

Honolulu By Design

*HOW HOMEGROWN TALENTS ARE MOVING HAWAII'S
FASHION INDUSTRY FORWARD.*

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Hanzawa O'Neill returns to her roots at the Dole Pineapple Fields.





AT FIRST GLANCE, Hawai'i's fashion industry might be mistaken for just another cog in a giant tourism machine, churning out brightly colored matching outfits for visitor photo ops. But a closer inspection reveals a richly nuanced industry with much more to offer, driven by a steadily expanding pool of talented designers and fashion personalities.

THE ALOHA SHIRT SERVES AS THE HEART OF THE INDUSTRY, a reminder of Hawai'i's multi-cultural roots, and as a canvas for local artists to communicate the experience of Island life. It is a style in constant evolution, championed by innovators who include father-son duo Sig and Kūha'o Zane of Sig Zane Designs, who transform the classic with bold Hawaiian-influenced graphics and modern cuts, and Dale Hope, former owner-designer of Kāhala Sportswear, who keeps his father's legacy line, HRH, relevant via collaborations with younger brands.

Some major brands started here and have remained committed to manufacturing their clothing here. They include: 'Iolani Sportswear, Tori Richard and Surf Line Hawai'i/Jams World.

At the other end of the spectrum, contemporary up-and-coming local designers are branching out aesthetically in exciting ways. Today, there are local labels focused on everything from denim and retro-inspired surf styles to urban fashions and breezy resort-wear. There are even a few flashes of the avant garde. At the head of the pack are Rona Bennett and Lan Chung, designers of the knitwear-focused Fighting Eel brand, and Andy South designer Ari Southiphong, the *Project Runway* standout turned local manufacturing advocate, whose lines are challenging conventional definitions of aloha wear.

A burgeoning scene, however, can only develop so much far from the traditional fashion centers of Paris and New York City. Hawai'i's Island setting offers endless inspiration but also isolates. Bridging the gap is fashion show producer extraordinaire Lynne Hanzawa O'Neill. A major player in the New York

fashion scene, the Honolulu native is helping to launch the first HONOLULU Fashion Week and propel local talents into the national spotlight.

State economists estimate the Hawai'i fashion manufacturing industry currently employs only about 1,900 people directly and a total of 4,350 when related jobs are included. The state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism's Re-

search and Economic Analysis Division tracks direct sales for the fashion manufacturing sector at \$383 million in 2013, and \$758 million in total sales generated in the economy when related revenue is included. For comparison's sake, the state's No. 1 industry, tourism, employs more than 162,630 people and generates more than \$14.4 billion annually, according to Hawai'i Tourism Authority statistics (as of 2014).

While the economic impact of the fashion industry remains relatively small, key industry players remain optimistic about the future of Hawai'i-based fashion.

▲ **FIRST, THERE WAS HOPE**

Since the 1930s, aloha shirts have told a story of color, fun and freedom. Dale Hope, former owner of Kāhala Sportswear, offers his philosophy: "If everyone wore aloha shirts, there would be no wars."

Hope's deep-rooted belief in the aloha shirt started young. As a child, he built elaborate forts made of shipping boxes at his parents' factory in Kapahulu, where his father, Howard Hope, sold fabric to local merchants. The family business soon grew into a small sewing operation that produced its first aloha wear line, Sun Fashions Ltd.

At the time, other industry labels were also gaining momentum. One was Alfred Shaheen, best known for luxurious aloha shirts topped with silk-screened prints. "He was amazing," Hope says. "He was the most accomplished local garment manufacturer in the '50s and '60s for both men and women." Tori Richard, the creation of Mort Feldman, debuted resort wear with bold Hawaiian motifs, Island-inspired elements and graphic Asian accents. "The Tori Richard look was refined and elegant," Hope says. And it is still going strong today, with 2,500 national and international storefronts carrying the label.

