



Bon Voyage, Kahiki

*Tiki News bids farewell to an icon
by Otto von Stroheim*

Monumental and historic. Those are two words that describe Columbus, Ohio's Kahiki restaurant and the closing party that Tiki News produced there on August 26, 2000. But words cannot describe the overwhelming architecture (a one-story building with a sweeping roof that reaches 90 feet at the front of its A-frame) and the perfect Polynesian/Tiki ambiance of Kahiki. Nor can mere words begin to describe the warmth, hospitality and goodwill that abounded within the walls of Kahiki when 500 Tiki lovers converged there. Guests traveled from all over the U.S. and abroad. Some of the cities represented were Atlanta, Chicago, London, Los Angeles, Madison, Melbourne, Minneapolis, New York, Pittsburgh and San Francisco.

Some of the Tiki celebrities included Shag aka Josh Agle (Tiki News #2 cover artist and former TikiTones guitarist), Martin McIntosh (Taboo: The Art of Tiki), Scott Owen (Murder Can Be Fun), Stacey Toon (Cheeseball), Al Hoff (ThriftScore), Vern Stoltz (Cannot Become Obsolete), Dirty Donny from Montreal (Kahiki poster artist), Freddy Fortune (musician), Johnny Halifax (London designer & filmmaker), tchoke maker Tiki King, Andy Cruz (Tiki font designer), monster maker Erik Von Gorr, Chris Pfouts (editor International Tattoo mag), Joe Bob Briggs (movie reviewer who is writing an article on Trader Vic), and of course Sven-Tiki aka Sven Kirsten (Book of Tiki; Tiki News co-editor). Foremost among the Tiki stars were original owner Bill Sapp, creator of drink & food recipes and the first bartender for the Kahiki Sandra O'Conte, and the builder (the guy responsible for the cement Maois out front) Herman Leitwein.



Let the party begin!

As the party kicked in the Kahiki house band gave the guests upstairs a taste of what a typical Saturday night at Kahiki is like. This was anything but a typical night though as Master Chef-in-the-making



(and Michael's son) Jeff Tsao orchestrated a top of the line luau with huge shrimp skewers pincushioned into towers made from fresh pineapples, two full roasted pigs with candied cherries for eyes, salmon pate shaped like a large salmon with head and fins reattached, make-your-own wonton bar, and lots of vegetarian fare too. Jeff is

attending culinary school in Boston and took two months off to work

the closing days of the Kahiki. If the luau spread and the media circus were not enough to distract folks from admiring the Kahiki's lush tropical decor then live sets from Hollywood's **King Kukulele** and Honolulu's **Don Tiki** were. King Kukulele is a wild one man show using his uke and his humor to captivate audiences worldwide. Having recorded a pure modern Exotica album with guest appearances by the creator of Exotica music **Martin Denny**, **Don Tiki** was the logical choice for headlining this event. This was their first mainland performance and they made it memorable by kicking off with an address by Martin Denny filmed a few days prior. Denny closed his video greeting by playing the opening bars of Quiet Village then Don Tiki joined in a virtual jam with Denny and continued the tune to open their first set. Their fetching Island Goddess/bassist **Hai Jong** captivated the audience with her rhythm while the nine member band gave us 2 hours of perfectly executed Exotica.



As an added treat, a list of Tiki celeb DJs entertained in the banquet room all night: **Jack Fetterman**, co-creator of In Hi-Fi; **Brother Cleve**,



former Com Ed keyboardist extraordinaire; **Rex Doane**, WFMU DJ; **Michael Toth**, world renown Enoch Light appreciator & Cleveland radio DJ; **Jeff Chenault**, Les Baxter chronicler.

The entire Kahiki staff was also at their best. All of the lovely waitresses showed up in Hawaiian dresses – one even brought her daughter Lexa in a grass hula skirt outfit! And let no one forget the bartending duo of **Skip and Jim**. The locals worked these guys so hard for the last four months that one of the other bartenders literally walked off his shift shortly after opening on Friday (Kahiki's last night open to the public which drew a line out the door). "The disappointing thing about the last four months is that it has been so busy that we couldn't even talk to the regulars – we didn't have time," lamented Skip. Skip and Jim have been with the Kahiki 22 and 18 1/2 years respectively. During that time they saw Kahiki bar staff gradually lose

its drink recipe books (and a few drinks fell off the menu too) but written recipes aren't necessary for Skip & Jim who memorized the 40 drinks on Kahiki's menu long ago. "Some of the drinks are easy: the only difference between a Zombie and a Barrelito is [1/2 ounce of] Navy Grog mix," stated Jim. But the Navy Grog mix is another story; The Kahiki Navy Grog mix is so complex and made so infrequently (once every 5 years) that the recipe was seldomly seen let alone memorized. Jim made it once when he was first hired at age 20, then again at 25. "I noticed [the recipe] hanging on a wire one day in the kitchen and I thought 'That's gonna fall off and get lost'" Jim divulged to me as I navigated my Navy Grog, "so I copied it down and kept it at home. Months later when it came time to make the recipe the other bartender said 'It's gone!' and I said 'No it isn't I have it at home'". Legend has it that making the mix requires a large pot and hours of patience. After pouring in the right amounts of sherry, three kinds of bitters ("Last time I had to purchase them at the pharmacy because the liquor stores don't carry them anymore" explained Jim), curacao, rock candy syrup, orgeat syrup, cinnamon, etc. a stirrer is made from a stick and about a pound of cloves wrapped in cheesecloth. This is used to stir the mixture as it is slowly brought to a boil. The recipe fills 50-100 bottles! You won't find this in your supermarket any time soon.



