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Light the torches for a night with Waitiki!

By **Bob Young** / Jazz/World
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Here's a combination that will melt the icicles in any New Englander's brain: Polynesian drums, grass-skirted singers, groovy rhythms courtesy of lounge music hero Juan Garcia Esquivel, and the tiki-torch exclamation point - a full tropical drink list.

That should thaw visitors to the Lizard Lounge tonight when the 19-piece Waitiki Orchestrotica performs the exotica music of Hawaii and the "space-age bachelor pad" sounds of Esquivel.

Anyone for a nice tall "Naked Hula" cocktail? How can you not like a band that brings its own drink menu?

Waitiki got its start two years ago after Hawaii natives-turned-Boston transplants Randy Wong and Abe Lagrimas Jr. decided to form a band that would update one of the island's most famous musical exports: the bright, breezy sound that got its name from Martin Denny's album "Exotica."

Back in 1959, Denny's hit "Quiet Village" found its way into suburban homes all across the United States. It also inspired many Americans to spice up their backyard Sunday barbecues with tiki torches and introduce stern-faced wooden Polynesian statues to the living rooms of their split-levels.

Wong and Lagrimas were happy to add some of those kitschy elements, but they were more interested in melding the exotica fusion of South Pacific and Asian instruments with their jazz leanings.

"For me, it's a chance to draw a bridge between my artistic identity and my cultural identity," said bassist and arranger Wong, a native of Oahu.

"Abraham and I grew up with the music. Arthur Lyman, the vibes player in Martin Denny's band, was a good friend of my family's and I used to go listen to him play and talk to him about music.

"I rediscovered it a couple of years ago in college when I was looking to share the music of Hawaii with my friends. A lot of people think of Don Ho and ukeleles and steel guitars strumming away. But there are other sounds from Hawaii."

Wong and Lagrimas put a notice on the Craigslist Web site looking for someone who could do bird calls. Boston-based musician Brian O'Neill answered and also brought his vibes, percussion and piano skills to the party.

During a subsequent visit to a record store in, of all places, Keene, N.H., O'Neill stumbled upon the music of Esquivel.

"I'd never heard of him," he said. "I'm kind of new to the whole lounge-tiki scene. But when I listened to it, I thought, 'Wow, this is like the sister to exotica.' That started us."

Tonight's show will include a number of Esquivel pieces that band members transcribed because the original manuscripts had been destroyed.

The Mexican composer and arranger was a pioneer of precise, complex, somewhat bizarre yet eminently catchy tunes during the '50s and '60s that eventually made him a staple on the Las Vegas strip.

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Esquivel's star rose again during the '90s when his music was rediscovered by younger generations as part of the retro lounge scene.

"The link between the musics is the undeniable creativity in the arrangements and performances," Wong said.

Added O'Neill, "We don't feel that we're selling out by doing lame stuff. We take the exotica and Esquivel stuff as being very deep. When you start listening to the nuances, you hear how much there is under the skin."

That said, good times aren't far away when Waitiki takes the stage.

"I love everything about it, from the tiki artwork and visual designs to the jet-set stuff where you can escape and just have a cocktail," said O'Neill. "It's a way to have fun without it being a brainy experience."

The Waitiki Orchestrotica appear at the Lizard Lounge, Cambridge, tonight at 9 p.m. Tickets: \$10. Go to www.waitiki.com.

CD PICK: "One More: Music of Thad Jones" (IPO) with Hank Jones, James Moody, Jimmy Owens and others.

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