Hawai'i fashion was competitive and growing fast. "My parents worked hard and spent most nights and weekends at the office. It was, and still is, a very consuming way to make a living." Dale Hope set off for college, planning to embark on a different journey. However, sales were down and the family business was struggling. So he returned to the factory floor, not to build playhouses this time, but to help his father construct an epic fashion house that would have a long-lasting legacy.

By the '60s, the aloha shirt had hit Hollywood. A stream of celebrities that included Elvis Presley, Frank Sinatra and even an entertainer named Clarissa "Hilo Hattie" Haili gave the garment a certain kind of cool.

In the '70s, Hope's first project—selling men's aloha shirts under the Howard Robert Hope (eventually HRH) label—was underway. He was finally getting into the rhythm of the business, building his professional network and expanding his creative range. He

worked with, and learned from, artists and textile designers he admired and respected. But he also witnessed the once-successful company that produced the label Kāhala go bankrupt after 30 years in business.

Then, 10 years later, in 1979, Dale Hope bought the once-iconic brand. In the '80s he reached out to the Islands' top creatives, including a handful who doubled as professional surfers. The collaborations that unfolded from these partnerships produced some

of Hope's favorite designs to date. He recalls that time as the best days of his career. "I was collaborating with John Severson, the former owner of *Surfer Magazine*, at his home in Napili. All of a sudden a wave broke in front of his house and he said, 'Get your shorts, let's go,' and I thought, one cannot beat this."

Despite the creative rewards, the hard work and the practical realities of running a business took their toll. "A broken central air-conditioning unit would cost us \$30,000 to replace. Too often, the days get filled with these matters and take you away from your business, and you find you have little time to enjoy your art," he says. Hope ended up selling Kāhala but stayed on as creative director for 10 years. In his spare time he wrote a book, one about aloha shirts, a perfect fit.

Hope sees today as an exciting time for the next generation: "I'm anxious to see what they create and the story they tell." His advice for those entering the ever-changing world of Hawai'i fashion: "Learn all you can about the industry, from finance and distribution to production and sales. Be organic and sustainable, and inspire with our aloha spirit."

▲ **MODERN STORYTELLERS**

Hilo-based Sig Zane Designs brings together ancient Hawaiian culture and distinct modern style to create bold prints that work equally well on aloha shirts and airplane paint schemes.

While Dale Hope's aloha shirt was anchored in the surf world, Sig Zane's journey is rooted in world travel, love and hula. Zane was fortunate to grow up with O'ahu, Paris, Madrid and the Big Island as his playgrounds. "One year, my dad moved us to Madrid to start a new job," he remembers. "The job didn't pan out, but during that time I was exposed to all the great landmarks and museums. I loved it. At 9 years old, I saw the Mona Lisa at the Louvre."

International travel and myriad Island adventures—catching ulua, four-wheeling around Mauna Kea, hiking the coastline—fueled Zane's deep appreciation of life, which, in turn, nurtured his view of design. "Fashion is a canvas to express culture, tradition and where we are at that moment. It articulates the energy of a period in time," Zane says.

Zane, now 62, first studied Hawaiian culture in the '70s, although many are surprised to learn that he is not of ethnic Hawai-

"If everyone wore aloha shirts, there would be no wars."
—Dale Hope



Hope and his golden retriever Mango in the backyard of his Pālolo home.

DALE HOPE ▶ **Covetable fashion item:** A Kyle Bernhardt 9' 4" stand-up paddle board—it's fun and becomes better with every use.
What grounds you? A Mike Fields hat with sunglass loops. He's a local artist and a dear friend who created a great new clothing line for Quiksilver.

ian ancestry. In the '80s, two things occupied his heart: hula and Nalani Kanaka'ole—whose family is synonymous with the Hawaiian culture and the hula community. His first clothing design? A white-ginger blossom print on a pareo, a romantic nod to the girl he liked to take to Mānoa Valley, where the flower's sweet scent filled the air. Sig married Nalani, and that first print lives on as part of his women's line.

