

## PALEKA LEINA'ALA MATTOS

Paleka Mattos named her halau "Hula Halau 'O Kamuela" in honor of her uncle and mentor, Sam Nae'ole. Each year, her halau participates in the Merrie Monarch Festival and the Queen Lili'uokalani Keiki Hula Competition.

Hawaiian ✓

My roots of becoming a kumu hula began at the tender age of six years old. I studied under hula master Sam Nae'ole. He was my uncle, my mother's brother. I learned under him and graduated from him in 1976.

My uncle Sam studied the hula from various teachers, where he had acquired a combination of different styles, or methods of hula. Although he was a hula teacher, it didn't mean he stopped learning. He still had so much more to learn from the older people who knew more about things that referred to hula. He put all this knowledge together and he formed his own style.

My 'uniki ceremony was held in Waimanalo in a lu'au tent. Some of the most prestigious people in hula today attended. Another girl was to 'uniki as an alaka'i and I as a kumu hula.

The dressing ceremony for the 'uniki was done by my uncle. Prior to my 'uniki, I had learned numerous oli and chants and was fortunate to present myself with dances, where I performed on the stage. It was a simple ceremony for us.

My uncle said I didn't have to go through all the other rituals because we were Catholics. Even today, we respect the hula and the Hawaiian culture but I'll go to church and say a little prayer before I go to the Merrie Monarch Festival. That is my way, and my uncle did the same thing too.

I just knew hula was my calling. I love dancing and I love every aspect of hula. But my uncle wanted me to learn more about Polynesian dancing. He said that it would be an extra asset when you go into the world. When the hotels call, they will want more than only hula. That was business.

Part of my style is my uncle's style, but another part of it is my style. I stayed with Uncle Sam until he passed away in 1981. It was at his funeral that a lot of his students asked me to "take over". I said, "No, I'm not going to take over, but I might continue where Uncle left off." So in 1982, I said to myself, "This is it, Paleka. Let's do your thing."

I first went into what is commonly known as "contemporary Hawaiian", meaning that I started to jazz everything up. I thought this is what the people wanted. Everything was screaming. At the time I had come out full bloom, many halau were jumping all over the stage doing fabulous fast-stepped kahiko. So there I was going wild; just like them. It was awesome to look at, but it was not really hula. It took me a long time to realize that I must return to basics where I originally started from. It was only a matter of time, before I got that "contemporary" style out of my system.

I remember going to my first competition. I had been only teaching hula for six months on my own when I entered the Queen Lili'uokalani Keiki Hula Competition. There, I overheard someone say that Paleka was fabulous in Tahitian but she knew nothing about hula. I said to myself, "I'll show you." Although my halau came in third or fourth that first time, I was disappointed because the children were so good.

To prove to myself that the children were good in hula, the following week I went to the hula competition in Maui and won first place in all divisions.

Teaching hula is a joy. I can teach everyday for a hundred years. That's how much I love it. My greatest accomplishment in hula is being able to teach the girls who have a hard time learning to dance. Every child does not have the same learning ability and is different. Hula teachers have to realize it and work at a slower pace. Some are not as quick as others. That's where being patient comes in. I just know that I can make anyone love hula as much as I do and eventually teach them to dance this special art.

Hula goes through periods of change such as life - like a circle of life. With the growth of our children and kupuna, the style of hula changed from traditional to a more innovative and "fancy" style. Because of its fanciness, I believe the keiki liked it so much and thought it was exciting and fun. They got back into hula.

Through this large desire to learn and dance the hula, it made its circle and became traditional again. But by then, the students have learned to love the hula and they invited tradition. Hula will never lose its tradition, as long as kumu as myself is teaching. We all will go through our little sporadic in-betweens of experimentation and new ideas, but will return.

Right now I'm settled into a more traditional line. But who knows. Two years from now, a halau might come up bursting with something (style) new and everybody will follow the train.

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