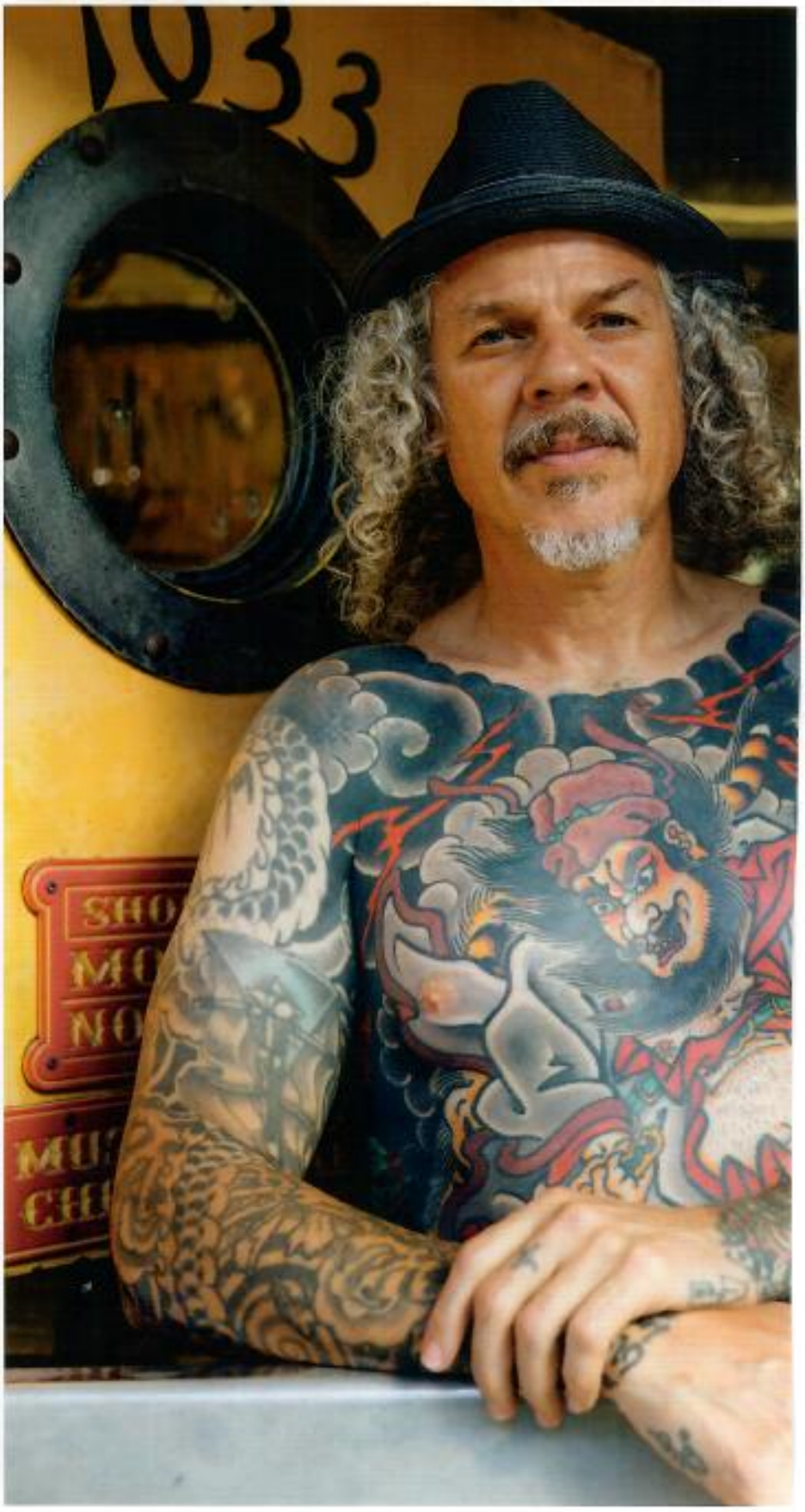
STORY BY **CATHARINE LO GRIFFIN**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **BRENDEN DONAHUE**

Anchors, Skulls and Hula Girls

Remembering Sailor Jerry's indelible legacy in Chinatown



The proposition is straightforward: Pay $60, shake the treasure chest and pick your prize. If you don't like it, walk away or trade with someone else in line. It's simple, but because the prize is a tattoo, it's also irreversible. That's not an issue for these diehards, who are here to get a Sailor Jerry design at the original Sailor Jerry tattoo parlor. They are proud to be among what the renowned, larger-than-life tattoo artist once called "the tattooed barbarians that live and die on world battlegrounds."