At first, designing clothing simply offered Zane a way to express his artistic side. But in 1985, he opened the Sig Zane Designs shop near Hilo Bay. With a chuckle, he admits, "Truthfully, the reason I turned this into a 'real' job was because I heard I was going to be a father." That store grew into a family business that now employs 13 people.

Today, son Kūha'o Zane, 31, is a graphic designer who embraces the legacy of his family with its layers of culture. From Sig he learned the importance of being both a gentleman and a successful businessman, to be on time (even when answering emails) and to always show respect. From his grandmother, Edith Kanaka'ole, he learned to give without restraint. His mother, Nalani, educated him on the value of tradition and how to humbly apply it to all his creative endeavors. The dynamic family saw results early when Kūha'o sold his first print, an interpretation of Santa Claus being pulled by dolphins in the ocean, when he was just 7 years old.

For Kūha'o, his two passions, design and hula, feed directly into each other. "When we dance, we learn about the chant, the motion, the location. Nearly all of my hula regalia is picked, braided, weaved or dyed by myself. I pick my palapalai, make my lei and present it with my hula. This shapes my perspective when it comes to design and marketing," says Kūha'o. "I look at a project the same way as making lei."

Over time, the father-and-son team developed a signature line of color-saturated prints, many using elements of the kukui, kalo (taro) and hala. The younger Zane graduated from a top U.S. fashion school, the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising in Los Angeles. This past December, Kūha'o celebrated 10 years of design.

Still based in sleepy Hilo, the team garners international attention. Locally and nationally, aloha shirts have won recognition as a fashion trend that's here to stay. The Zanes have helped it transform to a current style.

But, as with Dale Hope, business success didn't come easy. Survival takes hard work, dedication and long hours. Kūha'o explains that he takes one vacation a year to Fiji and cherishes the down time. One year, he arrived at his destination but had to keep working on the phone for hours: "By nightfall, I was pissed. I decided to drink, and 30 beers later, I found myself lying in a hammock. As I

looked toward the ground, I saw a bunch of rocks huddled together. In my drunken state, I picked them up and formed them into a K. It hit me, at that point: I knew I was meant to design."

Today, his multi-faceted role includes leading a new branch of Sig Zane Designs, SigZaneKaiao, a design firm that has engineered artistic campaigns for Hawaiian Electric, Hawaiian Airlines and French fashion icon Louis Vuitton. His knowledge of Hawaiian culture informs vividly contemporary graphics blended with sexy masculinity, showing where aloha fashion can go. And while he once saw the design process simply as concept, perspective, creativity, color and placement, Kūha'o now sees it as a way to share Hawaiian culture with the rest of the world "in a progressive way while keeping the concept rooted in practice and tradition."

▲ **AMBASSADOR OF ALOHA**

Lynne Hanzawa O'Neill wears black. Usually Comme des Garçons. Sometimes accompanied by Warby Parker black frame sunglasses, smart but not hipster. And Nars Heat Wave red lipstick, a pop of color that hints at her persona: present, powerful and in charge. Hanzawa O'Neill produces fashion shows, both for top-tier fashion houses as

well as for newcomers who may someday own a spot on the Barney's floor. Her job—one that a million people might yearn for—takes her from New York to Milan to Aruba and now Honolulu—a place she considers influential to the fashion world.

Since she was 4 years old, Hanzawa O'Neill has spent summers in Hawai'i visiting her relatives after her family moved from their Island home to California. She fondly recalls days of connecting with her 'ohana, dancing obon, swimming at Ala Moana Beach and tagging along to pick up her aunt at Watumull's (her first glimpse of Hawaiian fashion). Now 61, she renews that connection each time she returns home. "My first job here, at 16, was working at the pineapple cannery. I inspected the fruit from the sample fields and determined if it was ripe. The following summer I moved to inspector of outgoing cans. I learned how much energy and people it takes to produce one perfect product that people will savor, same as a fashion show."

