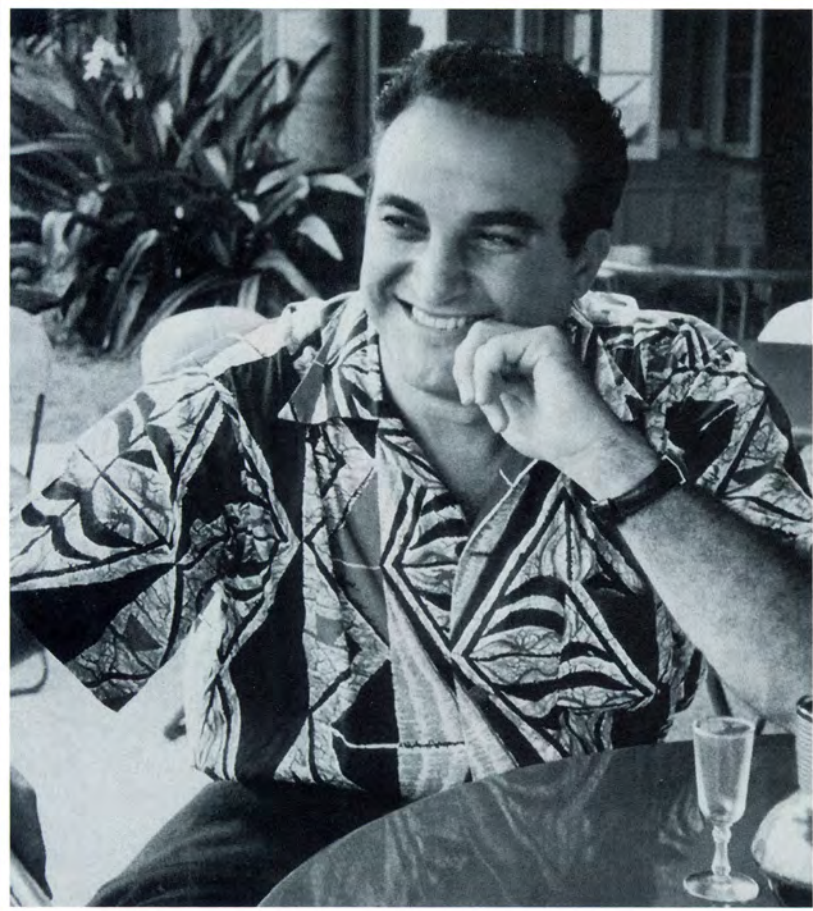


Tiki Pioneer



Alfred Shaheen in his heyday, wearing one of his own designs.



The Shaheen factory in Honolulu. It was so large it had three confirmed addresses.

Alfred Shaheen: A Legacy of Wearable Aloha

Story by Kari Hendler

Photos Courtesy of Camille Shaheen and
The Bishop Museum

"Once I step onboard, I won't look back", said the young lieutenant to his wife. He kissed her long and with intent. One last meaningful look, then he turned and strode up the gangplank of his ship, bound for Korea. She stood there, very still, watching him disappear into the sea of uniforms. He kept his word and did not look back at her -- because, if he had, the sight of his love, with the gardenia in her hair, in her ravishing Shaheen dress wrapping around her tan legs... well, man overboard. That ship would have been short one lieutenant.

Can clothing really make someone that unforgettable? Yes. Mix innovation with vision and art and you get the secret formula that created Alfred Shaheen, the man who transformed aloha-wear into high fashion with international desirability.

It isn't just Shaheen's fabrics and clothing that have made him memorable in Tiki history. It's also the when, where and how that made his success possible. Against many odds, Shaheen was able to build a textile empire in post-Pearl Harbor Honolulu. At that time, there wasn't much tourism in the islands, and flights between the Hawaii and mainland were infrequent. There also weren't any fabric manufacturing plants in Hawaii back then. But Shaheen was a visionary, born into a family with textile know-how in their blood, going back to his grandfather, who manufactured silk. In the 1930's, for health reasons, Shaheen's family moved from New Jersey to Hawaii, and they brought their skill and knowledge of fabrics with them. Alfred Shaheen left Oahu to attend college in Whittier, CA, and then completed a WWII tour of duty as a pilot. In 1945 he rejoined his family in Honolulu, and, shortly after that, set up his textile business in a Quonset hut with machinery he built himself from junkyard finds. He started everything with just that, along with his beautiful and supportive wife, Amelia, a few family members pitching in, and four paid employees.

