

THE GIG

by Nate Chinen

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Exotica: It Takes a Village



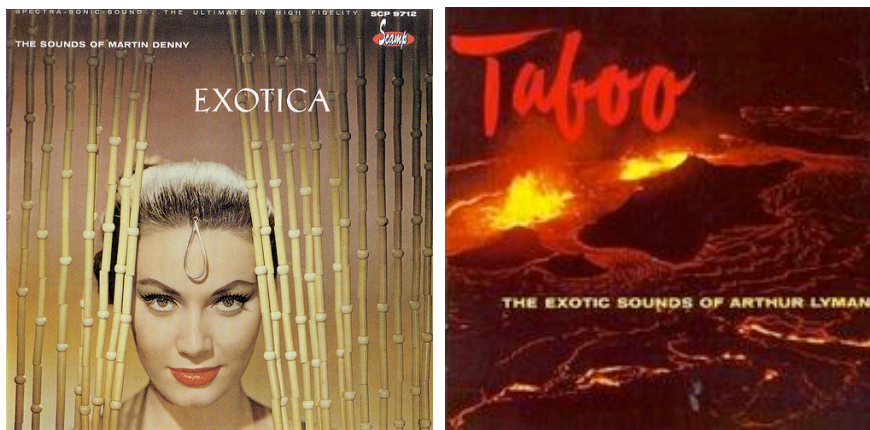
Continuing my commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Statehood, here's a new YouTube find (new to me, anyway) featuring pianist-bandleader Martin Denny on the long-running local program Hawaii Calls. This apparently dates to 1956, a few years before entry to the Union, which partly accounts for the perfumed air. Note how host Webley Edwards hails Denny as "a man who's both modern and native in his approach to music," before the band sidles into "Quiet Village," the definitive anthem of exotica. The camera trains first on the musicians, with their tropical birdcalls, before a languid (and staged) montage that's part National Geographic, part South Pacific.



Exotica was by definition a mongrel genre, hovering not only between “modern” and “native” but also between the West and the Orient, between honor and exploitation, between shrewdness and kitsch. (I might add art and commerce, but the scales were pretty far tipped, in that case, all along.) Because it was an instrumental pop music during the era when jazz was pop, there’s quite a bit of overlap in terms of style and repertoire. Musicians like Denny came from a similar school of thought as George Shearing, though their arranging strategies actually fell more in line, at the end of the day, with Sun Ra.

I’m being earnest with that last comparison: to a lot of Americans caught in the flush of postwar exuberance and technological innovation, Hawaii really might as well have been another planet, a distant clime ripe for exploration. The advent of affordable air travel had made it possible to reach those foreign (but not too foreign) shores, already touted as the ethnic melting pot of the Pacific. So in one sense, exotica, as pioneered by Denny and the likes of his former vibraphonist Arthur Lyman, was the ultimate soundtrack for the sun-dappled land depicted in glossy travel brochures.

That the reality didn’t look too different from the fantasy was a boon for everyone involved. “Quiet Village,” actually a Les Baxter tune, earned Denny a Top 5 single, and the album on which it appears, *Exotica*, spent five weeks at the top of the charts in 1959. Lyman’s album *Taboo* also entered the Billboard album chart in ‘59, and didn’t leave it for more than year. A couple of years later his biggest single, “Yellow Bird” -- an adaptation of the traditional Haitian folk song “Choucounè” -- peaked at No. 4.



So was exotica a species of Hawaiian music? That depends. In my [previous post](#) on this subject, I touched on some of the sociopolitical issues that tend to surround music in the islands. Here I'll simply point out that the Hawaiian Renaissance was, in many ways, a reaction to the tourist-economy churn that Denny et al helped sustain, as it sustained them. And when the pendulum swung hard in the other direction, all the trappings of exotica -- those tiki bars, coconut bras and polyester blends -- were harshly exposed as something fake, something cheap. When Arthur Lyman died, the Honolulu Star Bulletin allowed me to publish [a remembrance](#), which I approached with the conviction that Lyman was part of a culture many locals no longer valued.

The catch is that Lyman was indeed native Hawaiian, by birth and by blood, and his band book included some of the same ballads that would later crop up in the slack-key repertoire, like "Mapuana" and "Akaka Falls." I always found his music more intrinsically serious than the rest of the pack, and he based his image more on adventure than on sex appeal. (Consider an [online gallery](#) of Denny's cheesecake album covers. Lyman steered clear of that territory almost altogether.) Later, long after the dissolution of exotica as a popular music, he kept playing those songs in a hotel lobby once a week. The scarce audience he had was mostly old-timers, and mainly haole (Caucasian). I got a lump in my throat watching [this clip](#) shot by a fan in 2001; he's playing "Quiet Village." That's exactly how it was every Friday afternoon.