Hanzawa O'Neill never set out to work in fashion, although she did wear a Pucci-like dress with shiny gold mules to her prom. She majored in art history at UCLA and seriously considered a career as a physical therapist. "I had no idea this would be my life; I looked at a lot of fashion magazines and loved Twiggy, the Beatles and English bands, but still find it rather surprising that I have a career producing

At Right: Sig and Kūha'o at the Papahana Kuaola lo'i patch.

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"Fashion is a canvas to express culture, tradition and where we are at that moment."
—Sig Zane



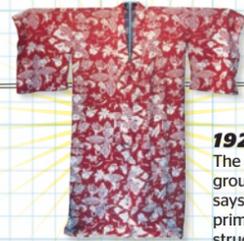
SIG & KŪHA'O ZANE ▶ **Covetable fashion item:** (Sig) A Tod's leather carry-on to hold my surf trunks and fishing lures for my annual trip to Namotu, Fiji. (Kūha'o) A Louis Vuitton trunk with my name Kūha'omaikalani, which means rain from clear sky, embossed on it. **What grounds you?** (Sig) Surfing at my secret spots on the Big Island. (Kūha'o) Our Hālau O Kekuhi warm-ups every Monday and Wednesday. It prepares my body for our style of hula, 'Aihā, and allows me time to meditate.

HISTORY OF HAWAII FASHION

HAWAII'S HISTORY of fashion reflects a colorful past with myriad influences ranging from missionaries and surfers through a host of creative and hard-working entrepreneurs. Before the arrival of woven fabrics from abroad, Native Hawaiian men wore malo, or loincloths, and women wore pā'ū skirts, both made from tapa, a cloth made from bark. Ali'i wore intricate feather capes.

COMPILED BY LORIN ELENI GILL

1820



1920

1820s

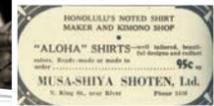
Explorers and missionaries arrive in Hawai'i, and royals adopt western dress immediately. Missionaries sew garments for ali'i, while commoners continue to use kapa. The formal holokū dress is developed with a higher bustline for Hawaiian women. Checkered denim work shirts called palaka are worn by men.



1920s
The aloha shirt is influenced by five ethnic groups, textile scholar Linda Arthur Bradley says. Early shirts are shaped Western-style, primarily made with Japanese fabric, constructed by Chinese tailors and worn outside the pants, a style tip from Filipinos. Hawaiian design elements are introduced in the '30s.

1930

1935
Local shirt maker Musa-Shiya uses the term "aloha shirts" in a June 28 advertisement. Tropical prints are popular among tourists, but not locals.



1929
Commercial sewing is introduced at the Territorial Trade School, which joins with the University of Hawai'i in 1964 and becomes Honolulu Community College in 1966.

1936
Tailor Ellery Chun trademarks the aloha shirt and begins its mass production. His sister, Ethel Lum, designs motif stamps for fabric, creating a "Hawaiian print." Prints start to appear on mu'umu'u, making them more acceptable for everyday wear.



1937
Royal Hawaiian Manufacturing Co. opens. The brand is bought by Watumull's in 1955.



1940

1940s
Many local people couldn't afford sportswear in the pre-WWII plantation economy. During the war, people adopted aloha attire because they lacked other options as U.S.-Hawai'i shipping stalled.



1970

1970s
Kamehameha graduate Nake'u Awai ('59) returns home after a dance career in New York, Europe, Reno and Hollywood to make his mark on Hawai'i fashion. His Hawaiian-motifed fabrics would soon inspire future designer Sig Zane.



1966
Honolulu Community College begins offering an Associate of Science degree through the Fashion Arts Department.



1965
Hawaiian Fashion Guild successfully promotes "Aloha Friday."

1964
Dave Rochlen opens Jam's World, bringing bright "jams" surf shorts to the Islands. The brand shifts to resort-wear in the 1990s.



