



The WAITIKI 7's Debut Release, *Adventures in Paradise*, Reinvents Classic Exotica for Modern Ears

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(Commemorates the 50th Anniversary of Hawai'i's Statehood)

If, while listening to The WAITIKI 7's debut album *Adventures in Paradise*, you find yourself daydreaming of sipping a cocktail from a tiki mug while lolling about idyllically on a Hawaiian beach as birds sing merrily in the trees not too far away, then you get it. *Adventures in Paradise*, to be released August 18th on Pass Out Records, is a contemporary reimagining of the classic exotica sound introduced on the islands exactly 50 years ago—the year of Hawaiian statehood—by Martin Denny, a transplanted mainland pianist who tapped into the tropical zeitgeist, stirred together several disparate elements, and created a whole new sound in the process.

“Exotica,” explains Randy Wong, the 28-year-old bassist, music director and co-founder of The WAITIKI 7, “floats in the zone between soundscapes and an early world music hybrid. Denny took popular WWII-era Hawaiian Island songs (themselves already set to jazz harmonies, and incorporating folk songs from the Far East) and a Latin feel and then added birdcalls. He took large orchestrations intended for full symphonic orchestra and pared them down to make them feasible in the combo context. But exotica just sort of stopped developing in the '60s.”

Which is where The WAITIKI 7 comes in. Although they bow at the altar of Martin Denny and other exotica pioneers such as Les Baxter and Juan Garcia Esquivel, The WAITIKI 7—whose name cleverly fuses that of the famous Honolulu beach with the faux-Polynesian gods ubiquitous in island culture—is a band for today. The WAITIKI 7 retains the essence of Denny-era exotica and reconstitutes it for contemporary audiences raised on a multitude of clashing musical genres and pop culture images.

The WAITIKI 7 emerged from a smaller band formed several years ago by Wong and Abe Lagrimas Jr., who plays drums, percussion, vibraphone and 'ukulele. That group evolved into The WAITIKI 7, whose other members are pianist Zaccai Curtis, woodwinds player Tim Mayer, violinist Helen Liu (who is Wong's wife), vibraphonist Jim Benoit, and Lopaka Colon, who doubles as percussionist and bird caller—and whose father, Augie Colon, served the same function in Martin Denny's group. While Wong, Lagrimas and Colon are the only members actually from Hawai'i originally—the others hail from Boston and the Bronx—all seven musicians share a love of the exotica sound and the associated tiki pop culture, which encompasses everything from art and design to painstakingly crafted tropical cocktails and cuisine (the booklet accompanying the *Adventures in Paradise* CD even includes drink recipes from renowned mixologists Jeff “Beachbum” Berry and John Gertsen, and an appetizer recipe from former *Cook's Illustrated* editor Sandra Wu). Trombonist and arranger Mike Dease makes a guest appearance as well.

Each WAITIKI 7 band member is an accomplished musician, bearing degrees from Berklee College of Music, New England Conservatory and other top music schools. Their collective performing and recording credits span the worlds of jazz, classical, film music, Broadway and beyond. Wong and Lagrimas didn't set out to revive the long-dormant exotica genre, but the more

they discovered about its unique musical properties and cultural significance, the more they were drawn to the idea of giving it new life.

“There’s no exotica scene in Hawai‘i anymore, but growing up I used to go and hear Arthur Lyman, the original vibraphonist for the Martin Denny group,” says Wong. “He was a good friend of my grandfather’s and my father’s. So we were going to support him as a friend, but I think I got that sound in my ear.” While attending college in Boston, Wong and his longtime friend Lagrimas—who had already played with Colon in an exotica-inspired revivalist band called Don Tiki—began to investigate exotica more seriously, and to generate ideas on how it might be made relevant and exciting again. One by one the band that would become The WAITIKI 7 fell into place.

Adventures in Paradise was recorded this past February in a whirlwind two-day session at Q-Division Studios in Somerville, Mass., with Wong and Mayer serving as executive producers and Brother Cleve, a former member of the ’90s neo-lounge music group Combustible Edison and bartender extraordinaire, serving as production consultant and helping out with the mixing and mastering. Both original compositions and classic exotica were given The WAITIKI 7 treatment. “Everything is through-composed,” says Wong. “Then of course the solos are all improvised.”

The fact that the band members dwell in far-flung locales and rehearsal time comes at a premium is only a minor inconvenience. “That’s the great thing about having guys who are complete virtuosos at their instruments,” says Wong. “I just send out charts ahead of time and we show up and we rehearse for a couple of hours.”

Any preconceived notions that exotica might encompass a narrow range of musical ideas are quickly dispelled upon the first listen to *Adventures in Paradise*. From the opening track, a cover of Les Baxter’s “Coronation,” to the closing title track, the theme from a TV program that ran in the late ’50s and early ’60s, the diversity and virtuosity of The WAITIKI 7 are constantly on display. Highlights include “L’ours Chinois,” a stunning violin concerto composed by Wong and featuring Liu; a cover of Denny’s “Manila” using such exotic percussion instruments as the güiro (a gourd played with an egg whisk scraper) and the quijada (literally the jaw of a donkey); and “Octopus Menagerie,” which Wong calls “the weirdest tune on the album, with spoken word and avant-garde trombone.”

Other tracks run the gamut from “Totem Pole,” originally found on jazz trumpeter Lee Morgan’s classic album *The Sidewinder*; to a Zaccai Curtis original called “Craving”; Denny’s “Left Arm of Buddha,” which Brother Cleve describes as “tiki noir”; Mayer’s “Ouanalao,” based on the Angolan semba and Caribbean zouk rhythm; and “Mood Indigo,” the famous Duke Ellington song, arranged for the band by trombonist Mike Dease. Rounding out the album are the Wong-penned ballad “Her Majesty’s Pearl,” which he calls “pretty much a dialogue between piano and vibraphone,” embellished with bird and animal calls, of course; “Ned’s Redemption,” a short but madcap improvised xylophone rag spotlighting Benoit; and “Sacha-Cha,” which, as its name implies, is a cha-cha, written by Wong.

To say that there is nothing else like The WAITIKI 7 out there today would be an understatement for sure. *Adventures in Paradise* proudly carries the tiki torch of classic exotica, and is sure to delight listeners young and old!

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