SOS Celebrates 40 Great Years

The Main Showroom of the Outrigger Waikiki has been the focus of celebration this week, as the Society of Seven marked 40 years of performing in that historic venue. What a record! What great memories! It broke my heart that I could not be there in person. If I had been able to share that evening with them, I am certain we would have talked about the good old days. Let me share a few of those nostalgic moments and memories with you.

The Outrigger Waikiki opened in late 1967. It was the first major new beachfront hotel built in central Waikiki since the Outrigger Reef opened in 1955. It was a hectic time. The U.S. was heavily involved in the Vietnam War, and a large percentage of our business came from servicemen and -women who were able to get a week's break from Southeast Asia and meet their families in Waikiki for rest and relaxation – or R&R, as it was called back then.

We were all young and full of enthusiasm. The manager at the Outrigger Waikiki wanted to make his hotel “entertainment central” of Waikiki, and, with the blessing of Roy Kelley, he did.

In 1969, the lobby conference room was equipped with a stage, sound system, and lighting. A brightly lighted marquee announced the opening of the Main Showroom and a group of young guys called the Society of Seven was booked as the headline show.

Almost overnight, the Outrigger Waikiki became the town’s nightlife hot spot. The place was jumping on all levels and at all hours.

At times, it really felt like we were the fictional characters described by the Beatles in their 1968 hit, “Yellow Submarine.”

_We all live in a yellow submarine,_
_Yellow submarine, yellow submarine,_
_And our friends are all aboard,_
_Many more of them live next door,_
_And the band begins to play._

The Society of Seven was packing them into the Main Showroom. They performed twice a night, Monday through Thursday, and did three shows on weekends. People flocked to see them, and long lines snaked through the lobby, down the escalator, and often out 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 underwater window that gave patrons a fisheye 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).

As the Beatles said, I indeed did “live next door.” My office and Outrigger’s Central Reservations operation were right next to the Main Showroom, and we shared a common, uninsulated wall. When the SOS rehearsed, we sure knew about it and quickly learned all the banter and jokes in their 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.

Sadly, some SOS members are no longer with us.

Danny Ruivivar, the original drummer. I can never forget Danny doing Satchmo, when he wore a special pair of “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 would bring down the house when, in those early days of oral contraceptives, he’d stop the show to tell the ladies in the audience it was “time to take your pills.”

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 energy 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 all through the night and most of the next day on a bus, and doing it all over again in the evening. 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 SOS energy. They continue to play in Las Vegas and Reno, Nevada. On June 6, they will open at the dazzling Stratosphere Las Vegas Hotel & Casino, with Hawaii’s own “American Idol” finalist, Jasmine Trias.

They also mentored the seven great young men who are now performing at the Outrigger Main Showroom under the name SOS LV. (SOS leader Tony Ruivivar tells me “LV” stands for “Latest Version.”) When she’s home in Hawaii, Jasmine Trias joins SOS LV on stage at the Main Showroom.

Way back in 1969, when the SOS opened at the Outrigger Waikiki with only 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. I clearly remember that we received a cable from TWT Vice President John Pugh saying we should pay a visit to the Main Showroom and see the SOS as soon as we returned to Hawaii because, in John’s words, “they could be around for a while.” He had no idea what a prophet he was!

In closing, I am moved by another verse from the Beatles, who, in 1967, wrote these poignant words in the song, “When I’m Sixty-Four:”
When I get older losing my hair,
Many years from now.
Will you still be sending me a Valentine
Birthday greetings bottle of wine.
Will you still need me, will you still feed me,
When I’m sixty-four.

Well, sixty-four has long since come and gone for me and for several of the SOS as well. They are still great performers and most of all, great friends. I and all of the Outrigger ‘ohana are truly honored to have you as part of our family.

Happy Anniversary! May you have many, many more.

(ShowBiz columnist Wayne Harada’s review/blog of the SOS Anniversary Reunion can be found on-line at: http://showandtellhawaii.honadvblogs.com)

How It All Began

The story of how the SOS and Outrigger got together, beginning in Hong Kong in the mid-1960s, is fascinating. At that time, Outrigger’s Entertainment director Fran Kirk was working in Hong Kong with an entertainment firm, Diamond Music Company. She contacted an exciting new group of performers called The Fabulous Echoes, booked them into several Asian venues, and then, in 1964, landed a gig for the group at the Thunderbird Hotel in Las Vegas!

In the Thunderbird audience were the famous TV variety show host, Ed Sullivan, and his wife. The Sullivans were impressed by the group’s energy and told Fran they would like to have them appear on the Ed Sullivan Show, which was broadcast nationwide from a CBS studio every week with a live (and lively) audience in New York City. Two years before, the Beatles had made their U.S. television debut on the show.

The group worked hard for their appearance on the nation’s hottest TV show. Then there was a near disaster just before they went on the air. A Canadian group called The Echoes, with their name allegedly copyrighted, wired Sullivan that they would sue him if he introduced his guests as The Fabulous Echoes. Sullivan did not want to end up in court, so he introduced “The Fabulous Boys From Hong Kong.”

A few days later, as they sat around having coffee, they were all dejected because they felt they might not be able to use their name. Then they started to think up possible new names. Fran wrote “Society of Seven” on a napkin and passed it to Bert Sagum. “I like that!” he exclaimed, and passed the napkin to Tony Ruivivar. He liked it too, and the Society of Seven was born.

The SOS then came to Hawaii and performed at the Hong Kong Junk at the Ilikai Hotel and Duke Kahanamoku’s at the International Market Place. Fran brought the group over to the Outrigger Waikiki in 1969, and the rest is history.