1962
The Hawaiian Fashion Guild promotes aloha attire for use in the workplace during summertime. The Guild distributes two aloha shirts to every member of the Hawai'i state legislature as part of its "Operation Liberation" campaign.

1960

1959
Reyn McCullough moves to Hawai'i and joins Ruth Spooner to create Reyn Spooner. Their goal? Design business-casual aloha shirts for locals. The same year, Princess Kaiulani takes the mu'umu'u mainstream.



1953
'Iolani Sportswear joins the fashion scene. Meanwhile, Frank Sinatra shows his aloha spirit by wearing an aloha shirt in the movie *From Here to Eternity*.



1956
Chicago apparel manufacturer Mort Feldman establishes Tori Richard in Honolulu. The company produces "resort-wear" and uses eye-catching prints with geometrics and stylized motifs. The designs range from traditional Hawaiian and tribal motifs to Asian and nature-themed prints.



1950

1950
Hawai'i Garment Manufacturers Guild formed to promote Island fashion.



1948
Alfred Shaheen, of Shaheen's Honolulu and Surf 'n Sand, uses a unique method of silk-screening textile designs for mass production, making aloha attire less touristy and more fashionable.



1947
The first Aloha Week commences in October, attracting tourists for cultural activities and celebrations. Aloha wear is donned at the Holokū ball, parade and Makahiki festival.

1946
The Honolulu Chamber of Commerce appropriates \$1,000 to study aloha shirts and prepare suitable designs for clothing businessmen could wear.

1980

1980
Tom Selleck wears aloha shirts in the *Magnum, P.I.* television show filmed on O'ahu.

1985
Sig Zane Designs (at right) opens in Hilo. Shirt designs incorporate images of taro, hala, 'ie'ie, kukui and other plants valued by the Hawaiians. Local girl Danene Lunn opens Manuheali'i, a Hawaiian quilt-inspired contemporary line.



1990

1994
Nola and Linda Nahulu acquire Bete Mu'u, formerly Bete Inc., a popular mu'umu'u shop which was founded in 1959.



2000

1993
The Hawai'i Fashion Industry Association debuts its "Made in Hawai'i with Aloha" label and campaign on Nov. 29.

2003
Designers Rona Bennett and Lan Chung launch Fighting Eel, eventually opening three boutiques on O'ahu. Sister line Ava Sky is created in 2012.



2006
Hawai'i Fashion Incubator is founded by Toby Portner and Melissa White to increase visibility, membership and impact of Hawai'i's fashion industry.



2011
Former Kāhala Sportswear creative director and *The Aloha Shirt: Spirit of the Islands* author Dale Hope launches collection of vintage aloha shirts called Hope for Man.

2012
Allison Izu denim Chinatown trousers are featured in the February issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*.

2014

2014
HCC Fashion and Technology graduate Kinio-kahokuloa "Kini" Zamora makes it on Season 13 of *Project Runway*.

2014
First HONOLULU Fashion Week.

2004
Roberta Oaks Power introduces a modern take on fun '60s-inspired attire. The brand expands to include menswear and a storefront in 2009.



2009
Florencia Arias launches, bringing contemporary clothing inspired by an Island lifestyle.



2010
Hawai'i's own Andy South makes it to the season 8 finale of *Project Runway*, a reality TV show based around a fashion design competition.

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fashion shows.”

From an early job as assistant to a special events manager at Macy’s to booking shows for *Vogue*, Calvin Klein, Versace, Missoni and Hervé Léger, Hanzawa O’Neill says there’s no secret formula to her success. She worked hard—a trait she learned from both parents. “My father worked at the Waikiki Aquarium until he was 60, and my mom still waitresses at the Kūhiō Beach Grill at the Marriott.” Visiting her mom is the main reason she comes back to Hawai’i so often. The pull of family ... and Waiola shave ice.

