

# NiteLife

## Tiki freaks

>> Indulging the exotica fetish of the Montreal Tiki Appreciation Society

by RUPERT BOTTENBERG

Apparently, in Tahitian, it means 'out of this world,' says John Trivisonno, founder and head of the recently formed Montreal Tiki Appreciation Society. He's explaining the origins of the Mai Tai, a drink we're enjoying, repeatedly, at the Jardin Tiki restaurant, due south of the Big O.

"These things are made a lot stronger at this place than they should be. The theory is, the reason they're so strong here is because they don't have an actual bar... it's just some guy in the kitchen mixing it up!"

Lord knows we need some strong drinks. Invisonno, myself and all six other members of the society have just come from having our hearts broken in the lobby of the Bill Wong's on Décarie. We met there to check out the Hawaii Kai bar, only to discover that the papier-mâché grotto with the blowfish lamps has recently given way to Billie's Bar—a travesty, an exercise in lowest-common-denominator white-trash blandness.

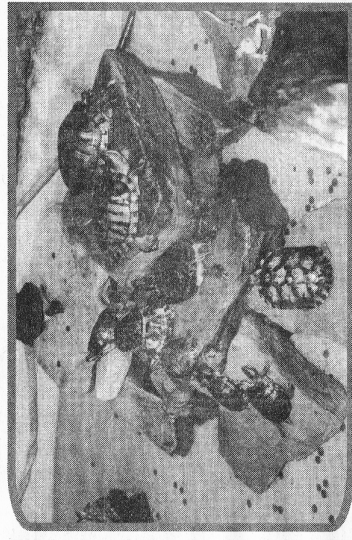
No one is more shattered than society member Kurt Hemmings, who pretty much grew up in the place—his folks were regulars. "It was like being in a cave, almost," he recalls. "The bar was this grass hut. A grass hut inside a cave. It was totally tacky, because they'd always have these bad acts. They had this couple there, the woman would play trombone and piano, and her husband would play bass, and they'd both



Mirror "research": BOTTENBERG ON THE JOB

sing. That would be the entertainment for the evening, and no one would really listen, anyways. They'd all be at the bar, drinking. But it was just a wild, crazy, cheesy place."

Bye bye, Hawaii Kai. But at least we still have the Jardin Tiki, a massive hall complete with 10-foot



On moulding pond: JARDIN TIKI'S TURTLE TRAP

totems (the "tikis" in question), rattan furniture and scores of ridiculous lamps, masks and junk. Even a filthy little turtle pond with a bamboo bridge. The decor is a mishmash of every tropical cliché you can imagine. "It's African, Chinese, Japanese," says Trivisonno. "It's Easter Island, it's the South Seas, it's Bora Bora, it's Pago Pago..." In other words, exotic locales with simple, repetitive names, easily remembered by shiftfaced GIs.

You see, when the Yanks came back from the Pacific front of WWII, they brought a little of that warmth back with them. "It was an imprint on their psyches," says Dan Laxer. "There's a camaraderie that's formed when you're in the war. So you come back and you miss the guys, you miss the environment you were in. Okay, so you were killing people in wholesale numbers..."

"Americans aren't exactly sticklers for detail," says Dave White. "So even if it was bastardized, and it wasn't exactly like your soldier had seen in the South Seas, he probably didn't even notice, anyway."

Other explanations for the original tiki craze of post-war, boom-era America abound. One is that Hawaii got statehood in '48, green-lighting the aloha shirt fad that followed. Another is simply the allure that the tropics hold for those stuck in colder climes.

Me, I like the psychosexual aspect. What first comes to mind at the mention of the South Seas? "Naked people," nods the chorus at our table. The sublimated lusts of the neo-Victorian '50s found expression in the "savage, uninhibited rituals" of these mysterious locales. The natives were restless, and so were the Smiths of suburbia.

"What you had to do to convince people that it was okay was to somehow elevate it to the status of being an elegant night out," says Trivisonno. "Because everything in the '50s was a façade. You

cared what your neighbours thought. If you had a Hawaiian floor show at a respectable dinner club, where you brought the wife, then it was okay to put on a grass skirt and a blowfish lamp on your head, dance around and get drunk on exotic drinks."

