

Sept. 5, 2004----

SAN FRANCISCO -- The ups and downs of World War II were played out at the corner of California and Mason streets here on Nob Hill. The history is as cloudy as a third mai tai, but I have a theory.

In 1939 the romantic Top of the Mark restaurant and lounge opened on the 19th floor of The Mark Hopkins Hotel, 999 California St. The lounge with the 360-degree view of San Francisco became a favorite place for Pacific-bound servicemen to share one last drink with friends and lovers.

The Fairmont Hotel across the street at 950 Mason saw the high drama at the Top of the Mark, so in 1945 it turned its basement swimming pool into the S.S. Tonga tiki bar for servicemen returning from the Pacific. Tonga is the island in the heart of the South Pacific, east of Fiji and south of Samoa.

The S.S. Tonga was one of America's first Polynesian themed restaurants and cocktail lounges. The dance floor was built on the remains from the deck of the S.S. Forrester, one of the last tall ships that sailed between San Francisco and the South Seas.

After Don the Beachcombers and Trader Vics washed across America's shores in the 1950s, the restaurant was converted into The Tonga Room and Hurricane Bar. Thatched huts were then built around the room, surrounding the swimming pool.

The Tonga Room is still going strong. Visitors still drink under the huts. There are 19 drinks on the bar menu and they include the power-packed Tonga Mai Tai and a Scorpion (rum and brandy mixed with fruit juices). The rum-laced Zombie will wake you up.

On Fridays and Saturdays the lounge band Mirage plays five sets a night on a barge with a thatched roof that floats on the 75-year-old tile swimming pool. You haven't lived large until you hear Mirage sing "Do You Know The Way to San Jose?" and Shania Twain's "That Don't Impress Me Much" in a tiki bar.

Locals hit The Tonga Room for what is regarded as the city's best happy hour (5 to 7 p.m. weekdays with an all-you-can-eat Pacific Rim spread). At least San Francisco still has happy hours.

Don't rush through The Tonga Room experience.

Before you enter the tropical paradise, the hotel's basement walls are filled with historic photos and memorabilia from the Fairmont. A late 1940s menu promises "*In any language, Tonga snacks are wonderful: Hamburger steak-Tahitian style, fresh ground beef served with pineapple-mango chutney, side rice, vegetables and crisp noodles \$1.50.*"

Over the years, I've had the opportunity to interview great bands such as Merle Haggard's Strangers, NRBQ and Jimmy Buffett's Coral Reefers.

During a recent visit to The Tonga Room I was fortunate to sit down with Mirage before their Friday night show.

Mirage consists of lead vocalist Marivic Estrella, her husband, Henry Concepcion, on keyboards and drummer-vocalist Tony Eshabarr, a San Francisco native.

Estrella, 37 and Concepcion, 51, are from the Philippines. Concepcion's late father, Manny, was a trumpet player and symphony conductor. By the time Henry was 13 he was performing in symphony orchestras throughout the Philippines.

Concepcion's arranging credits include work with Verdine White of Earth, Wind & Fire (1986) and The Whispers (1987).

On weekends Mirage beefs up its sound with an extra guitarist. Mirage has been performing in The Tonga Room since 1992. A former Tonga Room manager heard them play at the Holiday Inn lounge in the San Francisco financial district.

When Estrella and Concepcion first showed up in The Tonga Room, they learned the ambient thunder and rainstorms were no mirage. "When we're playing the storm comes every hour," Estrella said. "That's our cue to go on (at the hour) and to take a break."

Mirage does not perform "Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head."

"Oh no," Estrella said, quite seriously. "We'll do an instrumental (as the 11-foot-by-8-foot barge heads across the pool toward the "dock"). We know this is a San Francisco landmark. People come to see the place first. Then they come to see you. What's nice about this place is that you can bring your kids. It's nice that growing up, you're able to dance or party with your folks. No other places have that at night."

Mirage does not perform the theme from "The Love Boat."

"Oh yes!" Estrella said. "That's a good idea. But we never did it. But that's nothing we can't do. We try to do current stuff and songs that are memorable. (Abba's) "Dancing Queen" is still popular." And Estrella puts a cool, sultry-toned June Christy twist on "Let's Fall In Love."

All kinds of folks have taken a look-see at the tiki, including the queen of Tonga. Estrella recalls the night Bill Cosby walked into The Tonga Room by himself. He was not downing Jell-O shots.

"He was sitting quietly in the middle of the room," Estrella recalled. "Kids were getting his autograph. Between the songs it was quiet. He shouted, 'When is the band going to jump in the pool?' So I shouted back, 'After you, sir.' It was nice."

But Cosby declined the offer.

I also learned that Concepcion and I were two ships passing in the night. During the late 1970s he played trumpet, guitar and keyboards with the wonderfully named Moses & the High Brows show band at the now-defunct Navarone supper club in Elk Grove Village. During the early 1980s, I was toiling behind the Navarone at the now-defunct Suburban Sun-Times newspaper. It was about the same time the Sun-Times had an editor named Earl Moses.

Concepcion relocated to San Francisco in 1979 when he formed his first edition of Mirage, a seven-piece group.

Mirage does not perform "Tiny Bubbles" or any other Don Ho material.

"The only Hawaiian song we do is 'Hawaiian Wedding Song,'" Estrella said. "We get a lot of requests for that, especially from the lovers. And of course, 'I Left My Heart in San Francisco'." Be careful. It's also easy to leave your heart in the Tonga Room, where the vibe is always smooth sailing.