The United States was reveling in optimism and leisure again and wanted symbols of a lifestyle that reflected that. Memories of blackouts, rationing and air raid sirens faded with trips to Disneyland, a musical called "South Pacific" and, of course, those sexy, forbidden Tiki bars that were springing up everywhere. Shaheen's fabrics and clothing were a perfect embodiment of this era, and, like the Tiki bars, created happy illusions from overseas wartime memories. In Shaheen's exotic designs, women looked



The innovative use of live models were another brilliant selling technique used by Shaheen (shown here with two of his models in his factory).



Shaheen leading a design team meeting at his factory.



Shaheen employees wearing their company-made bowling league shirts. (The company also had a baseball team.)



Proof that Shaheen and Tiki go hand in hand.



like colorful collections of ultra-feminine joy as they greeted their returning war heroes. When men wore his aloha shirts, they felt as if they were on a stylish, permanent, tropical vacation. The kitsch factor of aloha wear was obliterated by Shaheen's artistic prints and couture cuts. His designs became so in demand, the company rapidly outgrew the Quonset hut, and a huge factory was built with modern equipment, creating jobs for hundreds more Hawaiian islanders. This new space gave Shaheen the ability to expand his work with print design and dye development. Working with his textile chemist, Shaheen created his own custom library of one thousand fabric inks, including the invention of metallic inks for wash and wear, which glamorized his fabrics even further. He became a marketing genius by using live models to display his clothing, licensing his prints internationally and coining the phrase "East Meets West" to describe the Shaheen style. He opened a series of namesake boutiques in Hawaii, while, on the mainland, big-name department stores had entire areas inside their shops devoted to his clothing.

Besides good timing and business sense, what also made Shaheen so successful were his bold textile designs. Rebelling against the typical flower and tourist prints put out by his competitors, Shaheen and his team were inspired by exotica and modernism imagery, as well as elements from different Pacific Rim cultures. Even before they were transformed into clothing, Shaheen prints, on their own, were works of art. His creative departments would brainstorm together to decide what mood or theme would best represent the five lines the company would produce that year. There were always variations on the aloha shirt for men, while Shaheen offered women choices that included fitted, Hawaiian party dresses, swingy sundresses and exotic sarong styles with enhancing bodice construction -- appreciated by both women and men.

Although we are most familiar with Shaheen's famous aloha wear, his company produced much more than that. Wanting to keep his employees working full-time, he branched out in the mid-50s with his "After Five" silk line, accented with semi-precious stone buttons. In the 60's, Shaheen embraced the flower power generation, with hand-silkscreened voile outfits in pastels. Mod polyester numbers appeared in the 1970's, including his signature panel prints. Vintage clothes collectors should not be surprised when they find a Shaheen label on a piece of clothing that has an elaborate Egyptian or Indian print. With a manufacturing history spanning forty years, Alfred Shaheen's designs included fusions of many cultures, as well a



Shaheen's most famous 50s model, Beverly Noa, stopping traffic on Kalakaua Ave in Waikiki in 1959. (DeSoto Brown)



Shaheen enjoys a luau with his wife, Amelia, and his fashion designer, Richard Goodwin.



One of Shaheen's most beloved designs that emphasized his "East Meets West" style.



Shaheen's invention of metallic fabric inks enabled him to add even more glamor to his designs.