Therein, perhaps, lies the essence of the tiki experience: the drinks. Fog Cutters and Bolos, Zombies and Singapore Slings. Aku Aku Coconuts and Tiki Groggs. Mai Tais, Martinis

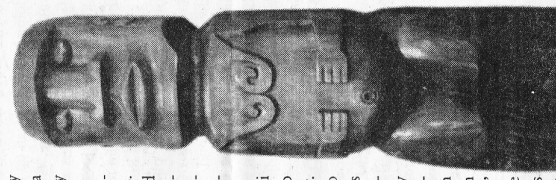
and a masterpiece called the Missionary's Downfall.

Despite the lack of an actual bar, Jardin Tiki's liquor list is twice as big as the food menu and thoroughly illustrated (these kooky cocktails are as much a visual treat as a gustatory one).

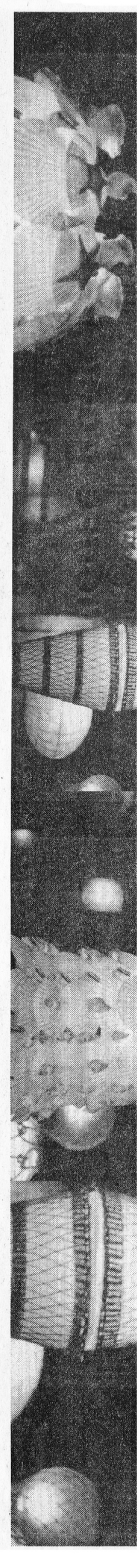
The appeal to Americans of the '50s is obvious. But why are we, the jaded slackers of Gen X, so fascinated? Irony? Or, ironically, a hunger for authenticity?

White, full of Mai Tai and ready to expound into my tape deck, has a theory. "It's a slap in the face to baby boomer culture that's been rammed down Generation X's throats. Baby boomers have had a stranglehold on the media, in commercials, television and films, in 'classic rock' stations. In the '80s we were force-fed the Beatles because they wanted to get nostalgic. It was like we were living in the '60s, for Christ's sake."

"So what was the best thing we could do to piss them off the most? Emulate their parents. We're railing against the establishment, too, but by calling them the establishment, that pisses them off!"



Jardin Tiki is located at 5300 Sherbrooke E., metro Viau. Mai Tai, the newsletter of the MTAS, can be picked up for free at Nemo, 3968 St-Laurent



TIKI NEWS IS PUBLISHED *three times a year, or whenever we feel like it, by Otto von Stroheim and Baby Doe.*  
Executive editor: Sven-Tiki  
Los Angeles Correspondent: Lisa G.

## OTTO'S REVIEWS

### "Mai Tai" Issues No 3 & 4

Montreal Tiki Appreciation Society newsletter  
With only 12 pages (the size of Tiki News but vertical) the MTAS has once again furthered our Tiki knowledge. Tiki expeditonist John Trivisonno talks of "Aku Aku" the book, Haole Hawaiian albums, and the NE Tiki outposts of Lee's Hawaiian Islander (Clifton, New Jersey) and Howard Johnson's Tiki Resort (Lake George, NY). Dave LeBlanc covers the Exotica

elements of New Jersey's Wildwood beach town. Paul Corupe reviews current music and Fred Sarli reveals Tahiti, a Tiki restaurant in Chateauguay near Montreal. Through their efforts I discover that both Tahiti and Jardin Tiki (Montreal) stole their logos from Stephen Crane's Kon Tiki chain.

[This logo is also used by



Tiki Ti, Los Angeles]

Issue 4 contains the history of Chinese food in America, the closing of a Montreal Tiki bar, Tiki fiction, Tiki film reviews, record reviews, and a report from Toronto.