Waiting patiently in line is John Poindexter II, who was buying a bottle of Sailor Jerry rum at a grocery store in San Diego when his dad pointed to the label and said, "That's the guy who gave me my tattoo." He showed his son the Popeye tattoo he got when he was stationed in Honolulu in 1972. After his dad passed away, the younger Poindexter went in search of the Sailor Jerry shop in Chinatown, and there he found tattoo artist Harisumi, who was able to re-create the design from a photo. His mom also accompanied him and got a shaka design on her wrist. "It was a big deal," Poindexter says. "She wanted to get a tattoo where my dad got his tattoo, so we came here."

It's not an uncommon story at the Sailor Jerry Festival, an annual

Punk and ink are staples at the Sailor Jerry Festival in Honolulu, an annual homage to Norman Keith Collins, a.k.a. Sailor Jerry, one of the most famous and infamous tattoo artists in history. On pages 102–103, tattoo artist Harisumi at Old Ironside, the studio he opened in the original Sailor Jerry shop in Chinatown.

celebration of the tattoo pioneer and the disappeared era he conquered. The festival features entertainment across twenty-one venues: live bands—punk, metal, ska, rock, reggae—a burlesque show, a pinup girls pageant, art exhibits, a skateboarding exhibition, a comedy show and of course tattooing. Every year, fans come in droves to keep his legacy alive; perhaps no other tattoo artist has left such an indelible mark, whether on human skin or American culture.

In April 1940, the *Honolulu Advertiser* featured a story about a prolific tattoo artist in Chinatown who would become a legend: "Craftsman in Needlepoint," the photo caption read. "Sailor Jerry is an old Honolulu shoreside friend to the boys of the Fleet who go in for illustrated epidermises." The handsome young artist wielded his electric gun with an earnest smile.

"A sailor minus a tattoo is like a woman without makeup," Jerry told the reporter. "The boys with the fleet will want something pictorial to take back home. They will probably display a hula girl on an arm. When asked by the gang at home how the hula is done, all that will be necessary for a demonstration will be a flexing of the arm muscles, so-so, and the girl will do a simulated hula." The average tattoo cost $3; some were as cheap as 50 cents. For a quarter you could imprint your Social Security number—which would make it easier to identify your body if you were killed in action.

1940 was the same year President Franklin D. Roosevelt moved the Pacific Fleet from San Diego to Hawai'i. Honolulu was already bustling with sailors; after the attack on Pearl Harbor, millions more came through. In 1942 alone the USO Hawai'i served more than six million service members. Against an ominous backdrop of fear—air raid sirens, barbed wire on the beach, 10 p.m. curfews, nightly blackouts—Sailor Jerry practiced his art.

When ships came to port, the sailors flocked to Chinatown, then a red-light district of bars and brothels where men stood in line hundreds deep to get, as one of Jerry's designs boasted, "stewed, screwed and tattooed." The ratio of men to women in Hawai'i at the time, according to historians Beth Bailey and David Farber, was approximately four to one (seventeen to one if you exclude married women). "The soldiers and sailors observed the conventions of a society of men, of young men who may soon be dead. They spoke in obscenities. They drank too much. They chased women," Bailey and Farber wrote in *The First Strange Place: The Alchemy of Race and Sex in World War II Hawaii*. "Many people viewed this behavior with pity and horror and the kind of resolve one develops from carrying gas masks to weddings."

The alcohol limit was four shots of whiskey, which the men—two hundred and fifty thousand men a month—would slam in succession. Before they returned to ship, thousands went to see Sailor Jerry for a souvenir. Jerry's work was marked by bold, clean outlines, heavy shading, vivid colors and later an infusion of Japanese elements he adapted from the tattoo masters, or *horishi*, of Japan. His style defined old-school Americana, its iconography easily recognizable today: anchors, ships, sharks, skulls, pinup girls, eagles, hearts emblazoned with a lover's name.