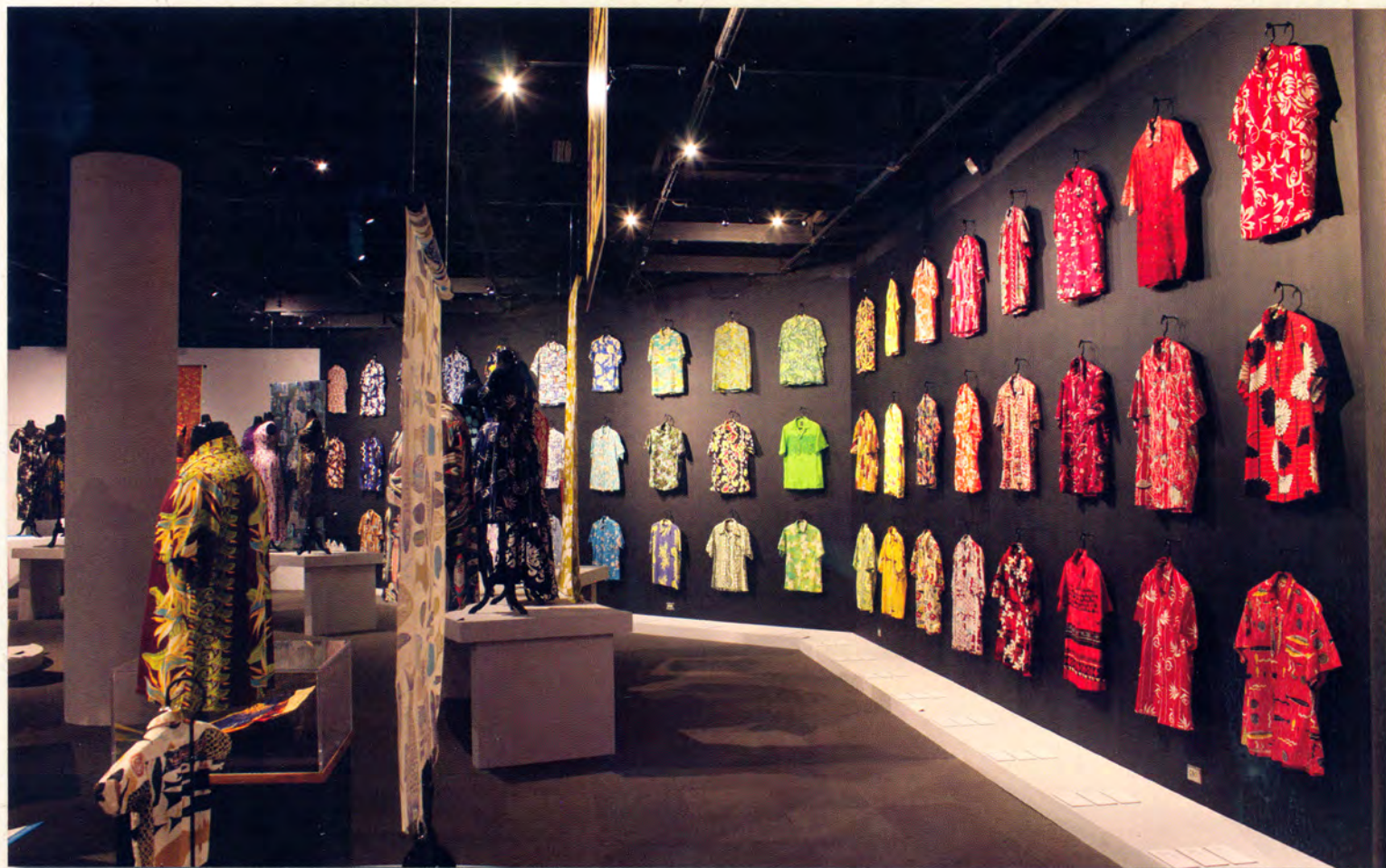
The most recent Shaheen exhibit at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu was so popular it was given an extended run. (Bishop Museum)

reflection of the mood of each decade, ending when Shaheen retired and closed his factory in 1988.

