

LEADERS & SUCCESS

The Hawaiian Shirt Monarch

Innovate: Alfred Shaheen's feel for fabric, fashion made his colorful clothing boom

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INVESTOR'S BUSINESS DAILY

If a visionary builds his business from the ground up, Alfred Shaheen fits the mold swimmingly.

Considered the pioneer in bringing Hawaiian fashion to a global consumer base, Shaheen did so with his first stitch of fabric.

He took a family company that consisted of making custom dresses and turned it into a multimillion-dollar wholesale and retail business.

Shaheen (1922-2008) did so by creating unique clothing items from styles that appealed first to the small population of the Hawaiian Islands in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

He expanded the concept into a brand that saw his goods featured in the biggest and most exclusive department stores worldwide. He especially turned his touristy "aloha" shirts into fashionable garments.

"He was a true visionary," said Linda Arthur, a professor and curator for the Washington State University Department of Apparel, Merchandising, Design and Textiles. "He started in a place (Hawaii) where there was no industry to speak of and created one from the ground up, creating a truly vertically integrated business."

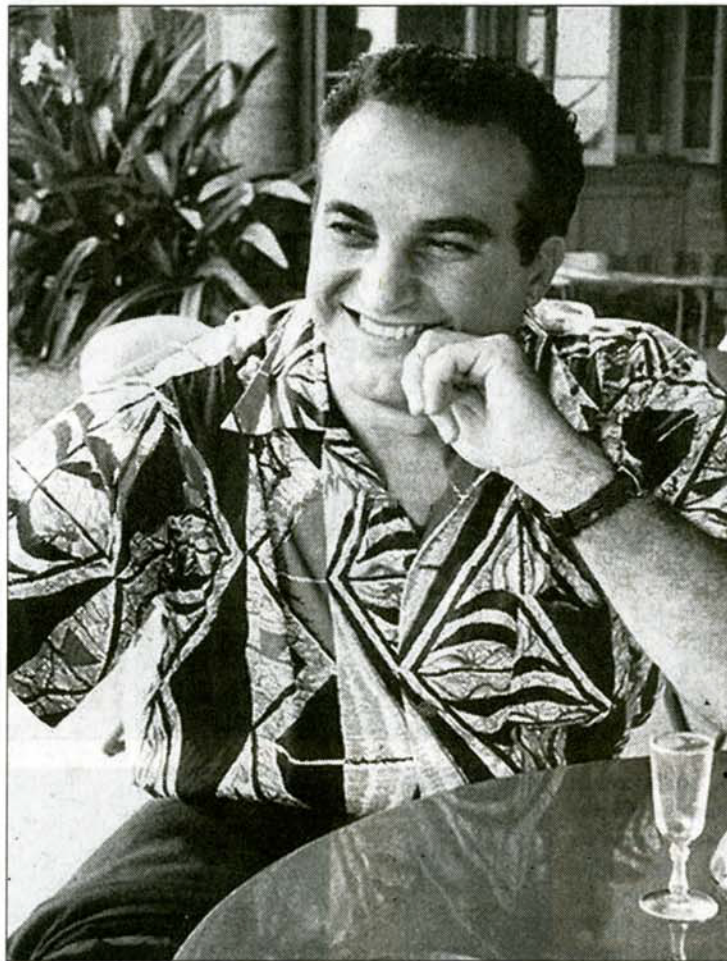
In the late 1940s and early '50s, Hawaii had no garment industry, just mom-and-pop stores that made and designed clothing with fabric shipped in. Those shipments were often plagued by work stoppages that made it tough to count on a steady flow of material.

"The greatest lesson he ever taught me," Camille Shaheen-Tunberg, his daughter, told IBD, "was to not have to rely on others when embarking on business ventures, but learn to do things for yourself."

Smart Guy

"He was a genius," Dale Hope, creative director for Kahala Sportswear and author of the book "The Aloha Shirt," told the Honolulu Advertiser. "Nobody came close to having the deep knowledge, and having the respect for the artists, the art, the printing, the distribution and the retailing. To be a vertical manufacturer — where you create your own art, make your own piece goods, sell them at your own retail stores and do wholesale accounts worldwide — that was pretty darn impressive."

