

Aloha, farewell

The Kahiki says goodbye in typical style: Great decorating, horrible food

by Rich Warren

As one of the handful of Americans who didn't see a single episode of *Survivor* this summer, I felt deprived. But then, finally, I had my own experience of being trapped in a tropical setting with truly offbeat people and scrounging for food I'd never consider eating at home. I attended the bon voyage luau party at the Kahiki.

Don't get me wrong. Even with its very iffy cuisine, I've always had a soft spot for this Polynesian theme park of a restaurant that soars—but not for long—above East Broad Street like a gigantic dugout canoe with twin icons belching flames out front. In fact, how could anyone *not* love this place that has elevated kitsch so high and so imaginatively it truly became its own art form?

We've had the Kahiki as a Columbus landmark since 1961, as a place we liked to take our out-of-town guests to guffaw and enjoy frothy, fruity drinks, some of which involved the ringing of gongs to announce their arrival. I still remember the non-stop giggling of several friends from college who'd quite wisely arrived at the Kahiki in a drug-induced euphoria. They still speak of the experience in rapturous terms, even the trip to the bathroom with its seashell fixtures.

More recently, I went there with two little girls—ages seven and five—who went bonkers over the place, running from one grass hut to the next, screaming in delight, and trying to escape the baleful gaze of the giant red-eyed god. I had to stop one of them from climbing inside the lobby fountain. But can't we all relate to that level of wanting to embrace the Kahiki's garden of delights?

And it wasn't just me and the kids who embraced the Kahiki. In the last weeks before its August 25 closing, people came from all over the country to say goodbye and enjoy one more Steaming Eruption, praying they wouldn't get so drunk they'd accidentally sip on the dry ice. Only then did we learn that a suddenly hyper-hip counterculture reveres the Kahiki as one of its foremost Meccas for a lifestyle they call "Tiki," which centers on the food, clothing and gooey beverages of those exotic islands where grass-skirted women swim out to meet visitors arriving in catamarans.

During the Kahiki's last weeks, Tiki pilgrims arrived in tsunami-like waves from hotspots like L.A., Seattle, even Berlin. The Kahiki stopped answering its telephones to accommodate the boatloads of people streaming through the doors.

Their pleas—and ours—to save the Kahiki fell on deaf ears. Its owner, Michael Tsao, had concocted a scheme to open a new, improved Kahiki in two years time somewhere downtown, though many of us fear we've said our last Aloha to the Kahiki.

Historic preservationists in particular are aghast that this treasure on the National

Register of Historic Places will come down and, in a true statement of our strip-mall culture, be replaced by a Walgreens. Haven't we all noticed the sudden mushrooming of drug stores on every street corner in Columbus? God help us if we should have to drive more than 250 yards to pick up our Ben-Gay and Depends.

And so, just in case a new Kahiki doesn't arise from the rubble, when I heard of its final blowout party I determined I had to be present, never mind that the entry cost brought to mind the old adage about fools and their money. For \$100 I figured there would be a regular volcanic explosion of frivolity. After all, the Kahiki had promised "entertainment never before seen on the mainland." What other daffy diversions might there be, I wondered? Hula lessons perhaps?

Naturally I arrived that Saturday evening, August 26, expecting zany hijinks. I should have regarded as an omen the overzealous security in the parking lot who practically shook me down to see my ticket. But the long line of festively dressed people waiting for entry gave me high hopes. Of course, there were Hawaiian shirts and vibrant skirts of pulsating color in great profusion, along with clattering jewelry and hilarious hats. One woman had fashioned an orchid so that it was growing out of her head. There were also plenty of hipsters representing the tattoos-and-piercings crowd.

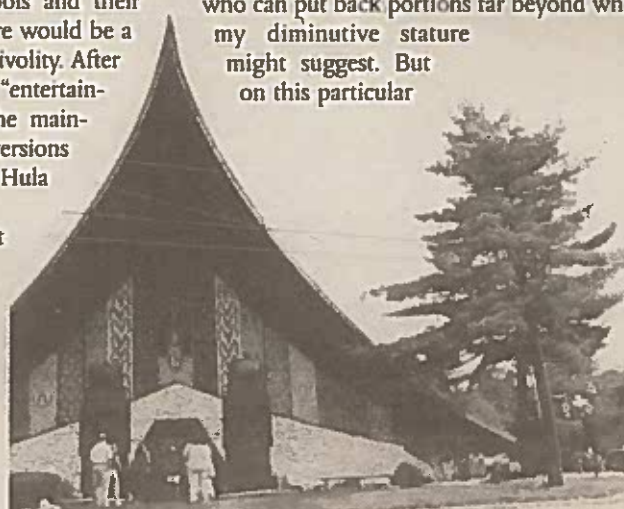
Standing in line, we had to sign release forms allowing us to be filmed by the several camera crews inside, including ones from Great Britain and the Discovery Channel. This, and getting "lei'd," only added to the aura of expectation as we swept inside. And then—after people grabbed the choicest tables they could get their hands on—we waited for the fun to begin. And waited. And waited. And in my case, I waited all evening.