We've enjoyed MTAS reporting so much that we are currently working on a deal to include issues of "Mai Tai" with future issues of Tiki News. We'll keep you posted on the details and feel free to give us feedback by mail or email at [otto@tikinews.com](mailto:otto@tikinews.com)



LA PRESSE  
14 JANVIER, 1999

Excursion

# Aloha!

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE LAURENCE  
collaboration spéciale

**A**h douce chaleur des îles! En cette période de froidure quasi sibérienne, qui ne trouverait pas son paletot et sa tuque pour une chemise hawaïenne et une plage de sable fin? Qui n'échangerait pas son café chaud et ses dents qui claquent pour un cocktail tropical et un bon vieux coup de soleil?

Il est possible, croyez-nous, de trouver tout cela pour peu cher. Car Waikiki Beach, messieurs-dames, n'existe pas que dans le sud du Pacifique. Ici même au Québec se cachent les derniers oasis d'une époque révolue, ultimes vestiges d'une période où l'Amérique se nourrissait de technicolor et d'exotisme de pacotille. J'ai nommé : les bars et restaurants Tiki.

## Un peu d'histoire...

C'étaient les années 60 dans toute leur splendeur. Insouciance, progrès, voyages sur la Lune et ouverture sur le monde. Alors que la moitié de notre continent n'avait d'yeux que pour les aventures de Spoutnik ou Apollo, l'autre moitié effectuait le chemin inverse en pratiquant le culte de l'art primitif et de l'anthropologie 101.

En 1959, lorsque Hawaii devient le cinquantième État des États-Unis, l'Oncle Sam découvre un nouveau paradis terrestre, un septième continent consommable situé, comme disait l'autre, « sous le soleil exactement ».

Pendant une quinzaine d'années, la culture Tiki — ou culture pop polynésienne — envahira l'Amérique du nord, de la côte Ouest à la côte Est. Dûment récupérée par le kitsch, elle s'américanise pour mieux plaire au touriste, qui ramène de sa lune de miel les plus beaux articles pour son bungalow. Sur les murs de son salon, monsieur Smith accroche des palmiers sur velours noir achetés à l'aéroport d'Honolulu. Les tasses à café de madame Brown sont à l'effigie de Tiki, le mythique dieu maori, cousin germain des statues de l'île de Pâques. Tendance oblige, Elvis tourne *Blue Hawaii* et *Aloha from Hawaii*, pendant que *Gilligan's Island* et *Hawaii 5-0*, deux séries (désormais) cultes, tiennent place dans le même décor enchanteur.

Comme toute mode, celle-ci ne durera hélas qu'un temps. Au milieu des années 70, la vogue de l'American Tiki Style disparaît progressivement. Les 33 tours de musique hawaïenne se retrouvent dans les bacs des disquaires d'occasion et les bars polynésiens voient leur clientèle des déserters progressivement. Aujourd'hui, quelques *lounges* et restaurants Tiki subsistent. Mais ils sont rares et il faut savoir où les trouver. Avec une voiture et un peu de flair, il y a tout de même moyen de dénicher l'oasis de vos rêves.

## À Montréal

L'année dernière à Montréal, deux bars Tiki (dont le Hawaii Kai Bar du restaurant japonais Beni Hanna) ont rasé leur ancien décor pour faire place à des débris de boisson plus conventionnels. Dommage... La Montreal Tiki Appreciation Society, un regroupement pour la préservation de la

culture pop polynésienne, a d'ailleurs été formée récemment pour veiller à ce que de telles erreurs ne se produisent plus.

À notre connaissance, il existe encore deux restaurants Tiki à Montréal, soit le Tiki doré et le Jardin Tiki, tous deux situés rue Sherbrooke, à quelques pas du Stade. Si vous avez vu le film *C'è'ta ton tour Laura Cadieux*, le grandiose paysage du Jardin Tiki ne vous sera pas inconnu. Inutile de préciser, on vient d'abord ici pour l'environnement : les palmiers en plastique et les petites chutes d'eau et les lampes exotiques. De vocation plutôt familiale, le Jardin Tiki propose parfois des spectacles de danse hawaïenne, mais il faut appeler à l'avance pour être sûr de tomber sur le bon soir... À noter que le Tiki doré et le Jardin Tiki n'ont de polynésien que l'ambiance. Côté bouffe, les deux restos servent d'abord des mets chinois à l'américaine. Au Jardin Tiki, on offre toutefois la possibilité de déguster quelques cocktails hawaïens à l'ananas ou à la noix de coco qui vous serviront d'apéro ou de digestif.

