Fran Kirk

The Last of the Great Show Bands
By Dr. Richard Kelley

The presses are rolling and a book titled “The Society of Seven: Last of the Great Show Bands” by Frances “Fran” Kirk will soon be on the shelves of bookstores and shops, particularly in Hawai‘i. It tells a fascinating story of how a group of young men from Asia were able to follow their dreams and become “one of the most enduring success stories in show business.” They played in the show rooms, clubs and concert halls of Las Vegas and Reno, performed on the famous nationally televised Ed Sullivan Show, and headlined at the Main Showroom of the Outrigger Waikiki Hotel for more than 30 years. Fran Kirk was there with them almost every step of the way, and no one can tell The Society of Seven’s story better.

During the mid-1960s, Fran was in Hong Kong working for Diamond Music, an entertainment firm, which booked a hot, young group called The Fabulous Echoes into several Asian venues. In 1964, just about the same time that two U.S. destroyers were attacked in the Gulf of Tonkin near North Vietnam, and things were getting tense in Southeast Asia, Fran managed to get the group a gig at the Thunderbird Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada. On opening night, Ed Sullivan, the famous TV variety show host, was in the audience. Two years earlier, the Ed Sullivan Show had provided the Beatles their American debut. Sullivan told Fran he was impressed by the energy of The Fabulous Echoes and would like to have them appear on his show, which was broadcast live, nationwide, every Sunday evening from CBS studios in New York City. What an opportunity!

The group worked hard for their appearance on the nation’s hottest TV show. At the last minute, near disaster struck when a Canadian group called The Echoes said they would sue for copyright infringement damages if The Fabulous Echoes used that name on national TV. To save the night and avoid a legal tangle, Sullivan introduced them as The Fabulous Boys From Hong Kong.

Fran’s book describes how they changed their name to The Society of Seven to avoid more copyright claims in the future. It also chronicles how the “SOS” ended up as the headliners at the Outrigger Waikiki in 1969.

That’s when the book gets really nostalgic for me. I was still spending most of my time practicing medicine at The Queen’s Medical Center near downtown Honolulu. The Vietnam War was at its peak with some 540,000 U.S. troops in that country. Much of our business came from servicemen and -women who were able to get a week’s break from the war and meet their families in Waikiki for rest and relaxation – or R&R, as it was called back then.

It was a busy time for everyone. After working as a physician during the day, I would take off my white lab coat and put on my hotelier’s “hat” to check on how the front desk was handling the calls and walk-ins from servicemen and their families desperately looking for any vacant hotel room in Waikiki. The showroom was right next to the front desk and I often heard The Society of Seven rehearsing for that evening’s performance.

In her book, Fran does a great job of chronicling the entertainment scene during the last 40 years of the twentieth century. There are great memories of the many fine entertainers and groups on stage in Hawai‘i and Las Vegas during those times. Fran was the silent, enduring, strong manager of the SOS who kept everything organized and everyone inspired, through good times and bad.

To generate business in those pre-Internet days, we had to take Hawai‘i’s message to the U.S. mainland in person. Fran and the SOS were kind enough to help us do...
any number of promotions for travel agents and potential customers across the nation, from Los Angeles to New York City. I participated in many of those tours and became good friends with each member of the SOS. It was a fun and exciting time, but also hard work that began very early each morning and ended very late, day after day. As just a part-timer, I would pack my bags and return home after a few exhausting days. The rest of the troupe carried on that hectic routine for many days more.

Reading Fran’s wonderful writing unleashed floods of memories for me.

It also reminded me of how deeply I miss those members of The Society of Seven who have passed on. Drummer Danny Ruivivar was uniquely handy, creative and versatile. He could play any instrument that required mallets. The incredibly talented Gary Bautista could mimic almost any entertainer’s voice and character so well that you’d think that Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson or others were right there on stage. The antics of pianist Terry Lucido, Jr. got him far more than his fair share of laughs night after night.

Hats off to Fran Kirk for bringing back to life a fascinating era and the personalities, large and small, who were such a powerful force in the entertainment and Travel & Tourism industries. 

SOS Roll Call Over The Years

Fabulous Echoes (Original group)
Tony and Danny Ruivivar, Bert Sagum, Terry Lucido Jr., Stan Robertson and Cliff Foenander

The Society of Seven (Renamed 1968 to avoid a legal battle)
Tony and Danny Ruivivar, Bert Sagum, Terry Lucido Jr., Don Gay and Roberto Nievera

Changes:
• Danny Ruivivar (Deceased 1971) replaced by Albert Maligmat “Little Albert.”
• Singer Roberto Nievera (resigned) replaced by Jun Polistico.
• Gary Bautista (Deceased 2006) replaced by various individuals including Michael Laygo, Martin Nievera (Roberto’s son) and Little Albert.
• Albert Maligmat replaced by Billy Rivera, Tony Davich, Randy Abellar and Vince Mendoza.
• Stan Robertson replaced by Alfredo Romero and Hoku Low.
• Terry Lucido Jr. (Deceased 1982) replaced by Mitch Morala, Roy Guerzo and Roy Venturino.
• Don Gay (Resigned) replaced by Tony Smith, Eddie Ramirez and Wayne Wakai.

The Society of Seven 2013
• Tony Ruivivar (Leader & Founding Member)
• Bert Sagum (Founding Member)
• Hoku Low (Since 1977)
• Wayne Wakai (Since 1989)
• Randy Abellar or Vince Mendoza (Subject to availability)
• Roy Venturina
• Michael Laygo

---

1 The Society of Seven: Last of the Great Show Bands by Frances Kirk, http://bookshawaii.net/sos.html