# MONDO EXOTICA

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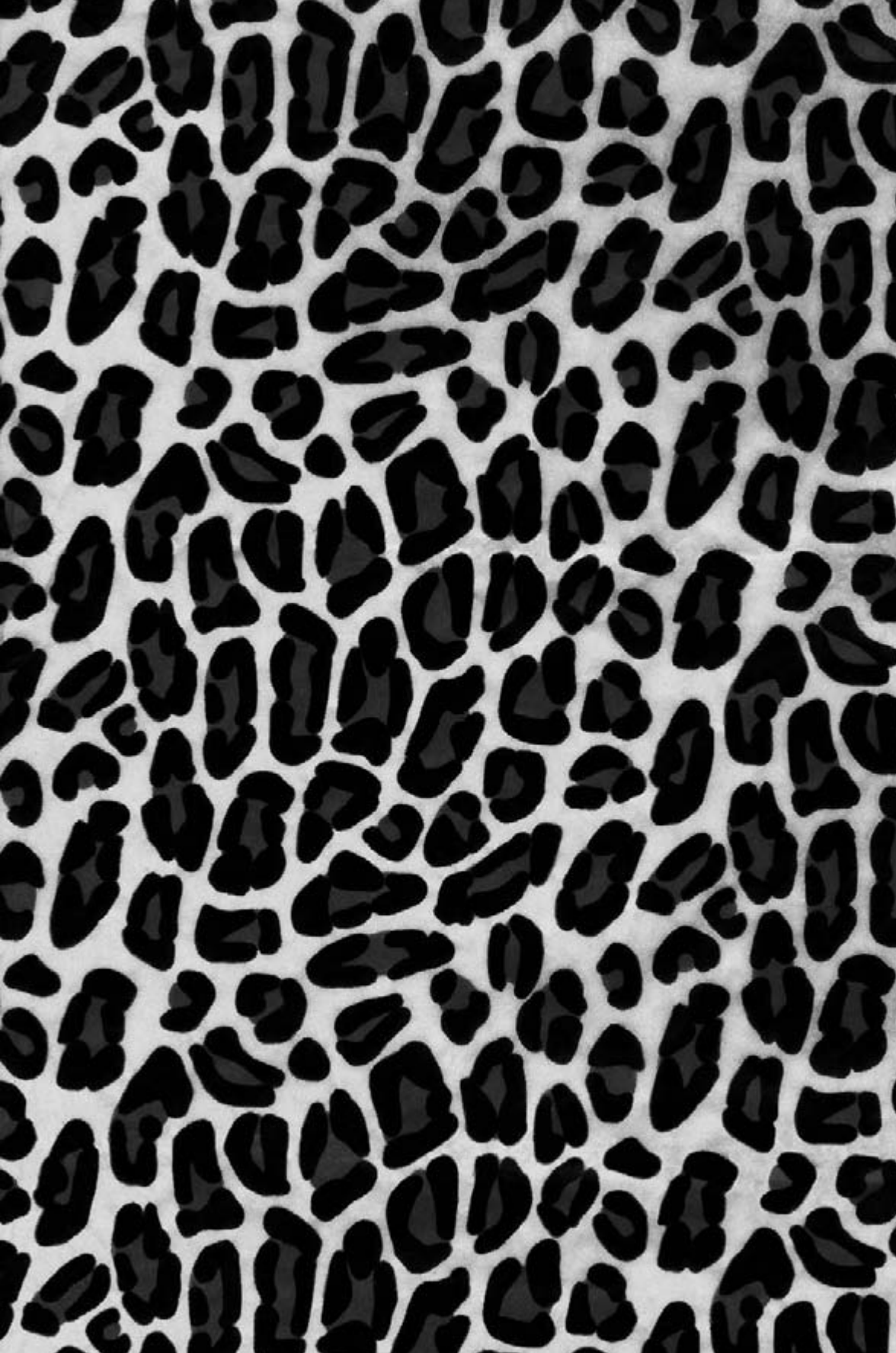
FRANCESCO ADINOLFI

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY KAREN PINKUS WITH JASON VIVRETTE



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# Contents

# *Karen Pinkus* **Preface**

. . . .

Vittorio Gassman (Bruno) and Jean-Louis Trintignant (Roberto) are driving along the Via Aurelia outside of Rome in Dino Risi's 1962 brilliant comedic film *Il sorpasso*.[1] Bruno slips a 45 RPM into his dashboard record player. It's a melancholic song by Domenico Modugno, "Vecchio Frack" ("Old Tux").

> *It's midnight.*
> *Everything is quiet.*
> *The last café turns off its lights.*
> *The streets are deserted and silent.*

It's a pop song from 1954—not exactly part of the canon of exotica—but what Bruno says is emblematic: "Listen, it seems like nothing. But it's got everything."

*Mondo Exotica* is a narrative kaleidoscope of music and popular culture that begins with the generation that grew into adulthood after World War II

and extends to youth culture of the 1990s and the present. It's a book that may seem like nothing—like so much pop ephemera—but it has everything (or better, it tries to be inclusive in the way that record nerds will try to outdo each other with their knowledge of obscure releases).

*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* defines *exotic* as something "introduced from another country; not native to the place where found." The plural *exotica* is used to indicate that which is "excitingly different or unusual." If we focus on the prefix *exo*, external, it becomes clear that exoticism should imply "everything that is other, [or rather] to open oneself up to the strangeness of the other and to feel, among others, clothed in a disquieting strangeness."[2] But wait—it's not as simple as it seems. Such assumptions presuppose a laborious extrication (*exo*) from one's own conditioning and an opening to the diversity of the world, stripped of every colonialist/imperialist and geographical fantasy. However, this is *not* the path taken by exotica, the musical mode that took the United States by storm in the 1950s, or by what was generically (and erroneously) codified as "lounge/cocktail music" in the 1990s. This is not to condemn outright a genre that produced excellent musicians, singers, and arrangers, but rather to place this musical fad within a zeitgeist that boasted assimilation and cultural annihilation of the other as one of its distinctive traits. Today it has become almost second nature to hear music from the postwar period with "politically correct" ears, or to vehemently criticize unmerited and misrepresentative appropriations of other cultures and their sounds.

We can't excuse exotica, but we should study its contexts and its modes of functioning. For instance, the father of exotica cuisine, Vic Bergeron of the mythical Trader Vic's chain, once said: "In 1994 I went to Tahiti for the first time and I hated the goddamn place! Here all these years I've been promoting South Seas cuisine and products, and I go there and see it for myself, and it rains all the time and the girls have bad teeth and the food is crummy and I can't wait to leave. It's the pits. It's a boil on the ass of creation, that place. I'll tell ya!"[3] Bergeron's reaction is hardly a surprise: Any sudden passage from a purely imagined exotic to a direct confrontation with an authentic object can have a dramatic effect on even the most open-minded person. An emblematic case study on exotic perceptions is offered by the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle. For composers like Camille Saint-Saëns, Chinese music was beautiful on the page. But when he actually listened to the "real" music played by "authentic Oriental" artists in flesh and blood, he found it "atrocious to our ears." But, he conceded, "if one took the time to study it, it offered something of potentially great interest."[4]

For most Americans who have studied the ideology of exotica in an academic context, the foundational text is, of course, Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said distinguishes a European current of orientalism from an American one: For Americans, the Orient is typically the Far East; for the French and British, as well as other European nations, "the Orient [the Middle East, essentially] is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilization and languages, its cultural contestant, and of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other."[5] Said teaches us that the Orient (like the Occident) is an idea, but not just an idea. The same can be said of exotica, and it is a primary contradiction that resurfaces over and over in the pages that follow. Throughout this book, then, we have omitted the quasi-obligatory scare quotes that should, could, and would normally accompany an academic work published in the new millennium on subjects such as "exotica," "the exotic," "the other," and "the Orient." Exotica without scare quotes expresses a relation between two cultures, even if such a relation is not always explicitly stated as such. "Because," as the music critic R. J. Smith wrote, "if exotica was a sound, it was also a *place*."[6]

In its obsessive search for exotica culture, this book moves all over the world (and even into outer space), but two of its primary geographical poles are the United States and Italy. The title itself exemplifies geographical movement: *exotica* is a word that exists in English and expresses the idea of a multiplicity of different cultures. *Mondo*, as most readers know, means simply "world" in Italian. It also has a more precise genealogy in relation to a series of exploitation and B-movies from the 1950s and 1960s in Italy, as developed especially in chapter 14. *Mondo cane* (1962), featuring music by Riz Ortolani (who also composed for the astounding soundtrack of *Il sorpasso*) was a documentary directed by Gualtiero Jacopetti. Originally defined as a "shockumentary," Jacopetti's film (featuring "exotic" American senior citizens learning to hula dance in Hawaii or doing bizarre calisthenics in a gym to rid themselves of all manner of bulges) inspired many imitators and virtually launched the phenomenon of using *mondo* to refer to the portrayal of a violent, absurd, and unpitying world. Later *mondo* will be widely used to refer to any world that seems extreme, excessive, or sexually deviant. Obviously, the title of this book follows on this tradition. *Mondo* was far from the only term used in Italian genre cinema. Alessandro Blasetti's *Europa di notte* (*Europe by Night*, 1958) generated a whole series of "by night" genre films like *America di Notte* (*America by Night*, 1961), *Mondo di Notte 1*, *2*, and *3* (1959, 1961, 1963), *Universo di Notte*