In 1949, Shaheen established Sand 'n Surf Hand Prints in a Quonset hut left standing after World War II. Using his math, physics and aeronautical engineering background gained during a stint at Whittier (Calif.) College the previous de-



Shaheen flew combat missions in World War II, then returned to Hawaii and turned his family clothing business into a worldwide phenomenon. AP

cade, he created his fabric using equipment assembled from parts found in Hawaiian junkyards.

"The biggest problem he encountered when he started was there was no labor pool in Hawaii (for fashion)," said Shaheen-Tunberg. "He had to learn all of the methods to making and designing the fabrics and teach them to everyone who worked for him."

By 1950, he had pieced together machinery that let him print, dye and finish the fabrics. Key to his success, says Arthur, was teaming up with textile chemist Edmund Luntz, whom he had met in California. Luntz was instrumental in helping Shaheen develop the dye process for creating the metallic paint colors that characterized his clothing. In the fashion world, what's fresh and new sells. Two years later his operation was producing 60,000 yards of fabric a month.

In 1956, he built an \$8 million factory showroom and office complex near Honolulu. By 1959, his business employed over 400 people, and his worldwide sales combined with his chain of retail stores in Hawaii grossed more than \$4 million a year — or \$30 million in today's money.

"He was responsible for the globalization of fashion in the United States," said Arthur, who has studied and written extensively about

Hawaiian fashion. "He incorporated Asian and Polynesian designs into clothing and introduced it to the mainland at a time when the fashion industry was hungry for something new and different."

Arthur says his marketing skills were formidable, using the clothing's hang tags to tell a story about the design pattern to help make them unique. She also points out that department stores showcased his designs in their own boutiques for island fashion and furniture.

"Shaheen's clothing was not haute couture, but it was high fashion," said Arthur, who co-wrote "The Art of the Aloha Shirt" with DeSoto Brown. "His women's clothing was especially popular not just because of the designs, but because of the fit. He knew how to make garments that fit women well and accentuated a woman's best features."

Shaheen grasped another front. He saw how air freight would help him expand his business into the mainland and beyond, letting him keep pace with fast-moving fashion industry cycles.

One reason for that was Shaheen's interest in flying. After studying aeronautics in college, he signed up to fight in World War II. He ended up flying P-47 Thunderbirds in 85 combat missions in France, Germany and Italy over three years.

Shaheen's Keys

What: Popularized high-end Hawaiian garments in the mainstream fashion industry.

How: "My father realized the only way to succeed in this business was to make his own fabric and not rely on others," said Camille Shaheen-Tunberg.

After the war ended in 1945, he trained pilots with the Hawaiian Air National Guard. "He maintained his interest in planes, and that probably led him to anticipate the potential for air freight in his business," said Shaheen-Tunberg.

He met his first wife through tragedy. His cousin Emil died in the war and had told Shaheen wonderful things about his fiancée, Amelia. When Shaheen returned from Europe, he sought her out, and the two were soon married.

Shaheen was born in New Jersey into a family with a history in the textile industry. The family moved to Hawaii in the late '30s around the time Shaheen headed to California for college. After returning from the war, he set out to expand his family's modest clothing business.

With Shaheen at the controls, the business flourished into the 1960s and '70s. In 1961, his shirt designs reached a worldwide mainstream audience when Elvis Presley was photographed wearing one of his shirts on the album cover for the "Blue Hawaii" movie soundtrack.

Shaheen maintained his business for more than 40 years, keeping his production operation in Hawaii the entire time before retiring in 1988.

He died last December of complication from diabetes at age 86.

Huzzahs

In 2001, the state of Hawaii recognized Shaheen for his contributions to the state with a Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2006, the Honolulu Advertiser named him one of the 150 most influential people, events and institutions to effect social, economic, political and cultural change in Hawaii from 1856 onward.

Shaheen-Tunberg retains the rights to Shaheen's designs. She licenses them to designer Reyn Spooner, who has created reinterpretations of Shaheen's original textile designs from the '50s and '60s.

Today, Shaheen's original garments are prized collectibles. It's not unusual for an original Shaheen shirt to sell on eBay for \$5,000 or more. Shaheen-Tunberg has spent the last decade collecting many of her father's original garments and working to organize an art exhibition featuring those designs.