There was no one to greet us as we entered, no one to offer guidance on the evening's activities. I watched many a person enter the Kahiki's vast banquet hall, their eyes scanning the great room for merriment, and finding none, a look of puzzlement would fall over their faces. Others—clearly the people who needed instruction in how to have fun—froze like deer in the headlights. A rather catchy steel drum band was playing, but playing reggae. Obviously, the island motif of the evening was to be rather broadly defined—Jamaica, Tahiti, South Bass.

Slowly word percolated through the crowd that the food was downstairs, so we dutifully trotted down. I must say I was

bowled over by the buffet's sheer beauty, huge bowls of colorful concoctions spread across many tables, festively adorned with ferns and fruit. There was even a pig with cherries for its eyes, hammered flat and slung onto a table.

But pretty as it was, much of it was frankly unidentifiable. "What's this?" was a common question on everyone's lips, and I observed several people vainly pushing food every which way with their forks trying to get it at an angle it might look familiar. I kid you not, I even had to inquire what the egg rolls were. Fried to death, they resembled a cross between a giant hunk of gravel and Purina Dog Chow. The fish—kind of an eely affair—reeked. The pot stickers tasted as though they'd been stuffed with Spam. The Pad Thai reminded me of my mother's egg noodles had she gone mad with the pepper. I am known far and wide as a legendary eater who can put back portions far beyond what my diminutive stature might suggest. But on this particular



The Kahiki

evening, I pecked, silently lamenting that I'd left my Roloids at home. After all, how can your gastric juices flow uninhibitedly at food even the Polynesians call "puu puu"?

Upstairs, the evening's entertainment, or should we say "irritainment," had begun. The opening act was someone called "King Kūkulele," kind of a combination West Coast comic and ukelele player who really looked like an L.A. surfer bum with a basket on his head. Plunking out silly little jingles on his uke and tittering to himself so we'd all known when he told a joke, the Kuke-meister demonstrated how lives go tragically awry when children don't get enough attention from their mommies. The Kahiki's literature referred to Kooky as "world renounced." At first I thought it was a typo, but now I'm not so sure.

During his set, a handful of determined souls gathered up front, gamely hoping to stir up some liveliness. One boldly dressed young woman of the pointy-black-glasses persuasion stood there single-mindedly bopping and tapping her foot, apparently in hopes she could infect the entire crowd with the true Tiki spirit if she had to do it herself. But for the most part, people sat quietly at their tables, idly conversing and burping. I overheard some people plotting their escapes.

When Kooky mercifully put an end to his

racket, the steel drum band came back on. By this time people had belted back enough spiked tropical beverages that something resembling a festive spirit set in. A man with a beautiful macaw named Sam on his shoulder strolled around, drawing crowds of people who wanted to stroke his feathers. When I tried it, the bird tried to remove my fingers with his gigantic beak. In the end, all the attention proved too much for ol' Sam, who quietly leaned over and regurgitated his supper—all in all another telltale metaphor for the evening, I thought. I retreated to my table and entertained myself by speculating how *Survivor* might have unfolded on Gilligan's Island. Who'd have been kicked off first? I'll bet it would have been that lazy Mrs. Howell.

The evening was building towards its culmination, the main act from Honolulu, but first came the master of ceremonies, Michael Tsao himself. The crowd was raptly attentive as he spoke because, after all, there were many unanswered questions on people's minds. Was he serious about rebuilding a new improved Kahiki downtown? How would he thwart the nay-saying civic titans throwing obstacles in his path? And would the food be edible?

I must admit to having a bit of a chip on my shoulder about a man who could knock down this piece of paradise for a Walgreens. And his first words didn't do much to win me over, when he announced he would take two years to consolidate the Kahiki's frozen food retail operations and take it coast to coast, apparently in a single-minded quest to turn the nation's stomach with those egg rolls.

But slowly the teary-eyed Michael began to convert me. Yes, he realizes the treasure he's tearing down. He's stunned by the worldwide attention—even the stodgy *New York Times* took note. He is firmly resolute the Kahiki will rise again in the shadow of downtown's skyscrapers, although his ideas for improvements are half-baked at best, something about a patio overlooking the river and dugout canoe races on the Scioto.

Then Michael surrendered the microphone to the headliner, Don Tiki, an eclectic ensemble that surprised me with a great Polynesian jazz fusion concoction. But at that point my senses had been dulled by four hours of excruciating boredom, and I took my leave, foregoing the promised dessert buffet at 11 p.m. I guess I'll always have to wonder what the Kahiki could do to rice pudding or a rum-flavored cream puff.

So Michael, yes, bring us back our Kahiki. Don't leave a single one of our beloved grass huts in the packing crates. We need the 30-foot red-eyed god, the gongs, the rain forest that really rains. But you've got two years to plan, so surprise us with some new features. How about a volcano? Bring us some really good entertainment (can the Kook) and, please, hire a chef. To bring people back again and again you need more than a kitschy concept, you need good eats.

Do all this and I promise you I'll be the first in line for the Kahiki's grand reopening wearing my homemade grass skirt. The hell with Honolulu. There's a place in Columbus for our own island paradise. Deep at heart, don't we all really want to hula? ca