"I think tattoos are amulets. It's things that [people] like, things they want to take on to themselves and gain those characteristics," says Jerry's most famous protégé, Don Ed Hardy, in a documentary about Sailor Jerry called *Hori Smoku Sailor Jerry*. "The classic stuff was a little distillation of everything dramatic about life. It had sadness, sex, death, longing, friendship, patriotism, resignation and humor."

Through years of steady correspondence with practitioners around the globe, Jerry amassed a clearinghouse of designs and ideas about technique, tools and philosophy of the underground art. "This kind of knowledge was life's blood in a tattoo world that operated on hearsay," Hardy wrote in his own memoir, *Wear Your Dreams*. "There were no books, no tattoo magazines. There was only a slender grapevine between tattooists, and his was the most important."

Sailor Jerry was born Norman Keith Collins in Reno, Nevada, on January 14, 1911. As a teenager, he hitched rides in boxcars across the American frontier. Somewhere along the way, he discovered tattooing and started hand-poking ink to skin. Eventually he landed in Chicago and met Gib "Tatts" Thomas, a local legend who taught him to use an electric needle. One of Jerry's favorite stories, as retold by Hardy, was when Thomas and his friend brought Jerry to a morgue to practice. They left Jerry with a corpse on a gurney, and as soon as Jerry picked up the arm, the body sat up and hollered, "Hey, what do you think you are doing?"

It was an initiation to a fraternity of mavericks that indulged in irreverent pranks and unapologetic insults, the threads of lore from which the larger-than-life persona of Sailor Jerry is woven. These stunts often manifested as vendettas, like the time he sent a kid to ask for a purple dragon from rival Lou Norman, who said purple ink couldn't be done—and the kid revealed his arm to show Jerry had already done it. When Norman subsequently had a stroke, Jerry sent him a bouquet of purple orchids. On another occasion he told Norman that adding sugar to the watercolor on his "flash" (pre-drawn