(*Universe by Night*, 1962), *Novanta notti in giro per il mondo* (*Around the World in Ninety Nights*, 1963), and . . . you get the picture. Night films gave rise, in turn, to "sexy" films: *Sexy al neon* (*Sexy by Neon*, 1962), *Sexy al neon che scotta* (*Sexy by Burning Neon*, 1963), *Supersexy 1964*, *Africa Sexy* (1963), and so on; to say nothing of "prohibited" films: *Notti e donne proibite* (*Prohibited Nights and Women*, 1963), and on and on. For the most part, these films were characterized by sensual, teasing soundtracks, an Italian version of Strip Sound, as we will learn throughout the course of this book.[7]

In the geographical movement between Italy and the United States, the Festival di Sanremo deserves special mention. This song spectacle/contest began in the Italian coastal town of San Remo in 1951. It developed alongside of, and thoroughly intertwined with, the developments of both radio and television in Italy. At its origins, as we will see later in this book, Sanremo was a characteristically regional cultural phenomenon, sponsored by the Italian state television and radio entity to promote Italian singer-songwriters and Italian values. But by the late 1950s, the competition was privatized and assumed a more international character, finally serving as the inspiration for the European (or Eurovision) song contest.

Domenico Modugno's "Nel blu dipinto di blu" (known to the world as "Volare") revolutionized Italian pop music after winning the 1958 edition of Sanremo. By 1964, audiences could watch foreign artists like Paul Anka, Frankie Avalon, Eartha Kitt, Shirley Bassey, and Sonny and Cher. At the 1968 festival, Louis Armstrong sang "Mi va di cantare" ("I Feel Like Singing") with Lara Saint Paul. Unaware that the rules strictly limited performers to one number, Armstrong indulged in an improvised jam session and was dragged offstage by the festival organizers. The history of this festival—today featuring international pop stars and its share of rumors of corrupt judges, and critiques of favoritism; to say nothing of the innovation of phone-in votes (as with *American Idol*, Sanremo tends to evoke a great deal of discussion around the water cooler)—is significant for the intersections of Italian and American pop music.

Of course, the transcontinental nature of exotica is completely tied up with the jet age, the jet set, and consequently, the subgenre of jet-set pop, including various international artists: the Brazilian Walter Wanderley, the Italians Domenico Modugno and Riz Ortolani, the German Horst Jankowski; or the 1960s French pop icons Brigitte Bardot, France Gall, Serge Gainsbourg, and Jacques Dutronc. According to Brad Bigelow (of the Web site spaceagepop.com) the influence of European songwriters on the American scene was due in large part to the introduction of jet engine planes and the consequent tourist boom.[8] The term *jet set* appeared for the first

time in 1960, a year after the first flight—American fl. 2—of the Boeing 707 from Los Angeles to New York, four hours and three minutes immortalized by the journalist Igor Cassini (Cholly Knickerbocker) in his newspaper column.[9] From the playboy Porfirio Rubirosa to the top model Verushka; from Valentino (the premier designer of the jet set) to Virna Lisi and Sophia Loren; from millionaires like Paul and Tahlita Getty to Princess Luciana ("you're only as good as your last facelift") Pignatelli, the adventures, loves, and disappointments of high society filled the gossip pages.

Jet-setters abounded in the James Bond books, although Bond himself was too obsessed with his work to indulge in unbridled joie de vivre. The jet set favored bossa nova music in particular. Astrud Gilberto, accompanied by the group of Stan Getz, had brought "The Girl from Ipanema" to success in 1964. In her autobiography, Brigitte Bardot recalls that the bossa nova guitar of Jorge Ben took over from the violins of Vivaldi in 1963. Great acclaim was also accorded to Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass and to Burt Bacharach, to this day a key name in pop music.[10]

Given the special relation of Italy and the United States in the formation of *Mondo exotica*, Fellini's *La dolce vita*, shot throughout 1959, plays a key role. Although highly specific in its evocation of a local ethos—Rome of the economic boom—it was a huge hit in America and helped internationalize "Italian style" (including a series of musical exoticisms). Marcello is overwhelmed by the exotic and enormous doll, Sylvia. Is she Swedish? American? In a sense she's both, and that's precisely the point: because she isn't Italian, such geographical precision is irrelevant. Sometimes, what might evoke dreams of tropical paradises in the United States are signs of "exotic" Americana in Europe. *Mondo Exotica* is ever attentive to shifts of this kind. The book recounts a complex set of interrelations between daily life, popular music, culture, politics, race relations, and much more. At times, the book serves as a catalog of artists, releases, and facts that speak for themselves. This kind of listing is essential to what exotica is all about: the (neurotic?) manias associated with collecting and incessantly putting together different cultures and styles. So it is important to present the protagonists and projects in this form, as if they were so many albums sitting next to each other on a shelf. At other points, the book will offer readers analysis to help place different phenomena in context. Most importantly, *Mondo Exotica* isn't "Orientalism lite," because it isn't about learned culture, policies, or actions. As much as exotica is about remembering or reviving, it is also a way of forgetting real problems in the world, whether those of the Cold War, the culture wars, or the war on terror.

I first picked up the original Italian of *Mondo Exotica* in the wealthy

Northern Italian city of Verona. It was part of a hip series of books called Stile Libero (Free Style), something akin to an indie sublabel of Italy's major publisher, Einaudi. Of course, I recognized the image on the cover of the book from the cover (actually one of several covers) for Martin Denny's 1958 classic *Exotica*. I knew immediately that it was a unique kind of book, since unlike many works about the 1950s, published, for example, by presses like Chronicle in the United States, this one was wholly without illustrations. At 550 pages, it was unlike anything I'd seen, and I decided to contact the author. Since that time, we've developed a great friendship. We're the same age, although in Italy Francesco was of a generation that still saw rock (and then punk) as "our music," as music that was different from "our parents' music." In the United States, my parents were playing rock on the "hi-fi" for as far back as I can remember, making it hard, if not impossible, to rebel through music. In any case, this book talks about the revival of a whole style of "adults-only" music by a youth-oriented culture that is primarily post-CD, and more recently, associated with MP3s and iPods. By invoking this shift in audio reproduction, I don't mean to imply some absolute link between the cocktail generation and the record album, since exotica is about much more than obsessively coveting vinyl. Still, there are some fundamental aspects of exotica that are tied to the materiality of recording techniques, developments in stereo technology, and to exotic images as they appear on the 12″ album cover.[11] One aspect of the exotica revival has involved a new generation hunting for "incredibly strange" albums once owned by their parents or grandparents in thrift stores. Such hunts may be more for the thrill of the cheap find, or for the alluring cover, than for the music on the album itself. In fact, listening to CD rereleases like the Ultra Lounge series, the first volume of which is titled precisely, *Mondo Exotica*, or buying tiki mugs and sampling 1950s bossa nova beats, are perhaps just as important to some citizens of the cocktail nation. But it is true that the author of this book, like everyone else in our generation, was raised on vinyl.

The apogee of our friendship came when Francesco and I sipped espresso (with a dollop of canned whipped cream) with Piero Piccioni on his terrace, overlooking the Roman Forum, shortly before his death. In fact, many of the artists featured in this book died in recent years—it's the end of a generation, which makes it all the more important to think about its music and culture in context and in all of their contradictory glory.

I wish to thank the students in my Soundtracks of Our Lives class in Fall 2004 for their enthusiasm and insights; and Bob, for everything.

# *chapter one* The Tiki Hour

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## *Tiki–ology*

For Tei Tetua, the Marquesas Islands native described by Thor Heyerdahl, Tiki is the "God and chief, he who led the ancestors to the islands where we now live."[1] *Reeds' Concise Maori Dictionary* is even more specific: "He is the First man, or the personification of man." Among the Maori of New Zealand, Tiki (literally, "man") was created by Tane, the Polynesian god of light, firstborn son of Papa (Mother Earth) and Rangi (Father Sky). Later, when man carved a human figure for the first time, he called his creation Tiki. In the genesis of the Society Islands (represented by Tahiti), "in the ninth and tenth Eras the scene is mainly dominated by Ki'i' (Tiki in Maori) and La'ila'i (the woman), who increased the world's population and from whom man derives his sacred right of primogeniture."[2]

Tiki plays a fundamental role in the broad and multivalent Polynesian cosmogony. For many Westerners, his name conjures up scenes of mys-

tery and spirituality, evoking unexplored and deeply exotic worlds. In the 1950s and 1960s, wooden or stone symbols of this anthropomorphic being began to spring up in the United States, triggering an unprecedented exotic mania. Most importantly, the tiki immediately became part of that vast family of symbols and rituals debased and then summarily annihilated by Westerners.

