

and her best friend—to feel they had to go see them. Mai Tai was still waitressing, but several years had passed since the fried watermelon. She would soon find out how far she'd really come, because walking into the Forbidden City changed her life.

She watched the dancers, fell in love with the man in the famous duo, and he fell in love with her. He soon split up with his partner and asked Mai Tai to replace her. They were married and began touring together: "Palm Springs, L.A., all over."

"His last name was Tai Sing, and that's how I became Mai Tai Sing. My original name is Mai, and I would prefer to be called that, but everyone began calling me Mai Tai. It stuck."

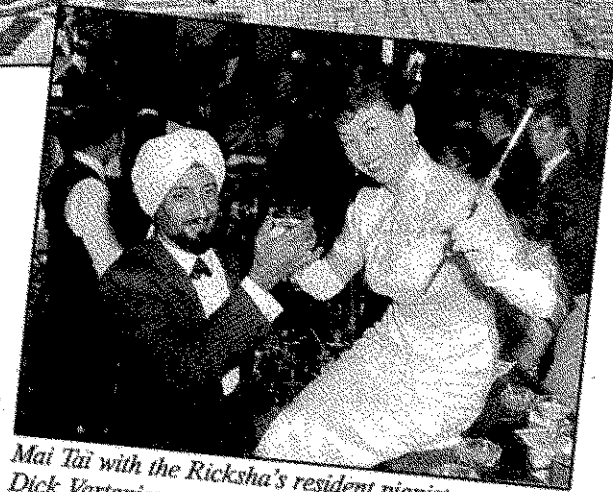
The Tai Sing team produced two daughters, but the marriage ended in divorce. Mai Tai danced solo after that, quite successfully. "I began to perfect my own technique," she says, "combining traditional Chinese steps with American modern and jazz." Her longest engagement had her kicking and spinning in front of a chorus of other dancers at the Thunderbird Hotel in Las Vegas. She was the star of the "China Dolls" extravaganza.

Mai Tai's dancing career stopped for a time after her mother and sister were killed in a car accident. Her father had run off several years before with a younger woman, and now the remaining members of the family—Mai Tai and her three brothers—decided they should be together. They took the money their mother had left them and in 1959 opened the Ricksha in a most unlikely location: an alley in Chinatown. "It was just a dirty alley," Mai Tai explains, "called Tong Alley. You'd walk along, and it was kind of a

*Mai Tai with frequent Ricksha patron Dan Duryea.*



*"Did you get that?" Mai Tai seems to be asking Herb Caen, as Steve Allen performs at the Ricksha's mosaic piano bar.*



*Mai Tai with the Ricksha's resident pianist, Dick Vartanian.*

mystical experience. You'd open an ordinary-looking door in the alley and step into fluorescent light. A piano bar with an exotic ambiance like in *Casablanca*."

Pretty soon some rather famous patrons began opening that door. From 1959 until it was sold in 1970, the Ricksha entertained a long list of luminaries, including Adlai Stevenson, Frank Sinatra, Steve Allen, Stan Musial, Ruth Roman, Victor Borge, Ethel Merman, Judy Garland, Dan Duryea, Shekey Greene, Buddy Hackett and Herb Caen.

Sometimes Mai Tai didn't recognize the celebrities. One time a group of famous rock 'n' roll singers came to her club. Mai Tai's passion was Chinese opera, so it wasn't her fault she'd never heard of this shaggy-haired quartet: The Beatles. "They looked pretty weird to me," Mai Tai says. "The morning after they were at the Ricksha, the alley filled with fans. Screaming, silly people. They wanted to buy the stools The Beatles had sat on and the glasses they drank out of. I couldn't understand all that and I told them to go away. The glasses had been

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