

Ancestral Voices

By Bertil Lintner

On the surface, the band at the Royal Papeete Hotel's nightclub looks like any other. Their instruments—electric guitars, bongo drums, and Western brass and percussion instruments—wouldn't be out of place in hotel discos from Sydney to Salzburg.

But this group of musicians doesn't do cover versions of Beatles' numbers. Instead they sing in their own tongue, Maohi, belting an entirely new musical concept that mixes ancestral lyrics with contemporary music.

On the dance floor, the dancers gyrate their hips while their feet and shoulders remain perfectly still. It's a hula of sorts, but without grass skirts and ukuleles of the tourist brochures. "We're Polynesians. This is our culture," declares a young man in the audience.

The hula girls and ukulele players

have not disappeared entirely, but they now perform almost exclusively at dance shows at major hotels catering to tourists from France, the United States and Japan. Among the Polynesians themselves, however, a new musical era has taken root. "Before, our singers sang almost only love songs. Now it is protest, about being broke, anti-colonial and anti-nuclear," says Nelson Ortas, a pro-independence politician who once ran a club in Papeete.

One form the new music takes is called *fenua*. It has its roots in the *himene*, choral pieces traditionally performed without instruments during the yearly Tiurai festival in July. A prominent part

of the festival are the dance and song competitions, particularly the *himene tarava*, traditional recitations of myths and legends.

The new performers, though, sing *himene tarava* hymns to the beat of synthesized music, an innovation that has proved highly popular. When a recording of the performance was launched on Sep-

tember 13, 1,500 compact discs and tapes were sold out in less than three weeks. "It was an instant success," says Eric Laroche, the French director of Oceane Production, Tahiti's biggest music-production company. "It was old and familiar and new and exciting at the same time." ■

Bertil Lintner is a REVIEW correspondent based in Bangkok.



Tahitian rocker in Papeete.