As if overnight, a generic and indiscriminate "tiki style" arose to embrace Ku, the warlike Hawaiian god; the Moai; the gigantic monoliths of Easter Island; and many other divinities. The more common these statues became in gardens and living rooms of thousands of American homes, the less anyone stopped to consider their distinctive or contextual meanings. Sven Kirsten, coeditor of the magazine *Tiki News*, notes that "in restaurants, lounges, motels, bowling alleys, mobile home parks, apartment buildings and even liquor stores, the Tiki was worshipped as [the] god of recreation."[3]

Martin Denny, prince of exotica music, a style that swept the United States in the fifties, echoes this sentiment:

> Between 1958 and 1960 many people displayed tiki in their gardens and organized Polynesian parties like luaus. They wanted to recreate a piece of Hawaii in their backyards, evoke the atmosphere of the South Seas. In a certain sense my music helped them do this. Over the years I have been asked what I thought of the tiki figure, but nothing was further from my mind. I don't know who thought up this trend, all I know is that Americans couldn't care less about the religious origins of the tiki. They welcomed it as just another novelty, and I don't believe they wanted to demean the culture that generated it. I myself, while cutting a record, would never have thought that by extracting music from its cultural roots I would be offending someone.[4]

During the Cold War years, the tiki represented, for an army of American bachelors, housewives, and suburban commuters, a dream of escape and sexual liberation, conjuring up scenes of pagan fertility rituals and a world filled with endless sensuality. Unmistakable phallic symbols, they soared almost arrogantly in the air, highlighting an eroticism that contrasted markedly with the sexual repression of the 1950s. In other words, exotica indicated the "right" road to lust.

"To display a Tiki," explains Josh Agle, a painter and illustrator, who under the *nom de surf* Shag Lono, served as guitarist for the Tiki Tones, a surf and exotica group formed in 1995, "was a sign of liberation. In time, this object represented the abandonment of daily rules. People could let themselves

go and enjoy themselves, returning, for one night, to their original savage states."[5]

The physical characteristics of this divinity helped confirm its status as guarantor of sensuality. Among the Maori, in fact, the term *tiki* also indicates the procreative power of Tane and his sexual member. To the south of Tahiti, on the island of Raevavae, *tiki-roa* literally means "penis" while *tiki-poto* refers to the clitoris.

Unaware of the details surrounding Polynesian erotic/spiritual mythology, Americans instinctively perceived that the South Seas represented the most accessible means by which to plunge into a world of pagan madness. Richard von Busack writes: "For the first time, our parents' generation was liberating itself from the Christian inheritance. It was as far as they dared to go. Tiki style represented an alternative way of life, like drugs and free love for the hippies. Our parents dreamed of free love in the South Seas and intoxicated themselves with strong cocktails. Their rebellion consisted in wearing a Hawaiian shirt."[6]

In the 1920s, the ethnographic explorations of Bronislaw Malinowski introduced colleagues and university students to the annual orgiastic feast of Milamala, typical of the Melanesian farmers of the Trobriand Islands. In 1928, anthropologist Margaret Mead published *Coming of Age in Samoa*, a lengthy and impassioned study of the uninhibited relationships between adolescents in a primitive society. The book was reprinted in 1955 and 1961, and it became a classic of the exotica generation. It is no accident that the book is often referenced in the CD booklets of recent exotica rereleases. An irrepressible sensuality seemed to gush forth from the pages that placed sacred Western concepts like celibacy into question:

> The Samoans laugh at stories of romantic love, scoff at fidelity to a long absent wife and mistress, believe explicitly that one love will quickly cure another. . . . Romantic love as it occurs in our civilization, inextricably bound up with ideas of monogamy, exclusiveness, jealousy and undeviating fidelity does not occur in Samoa. Our attitude is a compound, the final result of many converging lines of development in Western civilization, of the institution of monogamy, of the ideas of the age of chivalry, of the ethics of Christianity.[7]

The book had an astounding impact, bringing anthropology into the realm of mass culture. Mead contributed to a general acceptance of the idea that *all* "primitive societies" behaved in a similar manner, and that in contrast with Americans, "savages" did not sublimate their urges. In fact, they acted them out promiscuously under the benevolent aegis of the tiki.

Spurred on by exotic films, a swarm of architects and designers emerged from the grayness of the Depression, specializing in tiki style. In 1934, the first tiki bar, Don the Beachcomber, opened in Los Angeles. It was a favorite haunt of Clark Gable. Fishing nets, life jackets, and pieces of wreckage decorated the walls, evoking the Pacific. Later, Vic Bergeron was inspired to open Trader Vic's, the first in a series of exotic restaurants with the same name, frequented by Richard Nixon, among other illustrious patrons.

But it was only in the 1950s that the tiki restaurant became a genuine fad. According to Otto von Stroheim, coeditor of *Tiki News*, soldiers back from the Pacific brought fond memories of their life overseas, turning into entrepreneurs and opening restaurants that "reproduced" the places they visited during the war.[8] But this isn't really the case. If we consider William Manchester's *Goodbye Darkness* (1979) or similar dramatic stories of war in the South Seas, it becomes very difficult to imagine these "exotic businessmen" were motivated *solely* by nostalgia. Rather, the Pacific represented a vast, unexplored space to be mined. Ex-soldiers dedicated themselves to its commercialization while disavowing their traumatic wartime memories. Who was better equipped to do so? Large amounts of capital were invested in promoting tourism to the Pacific (particularly Hawaii), and this helped stimulate exotic curiosity.

Naturally, travelers and tourists returned from the islands with souvenirs and memories of an uncontaminated paradise, hoping to relive those very experiences in their own cities. Architects needed no convincing, especially Lloyd Lovegren, who designed many restaurants for the Victor Bergeron chain: in Denver (1954), Chicago (1957), and most significantly, inside the Hilton Hotel of Havana (1958).[9]

At the New York branch of Trader Vic's, built in 1965 at the Plaza Hotel, customers were drawn to the enormous canoe taken directly from the set of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, the 1962 film starring Marlon Brando.[10] Against a backdrop of *Polynesiana* and lilting music, customers savored unusual dishes and sipped fiery rum-based or simple fruit-juice cocktails. The most famous drink of the cocktail generation was the mai tai, invented in 1944 by Bergeron at his Oakland restaurant, Hinky Dink's. The recipe called for fresh-squeezed lime juice, barley syrup, orange curaçao, light rum, and Jamaican rum to be shaken and served in a tall glass filled with crushed ice. It was topped with a slice of pineapple, a cherry, and a mint sprig. Bergeron had served the concoction to two friends from Tahiti, and after their first

sip, one of them exclaimed "Mai tai-Roa ae," that is "Out of this world—the best" in Tahitian![11] The barman promptly exported the mai tai to Hawaiian hotels like the Royal Hawaiian, the Surfsider, and the Mauna. The drink appeared on the cocktail menu of the American President Lines, and it crossed the Atlantic, landing in the sophisticated lounges of the Via Veneto in Rome. Mauro Lotti, barman of Rome's Grand Hotel, recalls:

> I was the first person to serve the mai tai in Italy. I wrote to Vic Bergeron in 1966, asking him for the recipe. He sent me the ingredients and some helpful hints. For example, always use fresh lime. He was an incredible character. I also asked him for the recipe for the Scorpion, another cocktail that was a big success in his bars, and here he outdid himself. He said that I should use Puerto Rican rum, but if I couldn't find any, I should substitute African rum! Imagine finding African rum in Italy![12]

Back in the United States, the more prestigious hotels were competing for exotic ideas and architects. Particularly sought after was Florian Gabriel, known for his exuberant tiki style. Gabriel decorated the Luau of Beverly Hills and other splendid Polynesian temples managed by Steven Crane, the owner of Kon Tiki, an exotic chain of Sheratons. "It was an escape. People wanted to get away from whatever was humdrum," says Gabriel. "It was all-encompassing, drinks and flowers and music, it was the sum total of wonderful, and it was available to anybody if they had the money. It was a great package, a pre-Disney world for the price of a drink."[13]

