Society of Seven Honored

Last Saturday, I was thrilled to join many of the legends and current stars of the Hawaii entertainment scene at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel and cheer on the Society of Seven as they received the Nā Hōkū Hanohano Lifetime Achievement Award from the Hawaii Academy of Recording Artists. It is a fitting honor for the dynamic group that headlined the Main Showroom of the Outrigger Waikiki for so many years.

The Society of Seven first arrived in Hawaii in 1966 from Hong Kong after gigs in Las Vegas, New York City, and on the nationally broadcast, enormously popular Ed Sullivan Show. In Hawaii, however, hardly anyone had heard of them. On the opening night of their first engagement at Betty Riley’s Copacabana on Kalakaua Avenue, the audience consisted of just one table of four—but what a table!—Melveen Leed, Carole Kai, Kimo Kahoano, and Kui Lee. If anyone had predicted that night that the SOS and each member of the audience were destined to become top entertainers in Hawaii, they might have been thought crazy; however, that is exactly what happened!

After that modest debut, Melveen, Carole, Kimo, and Kui took the group over to Duke’s in Waikiki’s International Marketplace, where headliner Don Ho graciously invited the SOS up to sing a song. That moment marked the start of a long and spectacularly successful career in Hawaii.

In subsequent years, the Society of Seven was often booked to perform at Duke’s and proved to be the only attraction that could fill that large nightclub in Don Ho’s absence.

In 1969, the SOS was offered an opportunity to headline at the Outrigger Main Showroom. Soon, the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel became the town’s nightlife hot spot. The place was jumping on all levels and at all hours.

• The Society of Seven was packing them into the Main Showroom just off the lobby. They performed twice a night Monday through Thursday and did three shows on weekends. The 1:30 a.m. performance on Friday and Saturday was a “no cover” show. People flocked to see them, and long lines snaked through the lobby, down the escalator, and often onto the street!
• The Reycards, a hilarious comedy duo, were performing in the lobby next to the Malolo Kai restaurant (now Hula Grill Waikiki).
• Myra English and Sonny Chillingsworth held sway at the Blue Dolphin Room (now Duke’s Canoe Club).
• The Twin Sisters Two were featured at Davy Jones Locker, a basement bar with a huge window that gave patrons a fisheye’s view into the swimming pool.
• Al Nobriga and his group served up dance music on the rooftop at a disco called The Moon (now the home of the Waikiki Plantation Spa).

My office was right next to the Main Showroom, and we shared a common, uninsulated wall. When the SOS rehearsed, my assistant at the time, Pat Moore, and I sure knew about it and quickly learned all the words of their entire repertoire!

Each year the SOS presented a vibrant new show. They became Hawaii’s window on Broadway, staging lavishly costumed productions. Audiences looked forward to hearing the SOS version of the music world’s latest hits. More than just showmen, the SOS knew how to have fun, doing irreverent impressions of celebrities and mischievous skits. But they could also move their audiences to tears with poignant and touching songs.

The stage success of the SOS spilled over to the record industry. Their hit songs include “Walk Away,” “This Is My Life,” “99.8” (the “love fever” song), and many others.

During their tenure at the Outrigger Main Showroom, the SOS created more than 50 different productions and performed approximately 15,000 shows before four-and-a-half million delighted patrons.

I’d like to salute some SOS members who are no longer with us.

• Danny Ruivivar, the original drummer. I can never forget Danny doing Satchmo when he wore those special eyeglasses. He would sing “Hello Dolly,” and at just the right moment, tip his head, causing the “eyeballs” to roll out and bounce up and down on springs, sending the audience into gales of laughter.
• Terry Lucido, our pint-sized, loveable piano player who sang a literally inimitable “Hippy Hippy Shake.”
• And of course, there was the unforgettable Gary Bautista, who was a master at impersonating a raft of celebrities. But Gary also had superb pipes, and he used to sing one of my favorite songs, “Music of the Night” from “Phantom of the Opera.”

In looking back over the Society of Seven’s career, it is clear that while they are entertainers in every sense of the word, they are at the same time exemplary individuals who have given unstintingly of their time and efforts for many worthwhile causes.
They have also generously given their time and talent to promote the Hawaii Visitor Industry. I recall going on tour with them one year, doing back-to-back shows for travel agents in Chicago and New York City. It meant setting up and performing in Chicago, then packing up and traveling to New York late at night on day one and then doing it all over again the next day. Nobody got much sleep on that entire trip, but you'd never have known it from their high-energy performances, which served beautifully to showcase Hawaii.

More than 40 years of performing has not drained any of that trademark energy. Recently they reinvented themselves by adding the stunning diva Lani Misalucha to their show, which is now playing at the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas. Locally, they mentored the seven young men who are now performing at the Outrigger Main Showroom under the name, SOS LV. (Tony tells me “LV” stands for “Latest Version.”)

The SOS has given us so many special moments. Their dedication to their craft and desire to please audiences have withstood the test of time. In fact, the Society of Seven holds the record as the longest-running headliner in a Waikiki showroom.

Way back in 1969, when the SOS opened at the Outrigger Waikiki with a four-week contract, I was in Athens attending the World Congress of the American Society of Travel Agents with our company's founders, Roy and Estelle Kelley, and Trade Wind Tours (TWT) President Bob MacGregor. We received a cable from TWT Vice President John Pugh saying we should pay a visit to the Main Showroom and see the SOS when we returned because, in John’s words, “they could be around for a while.” He had no idea what a prophet he was!

Warmest congratulations to Tony Ruivivar, the leader, and Bert Sagum, another founding member. Tony and Bert have been with SOS from the beginning and are still going strong. Congratulations also to current members Hoku Low, Wayne Wakai, Roy Guerzo, Marc Escueta, and Vince Mendoza. You’ve given us some priceless memories and moments of pure joy!