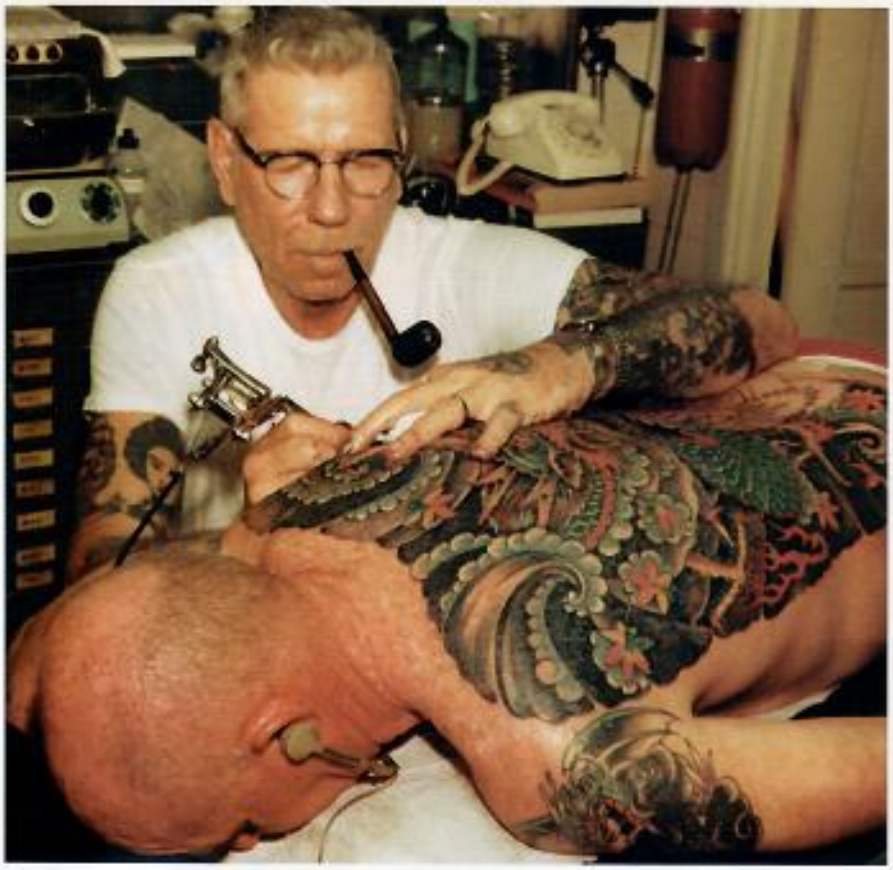


PHOTO COURTESY MERIEL COLLINS

LEFT / **"All the stuff that's written about Sailor Jerry is about Sailor Jerry—the man, the myth, the legend. Sailor Jerry is not Norman Keith Collins, the family man," says his daughter, Meriel Collins. "People are supposed to believe the legends," Collins, seen above, once said of his alter-ego. "Not understand them."**

ABOVE / **Collins, who was also a musician, poet and radio show host, is pictured above with his fifth wife, Louise, in 1947.**

designs) made the colors brighter. Norman tried it, and cockroaches ate the pages off the wall.

"All the stuff that's written about Sailor Jerry is about Sailor Jerry. Sailor Jerry is not Norman Keith Collins, the family man," says Meriel Collins, Jerry's daughter from his third wife, May Johansen. As Meriel remembers, the two worlds remained discrete.

Norman Collins had five wives and, by Meriel's count, seven kids. During her childhood their family lived on a boat in the Ala Wai Yacht Harbor. "Sailor" was the crux of Collins' identity, a devoted Navy man whose tour around the Pacific landed him in Honolulu, where he settled in 1931. A heart condition kept him from re-enlistment during WWII, so he joined the Merchant Marine. According to Hardy, "He held master's papers on practically every vessel afloat and was a stickler for details such as ships' rigging and nautical symbols in tattoo designs."

Meriel remembers her childhood in the '50s as carefree—"go to school, come home, throw the rope ladder over the side of the boat and jump in and swim." Occasionally her dad treated them to the drive-in movies. He went about his work in Chinatown, but he never brought his family into that world. "I think even he thought in those days that tattooing was not socially acceptable, so he never tattooed his kids." He drew bluebirds on her and took photos of them, but nothing permanent. To this day Meriel doesn't have a tattoo, but she takes time to admire ink on others—who often reveal a connection to Sailor Jerry.

Her father was very aware of his own importance, Meriel says. "Dad always had to be number one. In his mind he was." Collins was a Renaissance man who had no patience for anything phony. He played sax in a jazz band. He wrote poetry tinged with his sadistic humor. He read voraciously and was a self-taught mathematician and electrician. He found the Far East fascinating and embraced Chinese medicine. He was a shipbuilder and a captain—he met his fifth wife while giving a tour of Pearl Harbor.

Perhaps most publicly, he was "Old Ironsides," host of a late-night radio show, where he spouted ultra-right-wing theories in a diplomatic baritone. (Old Ironsides was mentioned in Collins' obituary, while Sailor Jerry was not.) "He was an absolute patriot. He loved America, do or die," Meriel says. "If you agreed with him, he would talk with you. If you didn't, you didn't exist."

The IRS came knocking in 1950, and instead of bowing to what he regarded as government interference, Collins closed his Chinatown shop and didn't reopen until he partnered with Californian Bob Palm in 1960. Palm suddenly left town and sold his share to Jerry for a dollar. It was in this smoke-filled shop (Jerry was a smoker but not a drinker) at 1033 Smith Street—above a rowdy strip bar and with room enough for only two tables—that the seeds of modern tattooing took root. Sailor Jerry elevated the industry standard by being one of the first with an autoclave and single-use needles, and he modified tattoo machines to be more efficient and less damaging to the skin.