Hanzawa O’Neill relies on what she calls “aloha zen” to operate in the high-pressure world of high fashion, especially during New York Fashion Week. Running 14 shows in one week leaves no room for error. She does it calmly without raising her voice, or swearing. (In 2001, *Sex and the City* ran an episode with a character based on Lynne played by comedian Margaret Cho, who swore a lot.) Instead, Hanzawa O’Neill relies on her inner aloha spirit to help coordinate, orchestrate and navigate. She offers this advice to folks from Hawai’i striving to make it in the New York fashion scene: “Treat everyone with the same respect, don’t lose perspective and be proud of who you are, show your aloha spirit.”

On a recent trip to Hawai’i she noted a new tingle of excitement in the local fashion scene. “Definitely more happening, local designers such as Roberta Oaks Power and Jun Jo of in4mation were showcasing aloha prints in dynamic ways, modernizing the Island’s unique fashion heritage,” she says. To Hanzawa O’Neill, these designers are capitalizing on what Hope, Shaheen, Zane and other industry pillars built and strengthened over the years.

For local designers, including Kūha’o Zane, Ari Southiphong and Fighting Eel’s Lan Chung and Rona Bennett, the aloha shirt serves as the foundation on which they can build alternate points of view, reflecting their own tradition and style. Instead of feeling pigeonholed in this local industry, they’ve challenged themselves to reinvent, recreate and reimagine what is possible. And Hanzawa O’Neill is encouraged by the progress made in Hawai’i fashion.

Fashion leaders Prada, Marc Jacobs and Opening Ceremony also gave a boost to the popularity of Hawaiian wear when their Spring ’14 collections featured tropical prints. And Hollywood continues to embrace a Hawai’i vibe, giving it life on the big screen, on magazine covers and on the red carpet.

Hanzawa O’Neill would like to see programs to help up-and-

LYNNE HANZAWA O’NEILL ▶ **Covetable fashion item:** Anything Comme des Garçons is all good. **What grounds you?** Wearing my Locals rubber slippers reminds me to walk with aloha.



THE EEL DEAL

The Fighting Eel brand has been going strong since 2003. Owners-designers Rona Bennett and Lan Chung share some of the secrets to their staying power.

▶ **Know your clientele.** We really try to think about what our customers want. They’re not afraid to let us know how they feel—whether they really love a particular style or if it’s not working. We’re quick to change.

▶ **Spend wisely.** Know which investments are worthwhile. Super nice business cards are great, but they’re not going to make you money.

▶ **Check the egos at the door.** It’s easy to get emotionally attached to a particular idea. For us, if something’s not working we say, oh well, and move on. We don’t have any egos.



coming local fashion designers thrive here in Hawai’i: “Mentorships, state support and local manufacturing facilities will definitely help elevate the local fashion industry, while attracting global attention to the amazing talent we have,” she says. She signed on to produce a handful of shows for the upcoming first HONOLULU Fashion Week, to help spotlight Hawai’i’s fashion talents.

On her way to the airport, Hanzawa O’Neill popped into Power’s downtown Honolulu boutique. After all, shopping *is* research in her world. She spotted two aloha-print dresses she had to buy: one a mandarin orange, the other an ocean blue, both reminiscent of old Hawai’i.

Hanzawa O’Neill believes in aloha wear for all seasons, even in other states and countries: “You don’t have to be living in Hawai’i to wear it. Mix it with pants, a shirt, fun accessories; incorporate it into your look and make it your own.” She sees it as an opportunity to spread that aloha zen through the latest aloha wear: “Everyone should wear aloha from the inside out!”

▲ **NEW TWISTS**

When they got started in 2003, Honolulu designers Rona Bennett and Lan Chung knew it wasn’t going to be easy to build a clothing brand from the ground up, much less a contemporary brand competing in a traditional Hawaiian-print market. But, as the name of their label Fighting Eel suggests, these women are up for a challenge.