JARDIN TIKI, 5300, rue Sherbrooke Est  
TIKI DORÉ, 6976, rue Sherbrooke Est

## À Trois-Rivières

Ouvert en 1973, le Coconut Bar est de loin le plus paradisiaque de nos *lounges* polynésiens. Intacte depuis 25 ans, la déco oscille entre le kitsch luxuriant et le dépaysement le plus absolu. Lumières rouges et bleues tamisées, aquariums bombés derrière le bar, petit pont de bois et oasis de palmiers y côtoient abat-jour en forme de poisson porc-épic, peintures de vahinés sur velours noir et terrifiants totems du dieu Tiki. Le vrai continent perdu!

Situé sur la route 138, le Coconut est un arrêt obligé pour tout fana d'exotisme et de culture cocktail. Sortez de la réalité, accoudez-vous au bar pour déguster un délicieux *Aku Aku* ou l'incontournable *Maï Tai*, LE drink Tiki, fait à partir de rhum sur glace, curaçao à l'orange, jus de lime, menthe fraîche et extrait d'amande. Savoureux... et mortel! Pour réunions plus intimes, des cubicles sont également à votre disposition. Pour réunions encore plus intimes, sachez que le Coconut fait aussi office de motel, petit-déjeuner compris! Les chambres coûtent 42 \$, et un peu plus de 60 \$ avec l'option bain tourbillon. Un must.

HÔTEL-MOTEL COCONUT, 7531 rue Notre-Dame (route 138), Trois-Rivières Ouest, 819-377-3221 ou sans frais : 1-800-838-3221

## À Saint-Jérôme

Depuis Montréal, prenez la 15 nord jusqu'à Saint-Jérôme, puis empruntez la rue de Martigny jusqu'au bar-restaurant Aloha. Ici, on vient plutôt en couple, pour se murmurer des mots doux dans une ambiance nocturne, sur une musique de circonstance. Un peu en retrait de la partie restaurant, le bar offre une jolie gamme de cocktails exotiques. Essayez le *Cocoboo* (trois sortes de rhum et lait de coco) le *Bolao* (rhum, ananas, fruits de la passion) ou la brûlante *Flamme tahitienne*, servie dans un verre de forme volcanique.

Pour ceux qui auraient le ventre vide, on peut aussi déguster quelques fruits de mer, grillades et autres mets asiatiques, ou se con-



PHOTO ROBERT VAILLOUX, LA PRESSE

Le bar-restaurant Aloha, à Saint-Jérôme, offre une jolie gamme de cocktails exotiques portant des noms comme *Flamme tahitienne* et *Potion d'amour*.

tenter de petits plats d'accompagnement comme le *Bali Miki*, un émincé de boeuf servi sur salade, ou l'assiette *Aloha Habachi*, composée de *egg rolls*, crevettes et ailes de poulet. Les plus chanceux seront servis sous les huttes de paille; les autres auront droit aux immenses fauteuils en rotin. Vingt et un ans après sa naissance, le Aloha draine toujours une clientèle d'habitues. L'endroit est ouvert tous les jours, en semaine de 11 h à 23 h et les fins de semaine de 16 h 30 à minuit.

ALOHA, 78, rue de Martigny Ouest, Saint-Jérôme

## À écouter

*Exotica* de Martin Denny sur étiquette Rhino. De la musique Tiki à son meilleur. Dans les années 50, Denny avait créé un style tout à fait novateur qui amalgamait bongos, vibraphone, piano à queue, coquillages, koto japonais gamelans et cris d'oiseaux exotiques. Fascinant.

*The Exotic Moods of Les Baxter*, Capitol. Mystérieux alliage de percussions ethniques d'incantations païennes et de lyrisme hollywoodien. Disparu il y a quatre ans. Les Baxter est considéré comme le père de la musi-

que exotica. Deux disques, 40 morceaux, livret de 18 pages. Incontournable.