It is not by chance that on June 23, 1963, Disneyland inaugurated the Enchanted Tiki Room, the first Disney attraction to feature sophisticated audio-animatronic figures. Greeting the spectators were Fritz, Michael, Pierre, and José, four parrot emcees presiding over a seventeen-minute musical extravaganza of flora, fauna, and tiki. At the end, the public was asked to join singing flowers in a round of "Let's All Sing Like the Birdies Sing." The original plans also called for a tiki restaurant, which was never built due to lack of space. The fact that this tropical paradise was sponsored by United Airlines from 1964 to 1973 is evidence of the great rise in tourism to the South Seas. But those who could not afford to travel might choose to visit any number of "theme" chain restaurants—Kon Tiki, Kona Kei, Don the Beachcomber, or Trader Vic's. "Because," as we have seen, "if exotica was a sound, it was also a *place*."[14]

## Oceanic Feelings

Most of the tikis were carved at Oceanic Arts, a firm specializing in Polynesian and tropical furnishings. The company still operates and continues to be an important source for Hollywood studios, theater companies, set designers, and surf businesses. The interior of the Aku Aku, the club seen in Martin Scorsese's *Casino* (1995), was, for example, entirely created by the designers of Oceanic, as were sets for various music videos produced by neo-exotica and surf groups. Oceanic is so famous that works by the Californian firm are on permanent exhibit at the Temple of Luxor in Las Vegas. Their premises in the L.A. suburb of Whittier occupy 4,000 square feet. Oceanic is brimming with tikis, masks made from palm trees, surfboards, carved tropical birds, and above all torches, the same ones that in the 1950s burned away in the American nights, marking off an area for a Polynesian party or the entrance to a tiki restaurant.

Leroy Schmaltz (his real name!), the company's president, has been carving tikis and wooden masks since 1956. In college he met Bob Van Oosting, his future partner with whom he would embark in the building of modern furniture. Later, he had a formative encounter with a tiki importer who lived in Samoa and who proposed that Schmaltz touch up steamer trunks to make them look "more authentic."

In the 1950s and 1960s, Oceanic Arts served as the "official exotic supplier" of American suburbia, especially in California, where there are still condominiums with such emblematic names as the Palms or Moana Lei. At the height of their popularity, these complexes contained rows of palm trees and swimming pools shaped like tropical lagoons. Tiki statues were illuminated by multicolored lights; arrays of anthropomorphic divinities presided over wild cocktail parties.

But once again, the authenticity of the tikis was the least of the developers' concerns. After all, musicals like *South Pacific* had paved the way for Polynesian fiction. It was as if the gods of the Pacific accepted, for a night or so, being part of the great American exotic dream. Schmaltz recalls: "We were kind of in between real Polynesian art and what Hollywood dreamt up. But ideas come from anywhere. And there were lots of carvers who showed up on the scene, a lot of them with real bizarre ideas."[15]

In the tiki restaurants, the lights were low and the atmosphere deeply sensual (and kitschy). Decor included palm trees, bamboo, rattan, miniature volcanoes, artificial waterfalls, wooden masks, and of course enormous tikis. Patrons of Trader Vic's in San Francisco sat around a barbecue in a straw hut. A glass showcase displayed reproductions of Jivaro shrunken heads. Visitors to Waikiki's Don the Beachcomber crossed a wooden bridge over a "tropical" stream. Inside, some of the most famous exotica musicians entertained. One of them was Arthur Lyman, also a guest musician at such Southern California landmarks as the Bali Hai of San Diego, Latitude 20 of Torrance, and Don the Beachcomber of Marina del Rey.[16]

Martin Denny also played in an apparently infinite number of Polynesian-themed lounges. His shows were so exotic and "wild" that the owners often had to ask the musicians to restrain themselves. At the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas, the lounge personnel even begged Denny to limit his trademark birdcall imitations, convinced that he would distract gamblers in the nearby casino. Denny was a frequent guest of the Trader Vic's chain, and he appears in a number of scenes from *The Forbidden Island* (dir. Charles B. Griffith, 1959) shot inside the Hawaiian branch.

On the heels of the exotica revival, tiki style is once again popular.[17] In some cases, tiki has been marketed along with mid-century-modern style. A search on eBay using keywords like *tiki* and *Eames* will yield hundreds of results on a given day for bamboo bars, lamps decorated with palm fronds, boomerang coffee tables, and molded plastic chairs. The modernist designers Charles and Ray Eames may have had little direct interest in Polynesiana, but it hardly matters, since all kinds of different styles get lumped together into a wholesale stylistic grab bag. Exotic-themed restaurants and bars—which had all but disappeared by the early 1970s—returned to prominence at the end of the 1990s, attracting a young clientele. The Polynesian-styled Tonga Room of San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel is the ultimate exotic locale. At regular intervals, simulated tropical storms erupt, complete with thunder and lightning. The public sips exotic cocktails while listening to the orchestra playing on a floating platform inside a pool resembling a tropical lagoon. The food is primarily Chinese; Polynesian dishes are rarely served. Evidently, the idea of a stereotyped and indefinite "Orient" is hard to dispel. Los Angeles still boasts a few cocktail lounges like the Tonga Hut, Tiki Ti's, or Damon's Steakhouse in Glendale. The Tropicana Bar in the Roosevelt Hotel in Los Angeles is now a popular hipster hangout. These urban atolls

recall the exotic splendors of another era, a time when the patrons of tiki restaurants were treated to a subtle background of percussion and offered splendid Hawaiian leis. Dishes served flambé or granted kitschy names like "pu pu platter," tend to evoke, rather than reproduce, actual dishes from the South Seas.

At midcentury, theme restaurants counted bachelors among their most loyal patrons. With their courting rituals, their pads, and their career mobility, bachelors became the kings of exotica. California suburbs in particular witnessed the wildest exotic craze in the history of the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Polynesian decor was ubiquitous, and the new mania contributed to making daily life more comfortable for office workers and secretaries attracted by high salaries in the aeronautical industries. According to Mike Davis, many such workers were hired by Cal Tech in Pasadena, a crucial force in the geography of postwar suburbia, the "dynamic nucleus of an emergent technostructure that held one of the keys to Southern California's future. While its aeronautics engineers tested airframe designs for Donald Douglas's DC-3 in their wind tunnel and its geologists solved technical problems for the California oil industry, other Cal Tech scientists were in Pasadena's Arroyo Seco, above Devil's Gate Dam (where NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory stands today), helping launch the space age with their path-breaking rocket experiments. Cal Tech, together with the Department of Defense, substantially invented Southern California's postwar, science-based economy."[18]

In 1957, *Life* first mentioned "swinging bachelors," identifying the areas in which they were mainly concentrated and their favorite pastimes. The bachelor liked to take part in luaus and hula dancing contests while sipping mai tais. He read *Playboy*, *Down Beat*, *Esquire*, and other magazines that served to keep him abreast of the latest records, stereo equipment, fashionable clothes, and travel destinations. The phenomenon of the swinging bachelor was determined by a particular series of socioeconomic events. For the first time, a vast social group that formed in college pursued careers while delaying marriage. The bachelor had plenty of disposable income, and plenty of free time to spend it.

The "subculture of the bachelor" developed alongside mass mobility and the expansion of the American middle classes. Not only did the nation manage to transform its war machine into a surprising consumer economy, it also witnessed an upheaval of traditional social mores. Americans born during the Depression arrived at adulthood at a moment when a felicitous coincidence of factors simultaneously led to the birth of the teenager and

rock and roll. These two phenomena were invented and made possible "by post–World War II America, a society affluent enough to postpone adulthood for many of its children."[19] So Elvis Presley's contemporaries enjoyed a lifestyle that in 1954, magazines like *Life* defined as "so much for so few." This was not meant to suggest that only an elite segment of the population enjoyed well-being. Rather, Thomas Hine explains, *Life* was "pinpointing a striking demographic phenomenon. The decade of the Depression had produced the lowest American birthrate in the country's history and the smallest increase in absolute population since the decade of the Civil War. The first half of the 1940s, when so many men were at war, continued the slow population growth. The combination of an expanding economy and a declining employment pool made the transformation to an automated economy almost painless."[20] So much, then, for so few: the American dream of college and a good job was a reality for many young adults. (Later, yes, a house in the 'burbs, with a lawn, a patio barbecue, and a family—but not yet!)

Hollywood soon turned an eye to the world of the *swinging bachelor*. The emblematic *Bachelor Party*, a 1957 film starring Don Murray, centers on five office workers at a stag party. In *Bachelor in Paradise* (dir. Jack Arnold, 1961), Bob Hope plays a writer who decides to research the habits and customs of Americans. He ends up at Paradise Village (in the San Fernando Valley), a typical suburban community populated by frustrated wives and dull husbands. Women find Hope's character irresistible, but in the end he gives in to staunch family values and marries Lana Turner. The film penetrates deep into the heart of bachelor culture. The suggestive music of Henry Mancini conjures up a world of silken gloves and scintillating soirees. In the theme song, an MGM chorus sings: "Lights down low. Frankie's [Sinatra's] records and cocktails on the floor." Mack David's lyrics accompany the love story between Hope and Turner, who find themselves in a Tahitian restaurant where "the food's fit for the angels and the drinks are fit for the gods."[21] The rituals and habits of the bachelor soon became an essential feature of Hollywood, and actors-singers like Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and Sammy Davis Jr. exemplified the ideal swingers. In particular, MGM specialized in "bachelor and cocktail" films.