Shaheen fans are legion, and collectors now pay hundreds of dollars (sometimes thousands) to own notable pieces by him. The biggest enthusiast is Shaheen's daughter, Camille Shaheen-Tunberg, who, as a teenager, worked in her father's Hawaiian boutiques. It is Camille who is responsible for the continuation of Alfred Shaheen's legacy. "My father didn't keep samples of his clothing. He wasn't a collector and even after he closed his business he didn't understand the impact of his what he had done." Camille was inspired to start collecting her father's creations after her husband gave her a book on aloha shirts. "There were so many Shaheen shirts in there! Because I grew up in the business, I remembered the prints. But, as I collected, I discovered there were Shaheens with many different labels, and I didn't understand why." She would bring each piece she acquired to her retired father, who explained how the different labels represented different time frames of his work. Collectors will come across labels with the words "Alfred Shaheen", "Shaheen's of Honolulu", "Surf and Sand", "Kiilani", "Burma Gold Hand Prints", as well as a few others. And then there are also the double labels, which are found on pieces that he manufactured for other retailers, including Speedo, Liberty House, McInerney, and Waltah Clarke.

As of this article, Camille Shaheen's collection consists of over one thousand stunning pieces. Finding those pieces in good, unaltered condition is not always easy, but, because of her passion, her work has resulted in five Shaheen museum shows since 2009, including the largest and most recent one, that took place in the Bishop Museum in Oahu from November 2012 until this past February. "It's wonderful to not only have museums show my father's work, but to finally take Hawaiian textiles seriously", says Camille.

These days, when you see a particularly beautiful bolt of Hawaiian fabric or new aloha wear it's often a knocked-off, reproduced Shaheen. "Shaheen's designs have become so much a part of Hawaii and so recognizable that no one ever thinks, 'How did that print originate?' And if they do trace it back, more than likely it originated from Shaheen", says Camille. Currently, authentic Shaheen prints can be found in specialty fabric stores, and



A wall of Shaheen aloha shirts provides the perfect background at the recent Bishop Museum exhibit. (Bishop Museum)

a few companies have permission to use them on various items like upholstery fabrics, rugs and lampshades. But the only clothing company that is licensed to use Shaheen prints is Reyn Spooner, due to a long and respected Shaheen-Spooner friendship that Camille maintains to this day. Reyn Spooner is a fifty-seven year-old Hawaii-based company that employs a lot of local people, as Shaheen did, which benefits the Hawaiian economy.

Besides the achievement of preservation and archiving, Camille's collecting had an added blessing: "It brought my father and me closer together during the last ten years of his life", says Camille. "I would take everything I found to him. He never really talked about himself before. I kept questioning: 'When did you do this one, what inspired that one?' It has been an emotional journey for me, more than just finding pieces of his clothing here and there. They're sentimental to me. And they were very sentimental to him. Not at first! He would say, 'Why are you collecting that stuff?' But, after a while, after I kept bringing his pieces to him, he would hold one of his dresses, like a long-lost friend, and it was wonderful for him. He would say, 'Honey, I was just doing my job', and he didn't understand what a huge impact he made on Hawaiian history and culture, not to mention how successfully it was embraced by the rest of the world."

Toward the end of his life, Alfred Shaheen received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the State of Hawaii. "We flew back to

Oahu for the ceremony, and I'm telling you, the Shaheen fashion show brought down the house", says Camille. "People were standing on their chairs clapping." Alfred Shaheen was also named one of the one hundred and fifty most important influences in the history of Hawaii. "I still don't think he really understood, because he was always a forward thinker, he was a visionary, so he wasn't the type of person to look back at what he had accomplished, he was always looking forward at what was TO BE accomplished."

To learn even more about the creativity and genius of Alfred Shaheen, please visit www.alfredshaheen.com, and if you own any Shaheen clothing, wear them proudly and often.

Kari Hendler would like to thank Phillip Roberts for his assistance with this article, and a very special mahalo to Camille Shaheen-Tunberg for so many images, as well as a splendid conversation. As for the young lieutenant in the first paragraph – that was a true story. And he did return safely from Korea to his beautiful wife, and eventually they had a couple of cute children – one of whom is this writer.