## Surfer

Tiki News  
<http://www.indieweb.com/Tiki/>

Magnifique site, facilement utilisable, conçu par le fanzine *Tiki News* de San Francisco. Tout ce qu'il faut savoir sur la pop polynésienne, du symposium Tiki (le prochain a lieu à Austin, le 10 juillet prochain) aux recettes à cocktails. En prime : un texte instructif sur l'origine du Dieu Tiki.

Tiki Bar Review Page  
[www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Fuji/2185/Tiki\\_main.html](http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/Fuji/2185/Tiki_main.html)

Descriptions en profondeur de tous les bars et restos Tiki d'Amérique du Nord ou presque, de San Diego à Montréal. Le Jardin Tiki y est, mais pas l'Aloha et le Coconut.

In Search of the Ultimate Mai Tai  
[www.kevdo.com](http://www.kevdo.com)

Tout ce que vous avez toujours voulu savoir sur le Mai Tai. Son origine, sa recette de base et ses dérivés, les meilleurs endroits pour le déguster, cotes à l'appui. Complet.



# Exotic Excursions

## John Trivisonno's Quest to Save Quebec Tiki

By Paul Corupe

If travel and vacation are all about experiencing something different, something new and exotic, what could be more thrilling than a lush environment bursting with tropical plants, inexhaustible waterfalls and the cries of tropical birds? How about all that, plus reclining in a large wicker chair, giddily sipping sweet boozy liquids from a gigantic volcano-shaped vessel brought to you by scantily clad natives?

It may sound like an expensive plane ticket, but it's not — such pagan paradises are often as near as the main strip (or even the main strip mall)!

It wasn't too long ago that Tiki bars and restaurants brought a little savagery to every suburbia. With their distinctive Polynesian boat frame architecture, and giant stone gods leading up to the front door, the Polynesian themed Tiki restaurants seemed tailor-made for the pretend innocence of the 1950s. There were big franchises such as Trader Vics, Don The Beachcomber and The Kon-Tiki, but also a lot of smaller restaurants who weren't above adopting such a marketable gimmick. Those chains are either gone or, like Trader Vic's, have abandoned Tiki style altogether. This has left a few remaining independents carrying the smouldering Tiki torch. Times may be tough but the Tiki enthusiast can take heart: zinester and Tiki fanatic John Trivisonno is on the job.

For the last few years, John has been putting together a zine called *Mai Tai* about Tiki bars in Quebec, and exotica culture in general. After graduating from McGill University, John started self-publishing literary chapbooks such as *Dollar Days*, and *The Official St. Leonard Dictionary*, which John describes as "a lexicon of Italo-Canadian slang terms and examples of how to use them in conversation." It proved popular enough to have been reprinted several times, and was subsequently turned into a website. Since 1998, John has focused his attention on *Mai Tai*. As a child, John and his parents went on vacations to Hawaiian-style resorts in Miami Beach, had a modest Tiki bar in their basement and played gentle Hawaiian music on the hi-fi. Still, the exotica experience didn't really hit



home until John's inaugural Tiki Restaurant encounter in his very own Montreal, home to the very first outpost of the Kon-Tiki chain, built in 1959. John still remembers his first visit as a complete assault on the senses.

"My eight-year-old mind was overwhelmed: Walking over a lagoon to get to the table! Flaming food! Erupting drinks! Eating ice cream out of a half coconut shell!" John never forgot that first youthful Tiki visit, and to this day, he connects Tiki to a simpler, stranger, time. "Back then," he explains, "Tiki bars were an 'exotic' evening out in the 50s and 60s. Now, for us, Tiki bars are a way of time-traveling back to that era, or experiencing the lifestyle of that era."

Tiki enthusiasts appreciate the visual extremes of Tiki style: Conservatively dressed men and women against a backdrop of fire pits, gigantic wooden idols and exaggerated floor shows. As a bonus, bars often sold drinks in promotional Tiki mugs that the weary businessman could

take home at the end of the night, starting his own Tiki bar in the basement. But by the 1970s, Tiki Bars just weren't hip anymore. Slowly they began disappearing, as the public became cynical and weary of the "fake" Polynesian experience. This set the stage for a new wave of Tiki enthusiasts like John who, when asked to describe the Tiki appeal, point to 1950s-style artificiality as its main charm.