But the bachelor flick is actually rooted in cinematic history. As early as 1930, the first words spoken by Greta Garbo in *Anna Christie* were emblematic: "Gimme a whiskey, ginger ale on the side. And don't be stingy, baby." In *Grand Hotel* (1932), John Barrymore turns into a barfly who favors a drink called a Louisiana Flip. In 1934, William Powell, as detective Nick

Carter in *The Thin Man*, captivated moviegoers by dancing to the rhythm of a cocktail shaker. Then he demonstrated how to shake a Manhattan to the rhythm of the fox trot, a Bronx to the rhythm of the two-step, and a dry Martini to the gentle sway of a waltz. One lounge scene in a film could suffice to transport viewers through time and space. The hand of fate was dealt in bars—in Hitchcock's 1959 release *North by Northwest*, Cary Grant "prepares" himself to be kidnapped by sipping a martini at the Oak Bar of the Plaza Hotel in New York. In *The Mating Game*, also released in 1959, Tony Randall alleviated tension by sipping a hyena, an explosive cocktail made of one part vermouth, two parts gin, three parts whiskey, and apple juice. Saddled with an investigation into a case of tax evasion, he ends up dancing to "I've Got You under My Skin" (Cole Porter, 1936) with Debbie Reynolds, the daughter of the suspect.

Of course, the bachelor admired Sinatra and Dean Martin but was at the same time fascinated by the rebelliousness of the beatniks. He identified with an elite that included James Bond and hundreds of other secret agents. He was not exactly an exotic subject himself, but Pacific style and fashion contributed to making him feel sufficiently different from other adults. Even though he needed to work for a living, the bachelor made courageous attempts to distance himself from the "organization and its men in gray flannel suits," the hoards of office drones who went to work every morning wearing white shirts, silk ties, and dark shoes, all the while clutching their briefcases. This was the world he inhabited by day. One of the books he was "forced" to contemplate was *The Organization Man*, a 1956 study by William H. Whyte outlining the possible scenarios open to America's white collar workers and new managers at the end of the Second World War. Soldiers who returned home found themselves facing a world in continuous evolution, and a mass media intent on redefining personalities and habits. The welcoming embrace of family and friends clashed with an icy and ruthless workplace setting, which demanded time and dedication. The cocktail bar, either inside the company's headquarters or just around the corner, seemed like the only possible escape, a time outside of time during which to meet and socialize. As he was unmarried, the bachelor could extend the cocktail "hour," but more important, he could choose *not* to transform the drink into a social obligation or a means to overcome tension and neurosis; he could swim against the tide, defying the usual depiction of the social drinker in books, plays, radio, and television sketches.

The real swinging bachelor liked a woman who could hold her liquor. He would never have tolerated a female character like Holly Golightly's

guest in 1961's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* who stands before the mirror with drink in hand. She cackles hysterically and then breaks into tears, her mascara streaming down her face. Nor could he tolerate Percy Dovetonsils, the character played by the great American comedian Ernie Kovacs who sipped martinis while reciting hysterical poetry.[22] The bachelor loved his drink; he worshipped it and savored it with devotion. For him it was not a means but an end. Above all, he would let himself be overcome by the flavor and enchanted atmosphere of his favorite lounges.

He would never have accepted the behavior of workaholic Ralph Hopkins from Sloan Wilson's influential *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955; the film version was released in 1956). In the story, Hopkins heads the United Broadcasting Corporation. His marriage is falling apart, and he has no control over his eighteen-year-old daughter, who is determined to have fun. Better to be like the novel's protagonist, Tom Rath. This former parachutist enters the UBC with the hope of buying a larger home and being able to afford better quality gin. In the end, Rath resists the lure of a neurotic career in favor of a nine-to-five job that will allow him to spend time with his wife and children in Connecticut.

## A Couple of Scotch and Sodas

Cocktail culture characterized the postwar years in a unique and comprehensive way. The United States became the top alcohol-consuming country in the world, and Americans engaged in neurotic or antisocial rituals surrounding drink. *The Cocktail Party*, the 1950 comedy by T. S. Eliot, introduced the figure of the mysterious "soul" doctor, a psychiatrist who manages to save a marriage. Mr. Riley has "certain methods," and by adding a drop of water to Edward Chamberlayne's gin, he manages to restore this very disturbed man's true perception of himself.[23] Obviously, this is not the place to elaborate on the fascinating rituality of Eliot's cocktail, or on the biblical references to baptismal water, capable of creating new men, as in the case of Edward. In fact, the Catholic Eliot, an American who resided in Great Britain, "wanted to present the spiritual options left to London's fashionable crowd, which was undergoing its own postwar cocktail renaissance."[24]

But the cocktail hour also served as an important rite of the passage from adolescence to adulthood, as in J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Holden Caulfield, a minor, often manages to slip into cocktail lounges where

he discusses "mature" topics like lesbians and fetishists. Since Holden is tall and his hair is almost gray, no one pays any attention to him. Not even when, at the Wicker Bar of the Seton Hotel in New York, he gulps down "a couple of Scotch and sodas."[25]

In his apartment/den—his pad—the bachelor oversaw a fully outfitted "operational center." In the sixties, for instance, Martini and Rossi focused on the bachelor's domestic space by advertising their vermouth with the characteristic slogan: "For cocktails that purr, sweet for captivating Manhattans, extra dry for martinis. Try it in your cage."[26]

## *In the Cage*

The bachelor's masculinity was expressed in a similar manner in many parts of the world. If the bachelor of the San Fernando Valley dreamed of Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita*, the Roman loafer dreamed of a Cadillac or ultramodern stereo equipment he had seen in magazines.

The media contributed to conjuring dreams of comfort and well-being, stimulating the bachelor to purchase tables, chairs, record racks, and bar furniture. A bachelor's apartment had to be entirely different from the house where he grew up and, as usual, the generation gap revealed itself in the details. The family grand piano was replaced by a set of bongo drums, a key instrument for the beat generation. The feminine armchair gave way to dizzying spirals of chrome and leather, and strategically placed trays bore humorous and sexually allusive inscriptions. The bachelor collected souvenirs from all over the world, demonstrating his propensity for travel and serving to put even the most roving visitors at ease. The kitchen was tiny but was always equipped with two essential elements: a refrigerator and a blender, of fundamental importance for mixing drinks.[27] Steven Guarnaccia and Bob Sloan have written extensively on the culture of the bachelor:

> Most of the pad was devoted to living room and bedroom, the two poles of a bachelor's universe. Like a river coursing to the sea, a well-designed pad had a natural flow from the couch to the bed; the licentious mood in a bachelor apartment was fecund to none. The altarpiece in this cathedral of leisure was the hi-fi. From it issued forth musical sermons testifying to the supremacy of bachelorhood and the greater glories of the swingin' life. The wire record stand stood loyally beside it like a beadle, ready to supply the required platter. The pad was where a bachelor entertained, where he invited a girl to see his etchings, where he hung out with his fellow wolves and hipsters. In the safe confines of

their hedonistic clubhouse, they made dates, sipped cocktails, smoked cigars, and patted themselves on the back for being the salacious yet charming reprobates they were.[28]

Their female counterparts or bachelorettes were exceptionally rare and therefore all the more ostracized in the great sexual repression of the Eisenhower years. Much of the fascination of the exotica revival consists in identifying moments in which women and men refused this sexual repression—for example, rituals and manuals like *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), a famous book by Helen Gurley Brown that, several years later, inspired the film version with Tony Curtis and Natalie Wood.[29] Brown advised women: "Look beautiful. Smell fragrant. Wear something feminine and offbeat. This is no time for capri pants and a shirt. Often you can pick up pretty hostessy things at a sale. . . . Give the party in a small space and pack the people in. Never be afraid you've asked too many. Play Rumanian gypsy music (interspersed with a little Perez Prado) to heighten the intimacy and drama."[30]

Exoticism animated the domestic rituals of the bachelor, and he would never be caught dead without his notorious tiki mug, now a sought-after collector's item. This ceramic cup in the shape of a tiki represented one of the most recognizable symbols of the exotic fifties and sixties. Long straws seemed to perforate the head of threatening divinities before drowning in colorful cocktails like the zombie.[31] Restaurants in the Los Angeles area, like Kebo, displayed entire collections of tiki mugs, capturing the imagination of the exotica population.