In 2014, Fighting Eel is more than just surviving, it’s flourishing. The knitwear brand boasts three successful boutiques with a fourth set to open in Kāhala by the end of the year and enjoys a cultlike following

among local women who appreciate the label’s versatile styles and playful, occasionally tropical prints.

The duo’s survival skills were put to the test from the start. How did they know where to begin? “We didn’t, we just started,” Bennett recalls with a laugh. Chung had studied merchandising at UH Mānoa, and both women had retail sales experience. But for the most part they learned the ropes as they went along. “When we realized that we wanted to do it, we went out, bought airline passes and learned everything along the way,” Bennett says. “When we wanted to buy fabric, we went to one manufacturer who explained how to go about it and what our minimums were. We decided that we needed a sales rep, so we just walked into an agency.”

They faced manufacturing challenges, when rising costs and a lack of resources prompted them to shift production to California. “At the time, there weren’t any jersey cutters here,” Bennett says. They set up in Los Angeles and traveled back and forth to make it work. A recent stroke of good fortune means that Fighting Eel’s sewing will soon once again be done in the Islands, which aligns with the Made in Paradise label stitched into the brand’s clothing.

PHOTO: COURTESY FIGHTING EEL

“Our sewer in L.A., who is from Hawai’i, is actually moving back.”

They’ve also been quick to adapt to an ever-changing retail environment. “When the economy tanked in 2008 and 2009, our wholesale business wasn’t doing well because there were all these boutiques that were closing. So we switched things up, selling straight through our own retail stores, which ended up being more profitable.”

After 11 years in the business, Fighting Eel has become the veteran among Hawai’i’s young contemporary brands. Currently, the label puts out seven to nine collections a year. Ava Sky, its 2-year-old sister line, offers up a monthly delivery, and both have expanded to include girls apparel.

Chung and Bennett are optimistic about the future of the local

MODEL: KRISTA ALVAREZ



fashion industry: “There are a lot more local boutiques and a lot more small designers, which helps.”

They are proof positive of the possibilities for up-and-coming fashion designers: “When you first start out, you get so much rejection. Even locally, not a lot of people wanted to take a chance on us. Now, people are more behind the idea of supporting local.”

▲ **A NEW DIRECTION**

Evolution seems to be an ongoing theme for designer Ari Southiphong. Within the space of just a few years, the Wai’anae native has gone from being a standout student in Honolulu Community College’s fashion technology program to a reality TV star, courtesy of two separate stints on the popular *Project Runway* series. On a personal journey, Southiphong, formerly known as Andy South, has been transitioning to life as a transgender female.

The designer has also been experiencing an evolution on the business side. Steadily, and ever so quietly, she’s taken on the role of local manufacturer.

The idea came about unexpectedly in 2012. Fresh off competing on season eight of *Project Runway*, Southiphong had taken a trip to China to source production services for the first collection of her South by Andy South line. When the China option fell through, Southiphong took matters into her own hands, literally. “I ended up doing the whole first collection in my studio with one other seamstress right up to the deadline,” she says. The accomplishment offered the designer some fresh perspective on manufacturing in the Islands. “That first season taught me that we can do this ourselves, we can produce in Hawai’i.”

Then reality set in. “I had thought, if I can do it here, surely I can find other people here that can do it for me. The answer was and still is a no,” Southiphong says. So her team started into production themselves. “Things lined up to push

Southiphong (standing) and model in South by Andy South evening wear at Kailua Beach, one of the designer’s favorite retreats.

us further in that direction. I had machines to start with and was picking up more along the way, and meeting the people who are now my seamstresses. Now it's my bread and butter."

Manufacturing in Hawai'i grew from a garment industry that employed a few hundred people in the Territory in the 1940s, to about 1,600 in the 1950s, into a heyday in the 1960s-'70s (statistics are hard to come by). But sharp competition from cheaper international competitors shrank the local garment industry in recent years to fewer than 5,000.

Three of the original Island fashion labels, Surf Line Hawai'i, Tori Richard and Tolani Sportswear, are second-generation owned and remain committed to manufacturing here.