Unlike the initial mainstream craze, modern followers are now attracted to the ironic connotations of the Tiki bar; instead of ignoring the obvious lack of authenticity, followers celebrate the fact that Tiki was never genuine, but just another American perversion of remote lands, complete with imperialistic attitudes.

"We don't really believe that Tiki bars are giving us a taste of the exotic," John says. "They are giving us a taste of what it was like to exist in a time when Tiki Bars were thought to be exotic by the



average North American. That is why we are not seeking anything authentically Hawaiian or Polynesian...we crave the fake interpretation."

During the lounge music revival of the early 1990s, Tiki gained some vogue in California, mostly thanks to a zine called Tiki News, and its publisher, Otto Von Stroheim. However, John is quick to stress that Mai Tai is not simply a Canadian version of Tiki News.

"We are completely distanced from the whole link between Tiki culture and surf culture, whereas Tiki News can relate to it. We are probably forced to do a little bit more urban archaeology too, since there is much less Tiki in Quebec than there is in San Francisco."

As interest in Tiki style gathered steam over the last decade, the new culture that surrounds it has grown as well. Tiki News has extended its exotica empire into DJ nights and live concerts, and has given a forum for frequent Tiki News contributor Sven Kirsten to develop *The Book of Tiki* (published by Taschen in 2000). Tiki websites have started popping up everywhere and Tiki mugs — the bread and butter of the Tiki devotee — are fetching between \$20 and \$50 at online auctions.

Still, today, Tiki style is primarily found in the United States. In most parts of Canada, the Tiki bar has long since vanished. In fact, John's home province of Quebec seems to be the only province in the country where authentic Tiki restaurants can still be found. "Everything used to stick around longer in Quebec," explains John, wondering if, like drive-ins, Tiki bars were kept out of Quebec for religious reasons: "The Catholic church kept drive-ins out of Quebec for so long. Did Tiki bars come into Quebec later than anywhere else because (like drive-ins) they were seen as anti-Catholic, pagan places?"

Whatever the reasons for the remaining restaurants, John is only too happy to reap the rewards with his friends. The magazine often lingers over the nostalgic visits John and pals take to the Quebec Tiki bars. Each bar "review" takes a careful note of the atmosphere, cataloguing everything from music, drink and food menus, down to the types of lamps and furniture. One visit to the Restaurant Aloha in St. Jerome revealed "two rattan chairs hung from the ceiling... to sit, swing...and drink!"

Visiting the bars and getting nostalgic is exciting, of course, but the main challenge of Mai Tai is in helping to perpetuate the survival of Tiki bars everywhere. This is not an easy task, as three Quebec Tiki bars have closed since John started publishing Mai Tai. Tiki Dore, Hawaii Kai

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and the Tiki Sun Polynesian have all gone the way of the grey flannel suit that inspired their exotic escape. Still, John knows of and frequents at least five remaining hot spots, including Jardin Tiki, the last remaining Tiki bar in the city of Montreal. Making sure that Jardin Tiki and its brethren are around for the current generations of Tiki enthusiasts is the most important mission of his zine. For John "it's all a matter of preserving the memories."

Tiki was originally intended to give people a way to experience the exotic and strange without leaving their neighbourhood. Now, John admits that "it does take a lot of travel to get to some of these places. But that makes it more of an adventure." Suddenly, and ironically, the search for Tiki has become a travel subculture itself. Instead of traveling to the Polynesian countries, John and his fellow urban archaeologists search out Polynesian themed restaurants and resorts in unlikely places such as Cuba and

would be missing the point. Tiki bars aren't about experiencing other cultures. Hopelessly mired in the endlessly self-referential world of North American pop, today's Tiki bars are about the style of nostalgia. Which is why, long after he glimpsed the water pump behind the lagoon, and realized the bird noises emitted from a carefully placed speaker, John still craves the Tiki experience.

