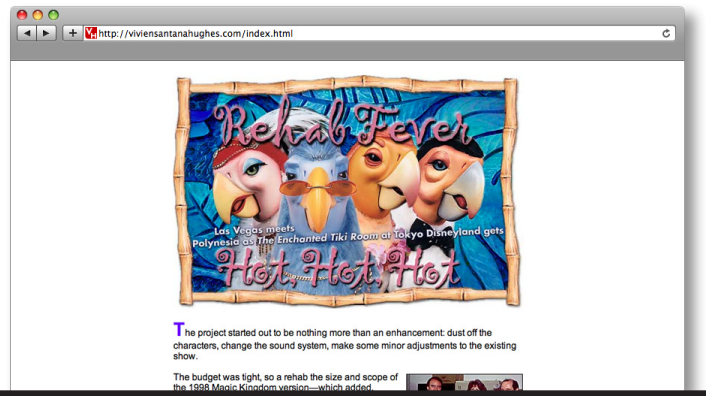


WDeye Online

by Vivien Santana Hughes



Note: interview subjects' last names have been deleted from Imagineering pieces written for internal publication.

Rehab Fever

Las Vegas Meets Polynesia as *The Enchanted Tiki Room* at Tokyo Disneyland gets Hot, Hot Hot

The project started out to be nothing more than an enhancement: dust off the characters, change the sound system, make some minor adjustments to the existing show.

The budget was tight, so a rehab the size and scope of the 1998 Magic Kingdom version—which added, among other things, new birds, special effects and Uh Oa the Tiki goddess—was out. *The Enchanted Tiki Room* at Tokyo Disneyland was not destined to be “Under New Management.”

Classic feathered friends Fritz, Johnny, Pierre and José were there to stay.

Or were they?

Inspired by some Vegas show tunes that he had been recently listening to, former senior vice president Eddie █████ had an idea. “We can do a whole new show here—a show where Vegas meets Polynesia!” explained Eddie to the team (while simultaneously doing some hilarious impersonations of famous lounge singers). “And we can do it using the same figures that are already there.”

But using the same *Audio-Animatronics*® macaws didn’t mean they couldn’t fluff up the fowls’ feathers—and then some. In a makeover job worthy of *Glamour* magazine, Tujungua costumers gave the birds a Vegas-inspired look to match their new characters: José became Danno (a smooth and suave crooner, complete with a tropical drink on his perch), Pierre turned into the flamboyant ladies’ bird Scats (complete with sunglasses and jewelry), Johnny became Buddy, the tuxedo-wearing leader of the flock and, the most stunning of all, Fritz was transformed into Lava, a sexy, sultry female bird (hmmm, make that a makeover worthy of Jerry Springer. . .).

A Premise That’s for the Birds. . . and the Audience

The set-up for *The Enchanted Tiki Room Now Playing Get the Fever!* is spelled out, rather, rapped out, in the preshow. Two toucans—hot rappers “The Beakie Boys”—explain the current premise: The tikis have all gone to sleep and no one knows how to wake them up. So a new cast of performers has flown in to help rouse the slumbering gods. Catch is, they can’t do it without the help of the audience clapping, making noise and singing along.

Now remember, this pre-show rap started off in English. “Generally Japanese lyrics do not rhyme,” says senior concept writer, Scott █████. “But [the translators] went out of their way and came through with flying colors on this one.” And, admitting he’s not a big rap fan, Scott himself hip-hopped the extra mile to write the lyrics in the first place. “I had to listen to rap songs over and over and over again as I drove to and from work. Once on the freeway, I was really getting into the music, banging on the steering wheel and laying down tracks in my head, when I noticed some people in another car were staring at me. It had to look strange—this bald, middle-aged, sedan-driving, rap-challenged guy trying to bust a rhyme!”

However he got there, it worked: “The sound track and the songs are great—very, very fun,” says project director Bruce █████. “The music never stops—the dialogue is all in the songs—so it’s a musical extravaganza from beginning to end.” Adds creative director Joe █████, “Eddie’s musical choices are very upbeat and high energy—the whole show is very ‘Eddie’ in many ways, which is a great thing!”

And besides the fun, there was a more pragmatic reason to emphasize music: Theater shows at Tokyo Disneyland have typically garnered the lowest attendance, according to Joe, because you get 90 percent repeaters in that Park. “Once you know a punch line, you don’t have to hear it a second time,” says Joe. “But if the music is infectious, it’s like listening to your favorite song: You want to hear it again and again. This is a very exciting, musical-based show that our guests will want to experience again and again.”

Purists will be happy to hear that the classic Tiki song (In the Tiki, Tiki, Tiki, Tiki, Tiki. . . you get the picture) is reprised first as each of the four hip, swingin' birds sing a couple lines rewritten to help establish the characters. "When you consider how few functions these birds have, you realize what a brilliant job the programmers did of capturing the birds' personalities," says Joe, demonstrating the six basic head and chest movements (sorry we didn't capture that on video!) they had to work with. (An A-100 figure, like the *Pirates* auctioneer, has around 42 functions.) Explains associate show animator Sean [REDACTED], "The dialogue and music helped carry me through it; I was animating to the beat. The challenge was in layering the functions to keep the movements from being repetitive."

As the show continues, this new tiki crew gets right to work trying to rouse the slumbering tiki gods. From Danno's rendition of "Hot, Hot, Hot" (aided by a mobile full of Brazilian showgirl birds) to Lava's sultry singing of the Peggy Lee classic "Fever" that ultimately does the trick, everyone ends up happy.

"We've given the traditionally reserved Japanese audience permission to have fun," says Scott. And when Joe brought the OLC executives through, "They were tapping their feet, bobbing their heads, clapping their hands—and there were a lot of smiles. Their guards were immediately taken down, which is something our shows are supposed to do."

The Birds Didn't Get the Only Makeover

While the main theater looks unchanged, it has been spruced up behind the scenes. "We had a tight schedule and a limited budget," says project coordinator Valerie [REDACTED]. "We had to be selective about how to give OLC the best possible show within those constraints." And great sound being a key feature for a musical, the value was with a sound system upgrade. "One of the greatest challenges was convincing OLC to make the leap from using their existing analog audio system to a digital audio system. They were concerned about introducing new technology because they would have to learn how to maintain it," says Valerie. "But that was the only way to afford the audio quality we were striving for, as well as complete our programming within the required time. Fortunately, OLC agreed and we came up with a great sounding show."

Along with the new audio came some upgrades to the lighting system. "The lighting is over the top—it adds so much excitement to the show," says Joe. "The marriage of the lighting, music, script and programming are what make the show so watchable."

But new systems alone don't make an attraction great. "Walt told everyone to keep 'plussing the process,' " shares Joe. "That's where you take your piece of work, look at what was done before and make it one bit better. That's what happened on this show. Everyone who came to the process really pushed it and 'plussed' it to help tell the story better and really drive the energy of the experience."

And that sense of fun has been infectious: Since opening last October, says Bruce, word's gotten around. "There is actually a queue for Tiki," he says. Adds Valerie, "The latest report from our very pleased OLC counterparts is that the show is pulling in up to 70 percent greater attendance than before." Pretty good for an attraction that almost had its final curtain call.

Concludes Bruce, "We fixed what needed to be fixed and maximized what was there. The project was fast, economical, a big success and guests love it. What more can you say?"