In 1972 the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* ran a feature, "She Chose a Flower for Her First Tattoo," by then-fashion editor Jocelyn Fujii. "[Tattoos] are becoming more acceptable as long as the work is done well. We're trying to get rid of the old sinister aspect—the tattoo of a naked girl on a man's arm," Jerry told Fujii. "We've progressed since the days of the old sponge-and-bucket shops, where needles were boiled but anything could happen. Today we throw the ink away after a job, sterilize all the instruments and materials, use soaps and alcohol." The legal age for getting a tattoo in Hawai'i at that time was 20, and Jerry's average customer was 25. Jerry was 62, and his slick pompadour was now white. In horn-rimmed glasses and a starched white shirt with "Sailor Jerry" monogrammed above the pocket, his vibe had become more grandfather than hell-raiser.

Collins died on June 12, 1973. A few days prior, he'd had a heart attack in a parking lot, woken up and ridden his Harley back home to Waipahu. He told his wife Louise that when he was gone, she should either sell the shop to one of three fellow artists—Ed Hardy, Zeke Owen or Mike Malone—or burn it. Malone bought the shop and renamed it China Sea Tattoo in honor of Sailor Jerry's adventures on the high seas. Collins was buried in the Cemetery of the Pacific at Punchbowl, resting in the paradise he never wanted to leave.

On a balmy summer eve half a century later, the queue outside 1033 Smith Street—now called Old Ironside, resurrected by masterful artist Hari Seda, a.k.a. Harisumi—stretches down the block and around the corner. Hari came to Honolulu after twenty-three years tattooing in Puerto Rico. He crossed paths with his buddy Christopher Danley, who had just bought the Sailor Jerry space, formerly a failed piercing business. They restored its integrity with fresh paint and old-school flash on the wall. Tragically, Danley died in a motorcycle crash a year after they opened. Fate left Hari to perpetuate Sailor Jerry's legacy. "As years went by, the word got around," says Hari. "Once sailors started finding out, it became the one spot to get tattooed."

At Old Ironside, Sailor Jerry's hula girl design remains a perennial favorite. Marked by bold, clean outlines, heavy shading and vivid colors, Sailor Jerry's style defined old-school Americana, its iconography easily recognizable today: anchors, ships, pinup girls, skulls, hearts emblazoned with a lover's name. Renowned artist Don Ed Hardy called Sailor Jerry "the king of tattooing in the world."

That's what everyone in line is waiting for. Local promoter Jason Miller and punk guitarist Josh Hancock, who established several Chinatown hot spots like Downbeat Diner, first partnered together in 2015 to organize the annual Sailor Jerry Festival. "The influence Sailor Jerry had is mind-boggling, and here he is laid to rest just a few miles away. The focus is not so much on what [tattooing] has become, but what the history is," says Miller, regarding the art form's acceptance into the mainstream. "Despite all the change that has happened, it's pretty remarkable how [Sailor Jerry's] designs have stood the test of time." Meriel Collins, grateful that her father's work is commemorated, likes to attend and meet his fans. Down the street at Manifest, the spirit of anti-establishment rises out of the mosh pit. Fourteen-year-old Finn Masterson is playing lead guitar for Giraffe Cult, one of the punk bands out of Kailua Music School, as his dad, Ian, looks on. Ian played the first six Sailor Jerry Festivals (pre-COVID) with the wildly popular reggae band Dread Ashanti, and he's pleased that the event enables the next generation to bring up tradition.

Back at Old Ironside, Harisumi thinks back to when he got his first tattoo in 1988 in New York City, where he was born. It was a tribal design by celebrity artist Jonathan Shaw, who opened NYC's first tattoo parlor. Tattoo shops were illegal in New York until 1997, so Shaw and others worked out of private studios that were hard to access. Hari played drums in a punk band called Oxblood, and his tattooing career began with him putting ink on fellow musicians and others in that scene. He never imagined someday he'd own one of the most historic tattoo shops in the world, where he could practice his own style and also incorporate elements of the notorious Sailor Jerry's style.

"It's pretty magical," Hari says, talking about Jerry's former customers who occasionally drop in. "At first they stay quiet and just look around. Then you start a conversation with them, and turns out they got tattooed by Jerry, and they show their tattoos: 'I got this in 1968.'"