*Paul Corupe is a Toronto based pop culture archivist who maintains the Canuxploitation website, <http://home.ica.net/~paul/canux/>*

**Mai Tai, John Trivisonno, \$1or free in Montreal, 6361 20th Avenue, Suite 301, Montreal, Quebec H1X 3P8**

New Jersey. Wouldn't it be easier to simply experience the real thing — actual exotic island culture? Maybe, but that



# Lifestyle Hot Summer Guide



## Floral print crusaders

>> The Montreal Tiki Appreciation Society keeps up the fight

by RUPERT BOTTENBERG

A year and change ago, I let y'all in on this cool club I'd discovered, the Montreal Tiki Appreciation Society. Under the guise of informal socio-cultural documentation, John Trivisonno and friends had written themselves an excuse slip for pulling on aloha shirts, knocking back potent "exotic" cocktails and debating the comparative merits of Martin Denny and Les Baxter. In the time since, their quest has taken them as far as Wildwood, New Jersey. "We rediscovered this Tiki paradise," says Trivisonno, "where every motel seems to have a grass hut over its entrance and plastic palm trees around the pool."

There is a certain melancholy nobility to these colourful hijinx. The genuine Tiki lounge is an endangered species (Jardin Tiki is Montreal's "last man standing"), so the MTAS crew see it as their responsibility to gather any relics they can—blowfish lamps, Tiki mugs, photos, matchbooks, whatever. They're not alone.

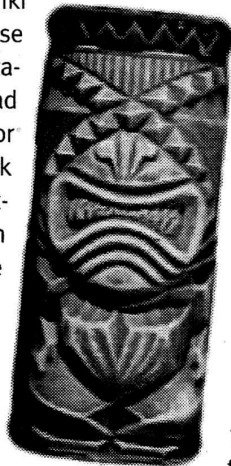
"Through our newsletter *Mai Tai* and my contributions to the zine/site *Tiki News* (tikinews.com) and the Tiki Bar Review Pages (tydirium.net) on the Web, people have been getting in touch with us to ask about Tiki in Montreal and to tell us what's going on where they are. I

personally hooked up with visiting German Tiki fans and a fan from Chicago, and we've heard from people in Ontario, Ohio, Virginia, California and elsewhere."

When the going gets tough, the tough fire up the photocopier. *Mai Tai* already sees 500 free copies distributed on the island, with 500 more inserted in copies of *Tiki News* in the States (*TN* being the leading light of neo-Tiki culture). "Additional copies have been distributed in NYC, more will be in Toronto in July and August, and even more will be going out with a Tiki carver's catalogue along the California coast in late summer."

Trivisonno promises the next issue will feature "reports on Vic Damone's Hawaiian album, the Coconut Motel, the Tiki art show in Toronto's Swizzle Gallery and advice how to build a Tiki bar. We'll also be enjoying a few Mai Tais of the liquid variety this summer. We're going up to Luau in Ste-Adèle in early July, and we want to get more people to discover the Jardin Tiki. We went again on Sunday night and their Mai Tais are as strong as ever!"

Never surrender, guys, never surrender. ☉





# Tiki takes over

Polynesian motif inspires collectors and the cool  
with kitschy designs and '60s sensibilities

MICHAEL CITROME  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Imagine yourself in a Polynesian paradise, surrounded by palm trees, balmy breezes and lovely maidens (or buff hunks) proffering potent rum drinks. OK, stop imagining. You may not be Tahiti-bound, but you can recreate the experience at home.

Everyone's seen a Tiki, those Polynesian-style island gods that scowl at you from a ceramic mug filled with tropical drinks like Zombies and Mai Tais. En vogue in the '60s, Tiki mugs and Tiki culture were largely forgotten, save for rare appearances on Brady Bunch reruns and "tropical drinks" sections of old-school Chinese restaurant menus.

But there's a resurgence of interest in Tiki, due in no small part to the popular lounge artist Shag – whose work can be seen gracing trendy handbags and the new Pink Panther DVD box set – and a certain yellow sponge who lives in a pineapple under the sea. Spongebob's co-worker and comic foil, Squidward, lives in a house made of a Tiki mug. Kinda makes you, well, thirsty.

