

July 7, 1999--

A Vegas-style act of big shtick and tiny bubbles made Hawaiian crooner Don Ho a household name. But face it, only hard-core fans can name other of his hits beyond the 1965 smash "Tiny Bubbles."

Ho knows this.

When the 68-year-old singer performs before older fans in Hawaii he kids his audience by promising to do "Tiny Bubbles" first, in case somebody doesn't make it all the way through the show.

"And for my final number, I'll do 'Tiny Bubbles' again, for people my age who can't remember if we've done it yet," Ho chortled over the phone last week from the Ko'Olau golf course on the main island of Oahu.

On Friday night at the House of Blues in Chicago, Ho tees off with his first area appearance since the mid-1970s, when he headlined the Mill Run Theatre in Niles. The singer will front a five-piece band. Expect standards such as "The Hawaiian Wedding Song" and "I'll Remember You," along with classic lounge jokes about leis and shopping trips.

"So this blind woman walks into a store," Ho told a 1997 audience at the Hana Hou Showroom in Honolulu. "She picks up a seeing-eye dog and begins twirling it around by the tail. A clerk walks up to the woman and asks, 'Ma'am, do you need any help?'

"And the woman says, 'No thanks, just taking a look around.' "

Ho, no!

"I had to get out on the road again," Ho says of his return to touring. "I got itchy feet." After appearing at House of Blues, Ho heads to the Oneida Casino in Green Bay, Wis., for shows from Sunday through next Wednesday. The Midwest will be saturated with tiny bubbles.

Ho estimated he has sung "Tiny Bubbles" 30,000 times, but never gets tired of it. "It pays the rent," he admitted.

The introductory lyrics, "*Tiny bubbles, in the wine,*" have nothing to do with Hawaii. The song was written by Leon Pober, who gave it to Reprise Records' A&R man Sonny Burke. Burke originally wanted Ho to record "Born Free." The relaxed sway of Hawaiian music floating against a traditional mid-1960s pop arrangement is what made "Tiny Bubbles" work.

"I was in the studio recording some other stuff," Ho recalls. "As I was walking out, Sonny asked me to try to sing 'Tiny Bubbles.' I sat down, did one take and left. Pretty soon it was all over the country. I never thought it was that much of a song, but then what did I know?"

Born in Honolulu, Ho is a mix of Hawaiian, Chinese, German, Portuguese and Dutch. He was a high school football star, and he received a sociology degree from the University of Hawaii.

Ho spent 1954-59 as an Air Force pilot near San Antonio, Texas, before he returned to Hawaii to help run Honey's, a bar his mother owned in Kaneohe. "In Texas, I was too busy trying to keep my airplane up," Ho says. Ho learned his first songs from the tavern jukebox. He was influenced by slack-key guitarist Gabby Pahinui and lounge legend Arthur Lyman, although Ho says, "Hawaii has no music of its own."

Pahinui, who died in 1980, was known as the "king of the slack key" around Hawaii. He first learned steel guitar and later picked up slack key. The slack key technique - tuning the guitar from a standard to a major chord to achieve greater range - was adapted by rural blues artists such as Blind Lemon Jefferson, who heard slack key in vaudeville shows.

After pausing to take a shot off the driving range, Ho added, "But even the stuff Gabby played came from the cowboys in Mexico. With 'Tiny Bubbles,' we were just trying to do something different. Everybody got tired of the old stuff. We were just swingers, you know.

"We're still swingers."

Ho swings so much he attracts alternative bands such as Jesus Lizard, L-7, Lush and Social Distortion to his shows at the Hoku Hale ("home of the stars" in Hawaiian) Showroom in the Waikiki Beachcomber Hotel.

"They're all really nice kids," Ho says. "Onstage, they're wild, but in real life, they're sweet. I'm blown away at the fact these bands come by. I have a 15-year-old daughter, and all she listens to in her bedroom is alternative music. It's just like when Frank Sinatra came to town, I was in awe of him."

Around 1964-65, the Chairman was one of a fleet of celebrities who visited Waikiki to catch Don Ho and the Allis (Al Akana, Benny Chong and others) who headlined at Duke Kahanamoku's supper club/tiki bar in the International Market Place. The post-statehood boom ignited the tourist industry and made Hawaii affordable for the rich and not-so-famous. Besides Sinatra, Duke's VIPs included Don Rickles, Don Knotts, Hugh Hefner and Petula Clark.

"We were in a different universe," Ho recalls in warm tones. "The world was at war, there was civil unrest in America and we were sitting in Waikiki at Duke's. The club held about 700 people, and we did three shows a night, seven days a week. For 10 years, we had a blast there. It seemed that while everything was happening on the outside world, we were at Duke's just making music. The local kids were loving each other. It was like a mini-Woodstock."

Whereas "Make Love, Not War," was a Woodstock slogan, "Suck 'Em Up" was Ho's slogan at Duke's. There was no cover and no minimum to catch Ho's act, but the club made more than enough money from the bar. Ho's main songwriter, the late Kui Lee ("I'll Remember You") even used "Suck 'Em Up" as a 1964 song title.

Every time Ho sang the refrain, the gang at Duke's raised their glasses in unison. Ho's show became so popular that lines would start at the bar, go through the market place and out on to Kalakaua Avenue.

"The first time Sinatra came, the place was so packed, he couldn't get in," Ho says. "That perturbed me because no one was smart enough to make room for him. The second time he came, they put him right across from me. I remember when I had him stand up and take a bow, when he smiled I could see his beautiful white pearl teeth. That impressed me."

American soldiers en route to Vietnam also caught Ho's act at Duke's. "They'd come back on R&R, too," he says. "They actually used 'Tiny Bubbles' in marching cadence." And he sang, "*Tiny Bubbles/hup-two-three-four/In the wine/hup-two-three-four . . .*"

Last December, Ho brought back a dash of the Duke's era when he opened Don Ho's Island Grill and Tiny Bubbles Bar in Honolulu's harbor-front landmark Aloha Tower Marketplace. Island Grill was created by a team led by Honolulu restaurateur Barry Silverman of Rodeo Cantina and Dixie Grill.

"It looks a little like the old Duke's," says Ho, a resident of Kapahulu, near Diamond Head on Oahu. "It's the hottest joint in town right now. It's more a restaurant than a bar."

But the menu is more heavy on surfboard pizzas and fresh Waianae spit-roasted leg of pork instead of the watercress, tofu and eel Ho says he has been eating since the early 1980s. He attributes his ageless, Dick Clark look to his eating habits.

"It's healthy stuff," Ho says. "So is poi. Poi looks like potatoes, but it's gray. First, you boil it; then you mash it and mix it with water, slowly. It comes out like a paste. You first eat your chicken or steak, then you put poi in your mouth and it mixes like you would with bread or rice."

And you can wash it all down with tiny bubbles.