"They reminisce about how Jerry used to run the shop, how the shop was set up, how things used to be, how the neighborhood has changed," he continues. "They were just kids then. And now they've had a life of experience. But they still have the tattoos to remind them of that moment." **hh**

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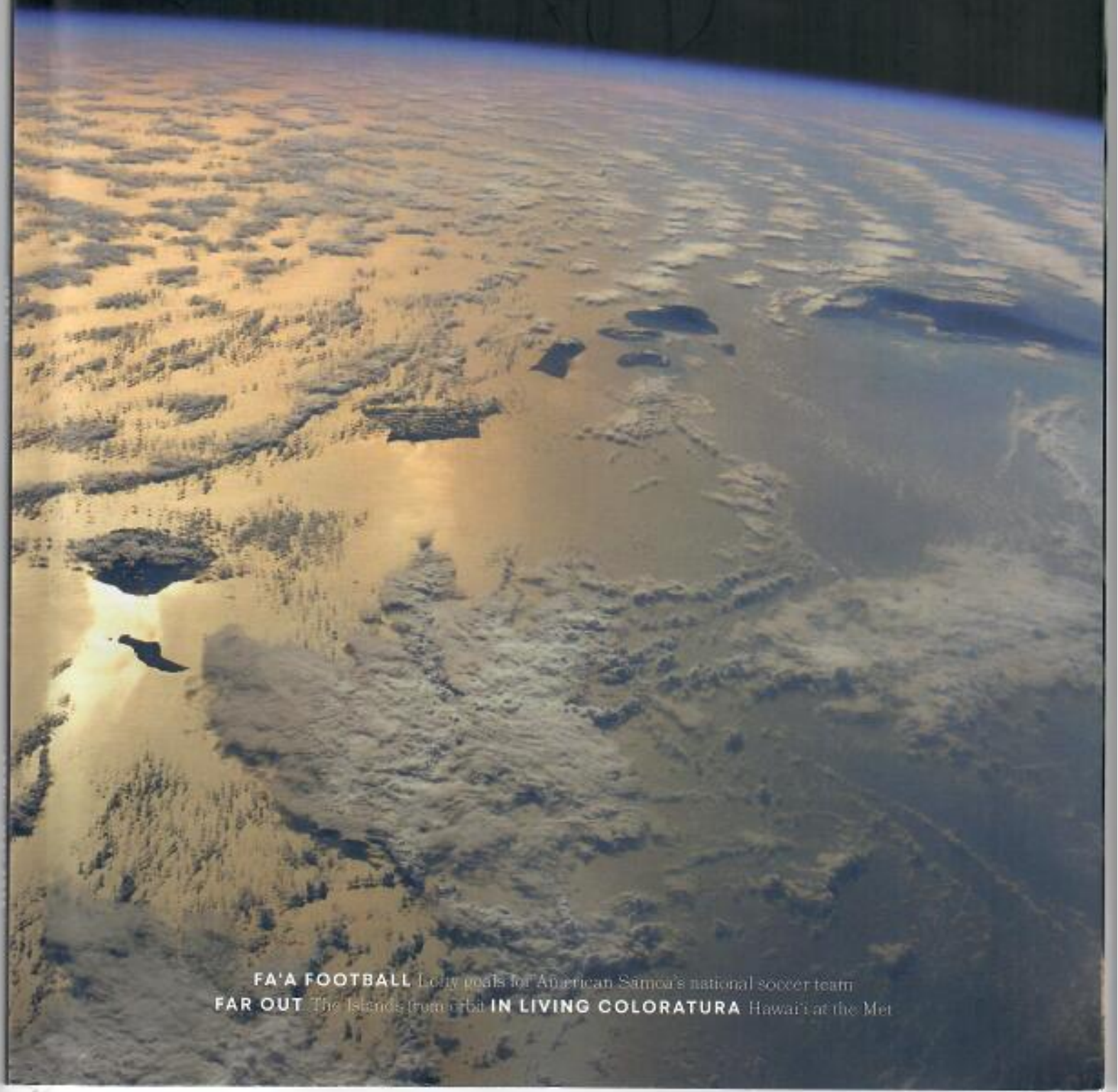

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