

## REMEMBRANCES

## ALFRED SHAHEEN

1922-2008

*Hawaiian-Shirt Designer  
Outfitted Elvis and Sinatra*

BY STEPHEN MILLER

When a lei-draped Elvis Presley posed for the cover of the soundtrack to "Blue Hawaii," he sported a red aloha shirt from the man who made the garment world-famous, Alfred Shaheen.

The 1961 movie, Elvis's biggest box-office hit according to Hawaii magazine, came near the apex of a postwar tiki and South Seas-island craze that included the musical "South Pacific," the spread of

muu-muus and pu-pu platters, and Hawaiian statehood in 1959.

Elvis wasn't the only one wearing the wild-style shirts that signified everything from Hawaiian ethnicity to surfer cool to casual Friday. Frank Sinatra wore one in "From Here to Eternity," and Tom Selleck wore one in "Magnum PI." More recently, Hawaiian native President Barack Obama has been photographed in aloha shirts, and so has the Rev. Rick Warren, who gave the inaugural invocation.

As the dean of Hawaiian couture, Mr. Shaheen, who died Dec. 22 at age 86, not only dressed Hollywood stars and surfers in his aloha shirts (an island industry term for what the rest of the world calls Hawaiian shirts), he also was famed for his women's wear, sold at department-store boutiques nationwide.

Like much of Hawaiian culture, Mr. Shaheen was an import to the islands. Of Lebanese heritage, he grew up in New Jersey, where his family owned textile mills. He was a decorated fighter pilot in the European theater during World War II, and after the war followed his family to Hawaii, where they had relocated.

In 1948, he started manufacturing rayon Hawaiian shirts in a Quonset hut left over from the war, with four seamstresses

taught by his mother. As the business expanded from shirts to dresses, Mr. Shaheen hired native and Japanese designers to create lush textile prints based on patterns from Hawaii, other islands and Japan. He often included a brochure with each garment describing where the fabric design came from.

"He wanted his designers to bring in ethnic images from around the world, because he saw Hawaii as a melting pot," says Linda B. Arthur, author of "The Art of the Aloha Shirt."

Within a decade, Mr. Shaheen's payroll had grown to about 400, and annual revenue to \$4 million, putting him at the top of what became the third-largest industry in Hawaii, after sugar and pineapples. He was the first to use high-fashion models and the first

to market actively on the mainland.

Lobbied by the Hawaiian Fashion Guild, the state senate in the early 1960s issued a proclamation recommending aloha wear for business attire all summer long, says Ms. Arthur, also a professor of apparel marketing at Washington State University. In 1966, Aloha Friday became official, according to her 2000 book, "Aloha Attire." She contends that Hawaiian shirts were the vessels that carried casual Friday around the country.

"Surfers brought [the shirts] back to the mainland," she says. "These guys then founded Silicon Valley and brought along casual Friday. It was in Hawaii 20 years before it came to the mainland."

Email [remembrances@wsj.com](mailto:remembrances@wsj.com)



Camille Shaheen