"We celebrated our 60th anniversary last year," says Lloyd Kawakami, the son of Tolani Sportswear founders Keiji and Edith Kawakami. "I believe as a business owner I have a responsibility to keep my employees employed. That has always been our philosophy for over 60 years now. I put myself in their shoes, I wouldn't want to hear one day that I lost my job because the work is somewhere else now."

Recently, Southiphong made a strategic decision to close her spacious Chinatown atelier and move her factory to Kalihi to cut overhead costs. The new location means fewer distractions and a renewed focus on profitability for herself and her staff of 10, which includes eight seamstresses and two pattern makers.

Despite being the new kid, Southiphong is making her mark. The same strong work ethic and levelheadedness that made her a *Project Runway* favorite is helping her win over industry veterans. "Once the older manufacturers had a chance to speak to me face to face, they realized that I'd thought about the risk and know what I'm capable of, and that I'm able to do everything—make patterns, cut, sew and project-manage."

Today, her client list is growing and includes such familiar names as Sig Zane Designs and Punahou School, which has hired Southiphong to redesign and produce its band uniforms.

She praises Punahou for investing in local companies. "The whole idea is to support sustainable local businesses so that we all can thrive," she explains. "It circulates—the money that I make

ARI SOUTHIPHONG

► **Covetable fashion item:** Valentino black leather, gold-studded stilettoes with metal heels. They're classic, yet so damn sexy!

What grounds you? Any time I can spend out countryside on a farm working in dirt, whether I'm in Kahuku or Kunia, is a total stress release.

HONOLULU FASHION WEEK

Find out more at honolulu.fashionweek.com

► **Want more local fashion?**

Join HONOLULU Magazine at Hawai'i's first official Fashion Week, which includes designer runway shows by world-renowned fashion producer Lynne Hanzawa O'Neill. You can buy limited-edition collaboration pieces hot off the runway, visit beauty bars for tips and makeovers and shop new Hawai'i designer fashions available exclusively during HONOLULU Fashion Week, Nov. 6-9 at the Hawai'i Convention Center.

► **The partners include**

HONOLULU Magazine, Japan Fashion Week Organization, Hawai'i Fashion Incubator, the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism, Hawaiian Airlines, Bank of Hawai'i, Neiman Marcus, Mercedes-Benz of Honolulu and INspiration Furniture.

► **Hawai'i Fashion Month**

Designed to promote Hawai'i as a fashion destination and strengthen the local industry, Hawai'i Fashion Month marks its second year with a month-long calendar of events to promote and elevate all aspects of Hawai'i's fashion industry including design, manufacturing, education, art and retail. Find out more at hawaiifashionmonth.com.

from the order goes into the business I'm doing with Puka Prints, who's printing the fabric order." The uniforms have become a passion project for Southiphong. Still in the works, the results so far are looking good: a cool graphic print, new breathable fabrics and clever details, including detachable pieces.

Using new cash flow from the production side of her business, Southiphong is eager to turn her attention back to other passion projects. She plans to release a new South by Andy South collection before the end of the year, one that will return the line to its strongly tailored roots. She'll also be tending to her company's blossoming custom design department. Ever the entrepreneur, she's even toying with the idea of launching a mobile pop-up shop.

Looking forward, Southiphong sees a lot of potential. "I hope that there will be growth on the manufacturing side. Now young designers see that it's not just a crap job. They realize the level of success you can achieve. As an efficient, quality production house, you can really call the shots."

On her wish list: "A much larger resource for notions and fabrics—the supplier here is limited because the market here is limited. A local textiles supplier who could warehouse a lot of it—that would make it a lot easier than having to travel." Currently, she's sourcing all of her fabric from LA and New York. But that could change. Southiphong's entrepreneurial wheels are still at work: "Maybe I'll be that person. Maybe I'll start importing fabric and be a supplier as well!"

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