Since the early-'90s boom in CD reissues, exotica and assorted other lounge musics have had resurgence after resurgence. You can hear the influence all over the work of Stereolab, and in stretches of John Zorn's pop instrumental project The Dreamers. But tone is tricky when it comes to this music. A few years ago Sex Mob toasted Martin Denny with a [lackluster album](#) that shares a title with an adult-movie franchise. ("Like waiting for a fireworks show and getting a single bottle rocket instead," grouses one Amazon reviewer.) I'd suggest that the problem isn't chiefly musical. I think you have to approach exotica with a balance of campy glee and genuine respect.

Waitiki 7, formed by bassist Randy Wong and drummer Abe Lagrimas Jr., avoids the irony trap; if anything, their version of exotica feels a bit straight-laced. But the band, which also includes pianist Zaccai Curtis and percussionist Lopaka Colon, is on the right track with [Adventures in Paradise](#), released last month. The music reflects a firm grounding in Hawaiian culture, and a real grasp of this genre's practices. (Colon's father was

the revered percussionist Augie Colon, a former member of Denny's group; he appears on that recording of "Quiet Village.") Waitiki 7 has just about wrapped up its East Coast tour, which I had to miss; I'd welcome reports from the field. If there's room for a postmillennial exotica revival, this is the band to beat.

Posted at 10:33 AM in [Album Art](#), [Hawaii](#), [Nostalgia](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Aloha Nate,

What a terrific post—you really get to the issues faced by exotica's musicians and aficionados, particularly those of us who are *kama'aina* (e.g. born & raised in Hawaii). That "Lyman was part of a culture that locals no longer valued" is partly what Waitiki 7 finds ourselves up against back home; most locals in my generation are completely unfamiliar with exotica and its roots in Hawaii, yet upon exposure find a natural kinship to its sounds, vocabulary, and (as you mentioned) tunes.

As you point out, one of the most unique elements of Mr. Lyman's approach to exotica are the Hawaiian tunes he incorporates, like *Imi Au Ia Oe*, *He Aloha No Honolulu*, or the others you mentioned. His choice and arrangement of these local favorites shows that he was sensitive to how Hawaii and its music would be portrayed on the world stage. Copycat exotica groups, of which there were dozens, usually went for totally cheese ball tunes written specifically for their record date and without connection to Hawaiiana. That Mr. Lyman was able to find a balance between what's authentic, exotic, popular/commercial, and hip has always been inspiring to me.

Interestingly, the basic instrumentation for which Denny's and Lyman's albums are famous pre-date both groups. Gabby Pahinui's 1949 recordings of *Lei Aloha Lei Makamae*, *Ahulili*, and *Hame Pila* use vibes, glockenspiel, flute, piano, drums, and Latin percussion... I doubt anyone would argue that Gabby is anything but authentic Hawaiian music.

To me this helps to push the debate of "Authentic" vs. "The Other" one step further. Certainly these issues aren't unique to Hawaiians or exotica: they are faced by other musicians who incorporate authentic or traditional cultural music with their own creative impulses. But the frame of exotica for understanding said issues is a particularly just one, since many are familiar with the intense commercialization, marketing, and stereotyping of Hawaii as a tourist attraction: Authentic Hawaiian cultural practices have been famously misrepresented and trampled. While Hawaiiana will never be completely free of others' misnomers, it's the Waitiki 7's intention and hope that our approach to exotica and musicianship may help to clear the air.

Mahalo nui loa for your enthusiastic support of the Waitiki 7!

Randy

PS: In 2007, the *Journal for Music-In-Education* published an article I wrote that talks about this in more detail. Email me for the PDF if anyone reading this is interested.

Posted by: [WAITIKI 7](#) | [09/23/2009 at 12:23 PM](#)

It is similar to when Don the Beachcomber opened his place in Hawaii and the locals hated it. That was the image they were trying to lose. Later, they embraced it as the tourists embraced it and luaus and thatch became the standard. It's a very confusing thing. But, doing these things in a non-ironic way is what is essential, and what is Waitiki 7.

Posted by: [Swanky](#) | [09/23/2009 at 03:53 PM](#)

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