finish each other's thoughts—in their conversations and in their music.

What's next for Don Tiki?

"Our new CD will feature remixed and spectacular-looking instruments procured at great peril from an ancient and forbidden Southeast Asian kingdom," intones Perry Coma. Adds Fluid Floyd: "We hope to keep it going for a while. We're older but youthful guys." ■



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