## Exotic Obsessions

Clothes also made the bachelor; the choice of proper wear became one of his most important rituals. In fact, bachelors not only refused the "gray flannel look"—typical work attire—but also rejected any clothing that brought to mind their parents' world. If their fathers' jackets were large and comfortable, designed to facilitate long hours in the office, the clothes of the bachelor were fashionably angular and geometrical, almost made-to-measure, with just a slight cuff on the trousers. They weren't designed "for someone planning to sit behind a desk his whole life growing corpulent. Bachelors were on the move."[32] Streamlined like cars, the swinger's clothes conjured up speed and reduced working hours. Even the ties were thinner, and the excessive colors of the 1940s made way for the subtlest geometric patterns. The trousers had to be peg-legged to reveal shiny shoes,

preferably two-toned black and white or brown and white. Anyone driving a convertible wouldn't dare be caught without a tweed hat, a jacket with suede elbow patches, and an ascot scarf. The richer and more cosmopolitan swinger was also aware of the latest trends in European fashions; he was fascinated by the aesthetics of the Roman dolce vita (also the name for a style of turtleneck sweater) and he rode a Vespa or Lambretta. His well-off female counterpart followed the latest collections from Palazzo Pitti in Florence. But only the wealthiest bachelors actually traveled overseas to encounter new trends and fashions. Most just worried about cultivating a certain exoticism in their own attire, especially with the Hawaiian shirt, the only piece of clothing truly capable of staving off the threatening wave of gray flannel.[33]

## Hula and Rattan

Exotic fads spread from the South Seas throughout the United States, and then to the rest of the world. Magazines often targeted the bachelorette by advertising an infinite variety of plastic leis and skirts for hula dancing:

> Imitate the rhythm of the natives of Hawaii! On the beach, at masquerades, at parties or even hanging on the wall in your bedroom or den, you will find that this Hula skirt provides a lot of amusement. A souvenir "from the South Seas," made of paper streamers in variegated colors. As soon as you receive your Hula skirt, go up to your room, put it on, and then stand before the mirror and try to imitate the rhythmic movements of the native Hawaiians. With fascinating grace you can soon learn the wiggles of the Hawaiian "shimmy" etc. Turns any gathering into a riot of fun. Hula Skirt adult size. Price: 35¢; Children's size: 15¢.[34]

Exotic offerings included everything from skirts made of cellophane strips to manuals for learning to dance the hula, Hawaiian bobblehead dolls for the dashboard, and, of course, the ubiquitous tiki mugs.

Bachelors also went for the "fearsome shrunken heads" of the Amazonian Jivaro, perfect for hanging in the car, den, or bar. The heads were advertised in magazines and newspapers in the most adventurous ways: "A strong stomach helps too, because these 4″ heads defy detection from just a few feet away, with remarkably true skin and hair. Cost: $1.50."

The bachelor fancied bamboo and rattan furniture. Rattan in particular, evoked a feeling of great exoticism, and between the 1930s and 1950s, it was one of the most popular materials used in hot climates like Hawaii,

Florida, and California.[35] Rattan, a clinging palm with long branches, grows in India, Southeast Asia, China, and Indonesia. It looks similar to bamboo but is much more resistant, so it is frequently used for umbrella handles or walking sticks. When heated, rattan can be molded into a variety of shapes. The American modernist Paul Frankl was so fascinated by rattan that he built a large number of armchairs and sofas out of the material.[36]

Before the 1930s, rattan was essentially employed outdoors; later it became common for dining and living room furniture. Chairs, tables, armchairs, beds, side tables and shelving in rattan abounded in city and suburban homes. If in European countries like Italy the material conjured up scenes of country living, in the United States it was synonymous with exoticism. Furniture was often upholstered in floral and tropical patterned fabrics meant to recall the South Seas. Bachelor homes often boasted bamboo or rattan bar stools, generally placed in an area dedicated to cocktails, together with the so-called jungle bar. With the exotica revival of the 1990s, rattan became popular once more. Films like *The Mask* and *Ed Wood* (both 1994) rediscovered the charm of the material. Celebrities including Bruce Willis and Madonna have decorated their homes with rattan furniture.

## Chihuahuas and Leopards

The exotica musician Xavier Cugat established the Chihuahua as part of the history of exoticism. He held the tiny dog in his arms while he conducted his orchestra. Charo, one of his most famous singers, had one, as did Billie Holiday, and more recently Cher, Britney Spears, and Paris Hilton, whose Chihuahua, Tinkerbell, bit a television producer. But it was Cugat who brought this small animal into exotic living rooms and lounges. Weighing only a few pounds, "manageable," and tremendously intelligent, the Mexican Chihuahua has a long and fascinating history. Engravings of the dog have been found near Mexico City, the heart of the Toltec civilization. The Aztecs considered the Chihuahua a sacred animal, and as such he was fed a special diet and cared for by slaves. It was customary to bury the Chihuahua alive with his owner, for it was said that in this way he would absorb human sins and guide the dead into the kingdom of darkness. The Chihuahua arrived in the United States halfway through the nineteenth century, brought by some Americans who were crossing the Mexican border. It used to be known as the Texas or Arizona dog, and only later on was it called *chihuahueño mexicano*. In 1888, the price of a Chihuahua was three dollars, but it soon increased disproportionately. Owners have always been fascinated

by the animal's sensitivity: a Chihuahua cries when sad and shakes when nervous. If only he could smoke, he would be the perfect swinger.

Spotted, marked, and stripped fur was another one of the most persistent icons of the exoticism of the 1950s. Leopard, jaguar, and tiger prints appeared on record and book covers, in advertisements and, obviously, at the cinema. It was not by chance that the cat-woman became the most recurring stereotype of the Cold War era, a chauvinistic and reactionary antidote to sexual repression. She derived her aggressiveness and pride, as well as her look and sinuous gait, from her feline counterparts. She was both prey and predator, and the bachelor was ready to hunt and be hunted. Irish McCalla was a perfect case in point. She soon traded in her pin-up clothes and became the most famous leopard-woman on American television. In 1956, she triumphed on the small screen with *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle*, a classic of American exoticism. She also appeared on the cover of *Music for Big Dame Hunters*, a 1960 Crown Records collection dedicated to the singles world. The sleeve depicts McCalla posed like a feline on the branch of a tall tree, wearing her Sheena leopard-skin bikini and holding a spotted pelt.

Feline fur was ubiquitous. In *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), Marilyn Monroe appears in Tom Ewell's exotic dream wearing a breathtaking tiger-striped costume. Ava Gardner also loved leopard skin, and one of her most famous photographic sessions found her in a spotted bathing suit against an equally spotted background. A leopard figures prominently in *Party Girl*, a 1958 film in which Cyd Charisse fascinated audiences with her spotted costume and sensual dances. Other feline films include *Invitation to the Dance* (1956), with Belita, and *The Visit* (1964), starring Ingrid Bergman, not to mention the incredible array of women on display in the many Tarzan films. In *The Tiger Woman*, a 1944 film featuring Linda Stirling, the actress, in apparent disregard for the title, is covered from head to toe in a blaze of jaguar spots: felines, like non-Westerners, are all alike in the world of exotica.

Even Bettie Page, the most photographed pin-up of the 1950s, succumbed to the lure of feline exoticism, and photos of her in the nude or in a spotted costume beside two cheetahs are famous. Apart from appearing in the many magazines that regularly kept the myth of the pin-up alive, "exotic" photos of Bettie Page can also be found in *Jungle Girl* (1998), a collection of recordings dedicated to the model.[37] In the 1950s, girlie magazines overflowed with cat-women. Magazines like *Bachelor*, *Gent*, *Hi-Life*, *Man*, *Mr.*, *Nugget*, and *Eyeful* flooded the world of the bachelor, triggering visual and sensual fantasies that, combined with appropriate sounds some forty years later, would resurface with the new cocktail nation.[38]

# *chapter two* **Mondo Exotica**

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## *The Cocktail Generation*

Cocktail generation, cocktail nation, lounge music, grounge, loungecore, neo–easy listening, jet-set, exotica, space-age pop, incredibly strange music: The second half of the 1990s saw a proliferation of potential labels for pop/rock groups, producers, and DJs intent on recovering sounds and styles long considered to have been laid to rest during the 1950s and 1960s, music that was once the exclusive domain of mothers and fathers, of adults in general, utterly inappropriate for youth.

Yet "someone walked over my grave," whispered Criswell, the favorite actor of Ed Wood, brilliant American B-movie director of the 1950s and 1960s. Perhaps it was the shadow of Yma Sumac, Esquivel, or Martin Denny; the voice of Julie London or Ann-Margret, slightly withered with age; the polished chorus work of the Ray Conniff Singers; the great "spy" soundtracks of John Barry, or the "sexy jazz" of Piero Umiliani. Music that

seemed so very distant, improbable, and superfluous in the early 1990s became one of the key supporting soundtracks of the new century and the new millennium. Even advertising has voraciously appropriated this music in its attempt to reach both baby boomers and youth consumers.