As the night ended Jim offered me champagne but after viewing Skip drinking some from his tennis shoe (apparently a tradition he started years ago) I declined. Skip will soon be servin' 'em up on the westside of Columbus at Grand View Cafe. I recommend you get a Zombie rather than champagne.

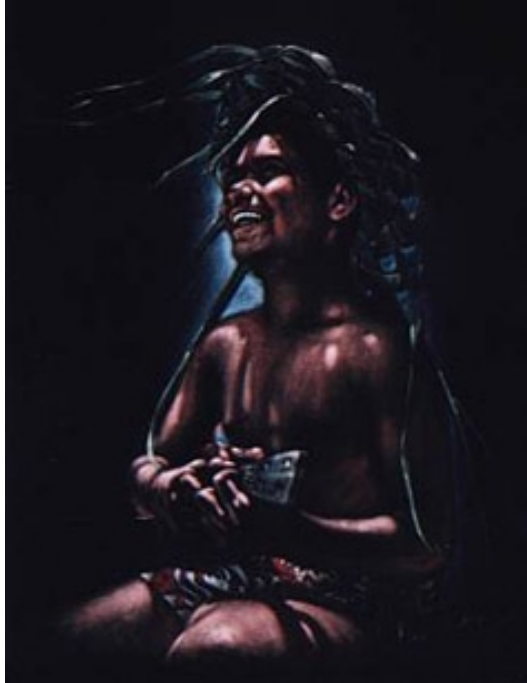
The party never ends

It was a full weekend of Exotica for those anxious to partake. On Friday was the Michael Toth-led Exotic Akron Tour and on Sunday was a luau thrown by locals Hoffa & Dana and Jimmy & Elise.

Let the demolition begin

As the decor gets packed up this week and the Kahiki's birds and fish get donated to a local school I am reminded of the important work of

local reporter **Joe Blundo** who broke the story of **Kahiki's** impending doom for the **Columbus Dispatch** in April 2000 and continued to keep it in the international eye and on the local front page. Upon hearing rumors that **Walgreens** bought **Kahiki** I called owner-turned-CEO **Michael Tsao** directly. In our first conversation he said he could not comment but assured, "you will be the first to know if I sell the **Kahiki**." And a month later after the contract was signed Michael phoned, "I called you even before I talked to my wife!" At this point Michael told me of his intent to reopen the **Kahiki** in a more desirable locale (he has already spent a lot of money developing plans and proposals to the city of Columbus) and asked my support for this and my help in throwing the best Tiki party I could imagine. Right from the start Michael was very generous, very honest, and very supportive of my concept for the closing party. I took care of most of the initial publicity work because as Michael said, "I am not into PR. You do that. We put our heads down and keep working."



And that's exactly what Michael and Alice Tsao did for four months straight right up til the end of the "Bon Voyage, Kahiki" party!

There were many questions asked of me regarding the closing: **Did Walgreens buy the Kahiki?** Yes. In direct opposition to their written statement that they will not destroy historic buildings. Walgreens may not be responsible for "demolishing" this National Register of Historic Sites landmark but they bought the land knowing that would facilitate Kahiki's demise.

Did Michael Tsao mislead the public about this deal? Never. Michael never said he was not going to close and when it came time to make it public he made it abundantly clear that he will reopen across town.

Do you really think Kahiki will reopen? "I have almost 100 people that rely on me for their livelihood. . . I want to make sure that Kahiki lasts another 40 years. That is why we are moving," explained Michael

when asked if he would reopen. Michael managed the Beverly Hills Trader Vic's for 11 years, bought the Kahiki with a partner in 1978 and has ran it successfully ever since. "They [Trader Vic's] wanted to make me VP in San Francisco [the most successful at the time] but I'm not corporate material, I'm a maverick. So I bought my own restaurant!" exclaimed Tsao. The Kahiki was a successful restaurant and Michael wants to continue its success. He's already invested in grandiose architectural renderings of the new Kahiki and will grow Kahiki into a chain if the new endeavor is successful. Meanwhile their frozen foods division will continue to expand so look for **Kahiki Tiki Bites** in a Sam's Club near you!

The Kahiki closing party was part dream, part nightmare for me. While it was a dream come true to be a major player in possible the biggest Tiki event this year if not this decade, it was alternately depressing to think that one of the world's best Tiki bars would soon meet its demise and I was basically powerless to stop it. But this wasn't a matter of "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." While I can not stop the closing of the original Kahiki I can support the opening of a new Kahiki and that is what I intend to do.