

THE STYLIN' ISLANDS

Hawai'i's fashion designers have a worldwide audience

BY ALEX SALKOVER

Rona Bennett and Lan Chung had a problem. Laid off from jobs at high-end French clothing company Agathe B in 2003, the two young designers needed a paycheck but wondered if they could land an equally interesting gig.

So they decided to start their own company, Fighting Eel. But instead of Los Angeles, Paris, London, or New York, the duo based it in Hawai'i, a place they both loved. They knew they'd need to spend time on planes to access broader markets and stay in front of mainland tastemakers, but they thought living in the islands would be worth the effort.

"We bought two air passes for \$1,000 each so we could travel back and forth from Hawai'i to Los Angeles," Bennett says. "We had a lot of confidence in ourselves. Seven years later, we're still here, so we must be doing something right."

Something right, indeed. Fighting Eel's designs now grace the racks of dozens of stores around the country and have significant international distribution. Although Fighting Eel may not be a huge house of couture, it has broken into fashion's big leagues, and the two founders can now maintain a studio in Honolulu's hip Chinatown neighborhood. Honolulu's men fashionistas regularly flock to Fighting Eel trunk sales, and the studio is a prime spot for first Friday evening neighborhood parties and downtown art walks.

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Bennett and Chung are among a vanguard of fashion pioneers who have raised the Hawai'i fashion scene's international status. Their chic creations go far beyond the tired aloha attire clichés that have long dominated broad perceptions of Hawai'i's prêt-à-porter. Over the past decade, more than a dozen hot fashion and design companies have popped up in the islands. You can find their creations at fashion outposts in Manhattan, such as the Inesita boutique (Fighting Eel), or in Sports Illustrated's famed resort edition (Lafayette Swimwear). There's even one A-lister in the competitive wedding dress arena.

These Hawai'i companies' ability to compete effectively comes in part from critical changes in the fashion world. "Fashion moves much faster now," says Bennett. "Before, trends would go from the catwalk to the magazines to boutiques. Now, as soon as the collections are shown, everyone can see them on the computer. It makes it a lot easier for people who are in remote places like Hawai'i to know what's happening in fashion around the world in real time."

Equally important, the global move toward casual dressing has favored Hawai'i's designers, who live at the nexus of slippah-wearing lifestyle and cosmopolitan cool. Here is a quick look at five island fashion houses making waves beyond these shores.



FIGHTING EEL

Rona Bennett and Lan Chung (from left) blend chic fabrics and clean lines to create sexy yet unpretentious silhouettes. Much of their clothing line is mix-and-match, with color palettes that vary from screaming lipstick reds to more subtle grays and blues. Above all, these clothes are made to be versatile, worn equally comfortably with rubber slippah or high-heeled pumps. Ashley Greene, a star of the wildly popular *Twilight* film series is a customer, and she's not the only celebrity fan. The company's headquarters (above) is open to the public Monday through Saturday in Chinatown, and Rona and Lan are often around to answer questions—a rare island touch that one wouldn't expect from the Pacific or Chanel design teams.
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INSPIRATION (RONA): "We are inspired by travel. We love to travel, and each time we go on a trip together, we come up with a bunch of ideas. They're not always related to designing the collection, but the ideas help unlock my brain. On our last trip to Australia, we got the idea to open our new Tahiti boutique, Tee'ee Bar. You have to go and see what's out there."

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