This is the same music that so many DJs have dismembered, mashed up, manipulated, and inserted into ultradigital contexts, granting new life to the original artists. So Yma Sumac reemerged in the world of highly sophisticated club music, along with Dean Martin, Louis Prima, Jean-Jacques Perrey, and many others. Even the 1960s and 1970s soundtracks of "spy/thriller/sex comedy" cinema have made a comeback. The new craze grew in the 1990s in cities like Los Angeles, where the DJ Dean R. Miller—host of Friday night's Mr. Phat's Royal Martini Club at the Viper Room—helped to familiarize neophytes and record labels with the sounds of space-age pop. It wasn't long before DJs from Tokyo responded by reviving Piero Umiliani and Piero Piccioni. London, Madrid, and Bologna followed suit.

At the same time, new groups got hold of the music of an older generation, bending it to the will of a vibrant postmodernism. What was once considered "your parents' music" ceased to be taboo. With the advent of the "cocktail generation"—the most effective term of all the possible choices as long as it isn't used referentially (cocktail music), but rather to designate artists united by a common interest in the many styles of space-age pop—older artistic and behavioral codes were, indeed, overturned. The subculture bestowed "musical dignity" upon a social group (adults) eternally perceived to be reactionary and lethargic, the first enemy to vanquish on the road to "cultural liberation."

The arrival of the cocktail generation was, in a certain sense, predictable. During the 1990s, cultural recycling was global, intrusive, constantly repeated—and the more it became the unconscious result of the influence of an ever more powerful media (especially television and film), in which images of different eras coexist simultaneously, the more culture lost a sense of its own historicity. The more our collective subconscious is influenced by media (especially television and film) in which different eras coexist simultaneously, the more we tend to lose the sense of our historicity. Film remakes of *The Flintstones* (live action, 1994; followed by a prequel in 2000, *The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas*), *Mission: Impossible* (parts 1, 2, and 3, in 1996, 2000, and 2006), *The Mod Squad* (1999), *The Saint* (1997), or *The Avengers* (1998), while viewed as stories of the past, simultaneously assert themselves as privileged cultural perspectives on the present. This strange historical phenomenon occurs because "many pasts," mixed together within

a given present, will inevitably end up stripping the future of a great deal of its charm. Repetitiveness tends, moreover, to provoke a sense of futility and to inhibit creative urges. Such is the case with rockers like Guns N' Roses: after *The Spaghetti Incident* (1993), a tribute album dedicated to the punk groups that originally inspired them, they stumbled into an unsettling artistic impasse, resulting in the 1999 live double album of recycled recordings released by Geffen. We are reminded of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," a short story by Herman Melville, in which an office employee gradually stops copying documents, and after a few personal mishaps, even stops eating, allowing himself to die. To each of his employer's requests, Bartleby has but one disarming response: "I would prefer not to." What's the point, since we all die in the end? This is precisely the theme of *American Beauty*, the acclaimed 1993 film directed by Sam Mendes, in which the American dream (or rather, the future) is repeatedly denied. The picture Mendes paints is a disturbing one: on the threshold of the new century, bourgeois suburbanites float in a limbo of death and pain, and in the film, it's cocktail music itself (Bobby Darin and Peggy Lee, specifically) that is used on the soundtrack to connote the most ruthless and reactionary adults.

In the context of widespread artistic ultraconservatism, the new sounds of the cocktail generation—linked to an imagined 1950s and 1960s—exploded in an almost subversive fashion, paradoxically spreading out from the United States, the nation of eternal youth, ever tied to romantic concepts like "the next generation" (think of Pepsi ads or the popular television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* [1987–94]), those antiadults, still capable of dreaming, who will succeed in saving America and the world.

Disaffected, discouraged by the seemingly unbeatable AIDS epidemic, by Kurt Cobain's suicide "in the name of independent rock," and by so much more, a broad social group spanning from ages twenty-five to forty reacted, proposing the last revival possible: the most improbable, and perhaps the most revolutionary of all revivals, a sort of "degree zero rebellion," a defiant reinstatement of parental music that had been the object of rejection for so many subcultures through the years (from rock and roll to punk and techno). It is said that many of the original punks (artists and nonartists alike) took part in the great cocktail conspiracy. This is not surprising if one considers that it was Sid Vicious (of the Sex Pistols), with his version of "My Way" (in the film *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, 1980), who opened the door for truculent renditions of Sinatra and "our parents' music." The deviant and postmodern recovery of sounds that had been sentenced to death some twenty-five years earlier now seemed to be the only weapon to counter an

alternative rock forever flattened by archaic punk modes of expression. It was the only possible reaction to the end-of-the-century neopunk movement (Green Day, Offspring, etc.) that dominated the charts in the United States and Europe by watering down the sound of punk groups who were anything but accustomed to the hit parade: groups like the Germs, the Sex Pistols, and the Clash.

Furthermore, the cocktail generation staked its claim at the exact moment when the presumed next (rock) generation was doubling back on itself—that is, when it was assuming ever more adult and profoundly bourgeois dynamics and characteristics with big-name artists like Metallica incorporating an orchestra, the Red Hot Chili Peppers drifting toward pop, and Oasis reverently aping the Beatles. Such bands did little to challenge their fans with musical innovations. Precisely when alternative rock became a mainstream chart staple, the sound that once represented the very essence of mainstream (Frank Sinatra, Yma Sumac, Carla Boni, etc.) became profoundly alternative. In the same way, the artists of the cocktail generation became the most revolutionary and unforeseeable incarnation of alternative rock.

In particular, new dance electronica (trip-hop, techno, drum and bass, house, and various derivatives)—perhaps the true contemporary rock in terms of its mass impact, deviance, and antagonism (demonstrated in venues such as illegal raves)—drew upon the sounds of space-age pop for new lifeblood and inspiration.[1] It should come as no surprise that a neospace-age dance genre was born, with names like Chris Joss and Los Chicharrons, remixes of pieces by the likes of Louis Prima ("Jump Jive and Wail," remixed by Tranquility Bass) and Roy Budd ("Get Carter," remixed by B. B. Davis and the Red Orchestra); from hits like "(Mucho Mambo) Sway" (Shaft), a remix of the song made famous by Dean Martin and Julie London, to "Mambo No. 5—A Little Bit Of" (Lou Bega).

Following enterprising groups and DJs, many record labels (such as Dionysus, Right Tempo, Plastic, Arf! Arf!, Irma La Douce, Crippled Dick, and Del-Fi) have focused on collections and rereleases of every genre, filling cultural gaps, erasing (one hopes) old and embarrassing stereotypes, and stimulating unusual sonic interactions between the old and the new. Finally, it was revealed that Telly Savalas (television's Kojak) sang *like* Elvis and that deep down, 007 was one of the first rock stars in history. It also became clear that an artist's assumed *strangeness* should never be evaluated after the fact, but rather should be considered in relation to the cultural context. Sound-effect wizards like Esquivel and Dean Elliott, deemed incredibly strange musicians in the 1990s, were definitely products of an era that

viewed stereophonics and innovative audio technologies as the new sonic frontier.

Furthermore, by exhuming the past in its original form or bending it to contemporary audio demands, many new groups and DJs could vicariously (even vampirically?) savor the artistic longevity of past songwriters from Henry Mancini to Tony Hatch. These artists, who had the confidence and skill to make the most of the technology available to them, could teach a great deal to the new generation.

## Ironic Detachment?

Certainly, it was a good starting point for vibrant, new musical futures. But the key is to prevent each future revival from going back and rekindling that boorish, racist exoticism that had characterized the genre, an exoticism that some fifty years later can perhaps be obliterated by means of a conscious detachment and proper irony. For us, that is, irony lies in the fact that like our parents, we can delight in longing for different worlds, appropriating styles and modes. Our parents might have put on Hawaiian skirts and served up canned pineapple at a backyard barbecue without a second thought. Unlike them, we came to knowledge that behind the appropriation of other cultures—however playful and pleasurable—lies a certain form of denigration.

There's a thin line between exoticism and racism, a line that is both very fragile and in a state of continual redefinition, depending on historical events and lived reality. With just a few bars of melody, or a few words, a simple pop song can function as an external projection of ethnocentrism, a quick and painless means of reconfiguring a broader social context or cultural other as we might like to imagine it. This helps explain the astonishing reception, in 1959, of "Quiet Village," a single by the jazz pianist Martin Denny featuring animal noises and seemingly obscure instruments. Indeed, the 1957 album that contained the number was titled *Exotica*. Denny's song made its way up the charts, asserting its place as an emblematic example of exotic instrumental pop.

What's more, at the height of the Cold War, Americans countered fears of annihilation and Soviet domination with dreams of "a place in the sun," with fantasies of tropical warmth that were both distant and yet entirely familiar. Exotica came to the rescue. All this happened during a period in which the United States was discovering a simultaneous attraction and repulsion for the other—communist, black, or Polynesian, it made little difference—

always held, however, at the proper distance, and, ideally, anaesthetized in the shimmer of a song.