"It's a good substitute for religion," said Dave Cooper, bassist for amped-up Montreal ska-party-poppers The Planet Smashers, whose current tour and new record, *Mighty*, due out this June, feature a giant Tiki as mascot and apparent object of worship.

The band got hooked on Tiki style – mugs, Hawaiian shirts, bamboo torches and all – by a lucky accident.

"We were playing a show in Trois Rivières and we asked if there was anywhere to go out and some kid brought us to the Coconut Lounge, which is a Tiki bar in a hotel," Cooper said. "We kind of stumbled on it by mistake, but we got really hammered and decided to write a song about it. Since then, we've been hooked."

The resulting song is called *Missionary's Downfall*, named for a Tiki drink

that like most, calls for a lot of rum.

Suckin' 'em back is a large element of the genesis of Tiki, but the word actually has prehistoric origins. It's from the Maori language and means "first man." In his day, Tiki was kind of a demigod.

Many also recognize the word as half of Kon Tiki, the name of the raft built by Norwegian explorer and proto-hippie Thor Heyerdahl, whose voyage confirmed a pattern of human migration in the Pacific, inspired a book and an Oscar-winning documentary.

So how did all this dusty archaeology turn into a cool lounge culture?

"For me, Tiki is an escape to an ideal, exotic environment not just a place to 'go' but the perfect place that can make you feel like you've been transported further than you've actually travelled to get there," said John Trivisonno, a local Tiki fanatic and self-proclaimed urban archaeologist dedicated to preserving the last outposts of original Tiki culture. Along with his fellow members of the Montreal Tiki Appreciation Society, Trivisonno publishes *Mai Tai*, a zine dedicated to all things Tiki that's currently in its ninth issue.

To experience Tiki at home, all you need is a few bottles of rum, some faux-Hawaiian décor and a couple of Tiki mugs to fill up with booze. The mugs can be the hardest part of the equation. Some local retail spots, like Urban Outfitters on Ste. Catherine St., carry them, but savvy Tiki collectors scour garage sales, thrift stores, flea markets and dusty Chinatown shops. My own collection numbers nearly 50, and I've been collecting for six years.

And there's always the Internet. Tiki mugs are a hot ticket on eBay, and there are plenty of Web sites dedicated to selling reproduction and neo-Tiki mugs, but be prepared to spend a little money.

In the Tiki heyday, Montreal was home to a Tiki lounges, including the posh Kon Tiki in the downtown Sheraton Mount Royal, which closed in 1981.

Its scowling brown signature mugs are a Salvation Army staple.

Today, the sole survivor is Jardin Tiki, on Sherbrooke St. E., just past the Big O. There you'll find a pony tailed, Trans-Am-driving maitre d' who looks like he stepped out of John Carpenters *Big Trouble in Little China*. He'll lead you to a high-backed wicker chair where friendly waitresses in Hawaiian shirts will take your order for drinks strong enough to singe your eyeballs.

The food is generic Chinese buffet fare in gloppy sauces, but that's not why you're there: the décor is breathtaking – like another world, especially when you cross a footbridge and look down at the world's laziest turtles. The building is a Flintstones-meets-Jetsons glass hut with tons of flotsam and jetsam hanging from the ceiling. There are man-sized carved Tikis everywhere, and dancing in the Hula room every Saturday night.

Ironically, Jardin Tiki's biggest enemy seems to be souvenir hunters. The bar is down to a half-dozen Tiki mugs, and they wouldn't sell one. My conversation with the terse manager amounted to "don't steal nothin'" and I could feel him watching as I went back for a second helping of gelatinous spare ribs and surprisingly tasty California rolls.

The Planet Smashers play *Le Medley* (1170 St. Denis) Saturday, April 24 with fellow ska-revisionists Catch 22, Mustard Plug and Big D and the Kids Table.

Mai Tai and the Montreal Tiki Appreciation Society are on the Web at [www.angelfire.com/un/maitai](http://www.angelfire.com/un/maitai)

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**Online Extra:** In 1988, the late Helen Rochester reviewed a revived Kon-Tiki restaurant. You can read that review on our revamped Web site. [www.montrealgazette.com](http://www.montrealgazette.com)