Adult, white, middle-class America of the 1950s began to give in to the sonorous charms of the kazoo, the ukulele, the gong, and many other percussive instruments. To animate their evenings, they turned to Les Baxter, Martin Denny, Yma Sumac, Arthur Lyman, Korla Pandit, or Robert Drasnin. These artists marked out the stylistic traits of a world in sharp contrast with rock and roll, a dense, resonant space of "postcard songs" (for the most part instrumentals) with references to blessed isles and unspoiled flora and fauna: lavish sounds and colors from the atolls of the Pacific, from Latin America, or the most stereotypical, Americanized, and exotically defined conception of Africa.

But exotica wasn't alone in the broad musical universe that characterized the Eisenhower and Kennedy years, an era fascinated by and obsessed with new technological conquests and new frontiers in space. Beyond Denny and Baxter, albums ranged from mood music to space sounds; from cocktail music to Latin music, and many others. Music embodied the dreams and the euphoria of the times: record covers exploded with colors and images evoking tropical paradises, sensual women, scenes of harmonious and intimate daily life, electrifying cocktail parties, and unbridled mambo and cha-cha dancers.[2] This was music performed by adults and marketed toward parents and older brothers; teenagers preferred Bill Haley or the provocative hips of Elvis Presley. In the liner notes included with *The Exotic Moods of Les Baxter*, the 1996 double-disc collection dedicated to the king of exotica who passed away in January of the same year, R. J. Smith asks: "Could our parents really have been this weird? If Baxter's oeuvre was wildly commercial then, now it seems wildly experimental. This was the mainstream that time forgot. Those of us who are rediscovering cocktails for the first time in our lives owe a thanks to our parents for never forcing this music down our throats when we were growing up. No: this pop was kept secret. Did it really come from the 1950s, or is it being beamed back from the future?"

As a matter of fact, space-age pop was a carefully guarded secret. Among the most plausible explanations for its obscurity is the fact that, from 1956 onward, rock and roll (and Elvis Presley in particular) were successful in distorting and overthrowing every preexisting popular music code.[3] An all-important event took place in 1956, the year of the definitive mass media consecration of rock and roll: on June 5, millions of people in the United States tuned in to a momentous passing of the baton. That night on *The Milton Berle Show*, Elvis Presley would perform "Hound Dog," flaunting all

of his presumed sexual energy, and unleashing an unprecedented wave of protests. (Later, television hosts like Steve Allen and Ed Sullivan would require the singer to wear a tuxedo on camera, or to be filmed from the waist up.) On that same episode of the Berle show, the last guest was none other than Les Baxter, who sang "The Poor People of Paris," a highly orchestrated chirping single that Elvis had knocked from the number-one spot on the charts in April 1956, with "Heartbreak Hotel." The show marked a historic passing of the torch: two stars, two distant and seemingly irreconcilable worlds. The collision of the two generations, dramatized on television in 1956, was actually much less painful than what we have been led to believe.

## The War of the Worlds

If it is clear that rock and roll represented the first great break of the teenager from the "sounds of his parents," it is also true—and this, contrary to what we are often told—that Elvis and other rockers did not express a sexuality that went utterly against adults. The physical sensuality of rock and roll has often been attributed to the influence of "savage, black" rhythm and blues singers. Yet scant attention has been paid to the significant influence on rock and roll of that adult, white, middle-class exoticism/eroticism that rock and roll was about to replace. According to Alessandro Portelli, a number of strong sexual symbols circulated within pop culture some ten years before Elvis. Rita Hayworth, for example, was the product of:

> a completely masculine idea of sexuality, quite far from transgression or liberation. But while with Hayworth the emphasis is on pleasure, with Elvis Presley and his descendants the focus is on domination, strength, and aggression. Rock and roll exalted masculine sex appeal not for the female public (teenage girls worshipped the youthful Frankie Avalon, Johnny Restivo, Fabian, etc.) but as a narcissistic self-reference for young men. So if we were not at the level of a full-blown autoeroticism, the female nonetheless functioned as a vehicle for a discourse among men from which she was, in fact, excluded.[4]

Yet even in terms of autoeroticism and aggression, rock and roll was not entirely avant-garde. American writers like Norman Mailer had already propagandized the cult of masculine virility as a revolutionary force. Moreover, magazines such as *Esquire*, *Playboy* (first published in December of 1953), and the tradition of the striptease helped to fuel an image of sex as something lawful and fun, "unlike the allusions and double entendres, often more

obscene than erotic, of so many ditties of the time."[5] Rock's revolutionary aspect was not in having replaced sex symbols like Rita Hayworth with new female role models, but in having acknowledged the adult origins of those models, while also suggesting their wholesale replacement. Likewise, rock and roll, even if comprised of innocuous behaviors masquerading as grand transgressions, necessarily became revolutionary, since it allowed the association of the adolescent with sex for the first time in American culture.

Inevitably, at this point in time the evocative sensual paradises of the musicians of exotica began to fade, linked as they were to those adult erotic models that were necessarily marginalized in the generational shift. Those earlier models had developed, in turn, from the so-called exotic adult cinema, the imaginative realm of other and liberated modes of libidinal pleasure. Nevertheless, an important point of contact between rock and roll and exotica can be located in Elvis's forays into Hollywood. Films such as *Blue Hawaii* (1961), *Harum Scarum* (1965), *Fun in Acapulco* (1963), and *Paradise, Hawaiian Style* (1966) reenact exotic stereotypes that were already familiar to a more mature audience. In one sense, these films would also legitimize so-called rocking exotica, a rock subgenre that borrowed with irony from the most notable exotic musicians of the 1950s.[6] Consider also that prevailing epithets such as "junglesque" or "savage" were assigned with repugnance to rock and roll singers, both black and white, whereas the "sounds of the primitive jungle" evoked and cultivated by exotica artists were assimilated into everyday life. Of course, everything depends on context.

## Exotic Screens

It would be impossible to neglect cinema in a discussion of the 1950s and 1960s exotica musical invasion. In his book *Lure of the Tropix*, the designer and film critic Bill Feret observes that from its very origins, American silent cinema was built around mystery and exoticism. Audiences fell head over heels for Theda Bara, considered the first femme fatale of the cinema and known for her role as the "vampiress" (from Bara, the term "vamp" was born) in *A Fool There Was* (1915). That film would become famous for the line "Kiss me, you fool," which would soon enter into common American vernacular. But the cult appeal of Bara, interpreter of such roles as Cleopatra, Salomé, and the Tiger Lady, is particularly linked to her mysteriously exotic biography. The name Theda Bara was an anagram of "Arab Death," and it was said that the actress, born in the desert, was the daughter of a

French artist and an Arab princess. In reality, under her heavy makeup, outlandish costumes, and the haze of incense that accompanied her meetings with the press, Theda was none other than Theodosia Goodman, born in Cincinnati, Ohio, the daughter of a tailor. Nevertheless, she became the archetype of the female "man-eater" and the first mass object of exotic desire for the American male public.

In any case, the cinema, as a primary source of cultural colonization, could not resist exploiting locales that were as yet unexplored. Considering that Machu Picchu, heart of the Inca civilization, had been discovered only in 1911, and that Howard Carter would unearth the tomb of King Tut only in 1922, we can begin to understand the immense possibilities that directors of "silent exotica" had at their disposal. Essentially concentrated between the two world wars, silent exotica evinced on the one hand the need for escape from everyday life, and on the other the perennially restless American imagination always in search of new frontiers to conquer, both real and symbolic.

In film after film and serial after serial, Hollywood succumbed to an unprecedented onslaught of white, imperialist, colonialist stereotypes. Helpless native girls swooning for a white savior were balanced by rigid plots that ended up reconfirming the absolute incorruptibility of the Anglo-Saxon model: white men paired with white women. The "African jungle" (*sic*—while India can claim jungles, for instance, central Africa is actually characterized by savanna and arable land) and the Pacific Islands swarmed with explorers and usurpers intent on claiming Western authority over the surrounding natural and psychological environs. The geographical error was compounded by an overtly racist stereotype that tended to assimilate all that was culturally, ethnically, and geographically other. The jungle could be anywhere. It might be that Oriental place where the Occident dumps its refuse. But "jungle" also describes the savage behavior of man under capitalism, the morass of flesh, the squeals of tormented pigs, and the loss of innocence in Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel of the Chicago slaughterhouses, titled, appropriately enough, *The Jungle*.

## Deep in the African Jungle

Central to the construction of the African, exoticist, "jungle" were the adventures of Tarzan, the ape-man, born of the hand of Edgar Rice Burroughs, a writer who, from 1912 onward, would become one of the most important points of reference of pulp fiction. He debuted with stories set on Mars