

Keali'inani'aimokuokalani Reichel

*Na Hoku Hanohano award winner, Keali'inani'aimokuokalani Reichel is an accomplished singer, composer and notable kumu hula of Halau Hula o Ka Makani Wili Makaha o Kaua'ula.*

In comparison to other people, I started hula late. I was exposed to hula through the Hawaiiiana Club at Lahainaluna High School when I was a freshman. The club was under the direction of a senior named Peter Day. At the time, he was considered to be a child prodigy. He studied under 'Iolani Luahine and Henry Pa when he was about seven years old. He had all this knowledge so he taught 'oli, kahiko and 'auana for the school's Hawaiiiana Club.

I studied with Peter for one year in high school until he graduated. He didn't explain too much about the chants. He just showed us how the mele was danced. I was a bad dancer in high school. I had no rhythm, nothing. I was junk. The other students used to forget my outfits on purpose when we had performances. When I go to the performance, everybody had their outfits except me. They'd say that they forgot my outfit. Finally after the twelfth or thirteenth time, I caught on that they didn't want me to dance cause I was junk. When you're fourteen years old, that's hard to take so I quit and studied on my own. I practiced everyday in front of the mirror just to perfect my timing. After a couple of years, Peter saw me dance again for the Hawaiian Club and he was impressed with me. He had just formulated his halau and he wanted me to dance for him and help teach.

Peter taught me and I would teach the students when he wasn't there. During that time, I was able to perfect how to teach. I think that's a skill unto itself. You can have all this knowledge, but if you don't know how to teach or convey it, there's no sense. In 1981, Peter moved and left the halau. Within a two-day period, he just up and went. He had all these students who were hungry for more hula and because I was the alaka'i, they asked if I could stay on and continue the training as

best I could. At first I told them no because I wasn't qualified. But other kumu hula on Maui urged me to continue and said they would be there if I needed help. I didn't want to take over his halau so we decided to change the name and make our own identity. We changed the name to Halau Hula o Ka Makani Wili Makaha o Kaua'ula. Kaua'ula is the name of a valley that is situated right next to Lahainaluna High School. It is famous for a powerful wind that comes out usually after the death of an ali'i. Our reasons for choosing that name are that I grew up in the shadow of this valley and we wanted to harness the power within the name and instill that in all of our dancers.

Some of the students had a hard time for the knowledge to stick. I realized that the students didn't know how to identify with a specific song or chant so I had them memorize the words to understand the chant and the dance better. I learned to do this on my own. I have an easy time remembering the dances even till this day. I can clearly remember dances that were taught to me when I was fourteen. A big part of it was because I had learned how to chant or sing it at the same time I learned the dance.

It was an intense several years that I studied under Peter. I learned dozen upon dozen of dances. They were fine but something was missing. When Pua Kanahale came to Maui to teach Hawaiian language, I jumped at the chance to study with her. I quit all my jobs and I basically plunged into poverty so I could go back to school to study under her. The first foundation she gave me was language and stressing the importance of language in hula and chant. The next foundation she gave me was in chanting. Through the State Foundation on Culture and the Arts Apprenticeship Program, I became Pua's apprentice and studied with her one on one in chant styles and techniques. Between these two different foundations, I believe that we have become successful. We had the first group of Maui-born, Maui-breed, Maui-trained chanters for the first time in one hundred years. That

was a big accomplishment because for many years there was a huge void of chant on Maui.

In our halau, we stress language. We usually start off with a few language lessons then we start an hour and a half of hula kahiko or hula 'auana. I teach the kahiko and Uluwehi Guerrero teaches 'auana. The dance classes probably run three to four hours every Sunday afternoon. I don't separate the students by age or sex but by skill and knowledge. Age does not matter as long as they are able to physically and mentally keep up with the class. Once in a while I will separate the men from the women for certain things, but for the most part, everybody learns the same thing. We haven't opened up our halau in three years because we don't like continually having new students who must catch up.

Everyday spoken language is very different from hula language. Learning both is really important. First it's important to communicate and think in Hawaiian. And when you can do that on an everyday basis, shifting to a hula language is not difficult. If you are going to teach hula, you've got to be able to speak Hawaiian and understand it. You have to have fluency in the language otherwise it's just a jumble of words and you're just memorizing passages.

A hula style is something that you develop over the years. Every person who teaches hula today is almost a direct reflection of their kumu hula. What makes a kumu hula good is that they take the knowledge from their own kumu and take it to a higher level. If they learned from two or three different people, they take the styling and they blend all of those styles together and they come up with their own. It's not done on purpose, it just happens that way. I think that's an important osmosis where you gather all that you've learned and you make it work for yourself and for your students. It's not the copy cat kind.

Seeking knowledge is an ongoing thing. I don't think everybody knows everything. What they say, "'A'ohe pau ka 'ike i ka halau ho'okahi" is really true.

In our halau, there are certain things that I'm not knowledgeable in and I recognize that. I don't pretend to know certain kinds of hula. When I feel that my dancers are ready to learn that hula, I send them to another kumu hula who has extensive knowledge in that hula. That way our students receive as much information as possible from other kumu hula who are willing to help and to share. I'm not going to deny my students a specific branch of knowledge just because I don't know it. It's important that I bring in someone who can fulfill that void.

I'm not a prolific composer. I compose every so often when I'm moved to do so or stressed out to do so. I usually compose when emotions are running high and it's a good outlet for that. If you are composing, you need to have that emotional connection to whatever it is you're writing about. If you are writing about love or a broken heart, make sure that you understand what that emotion is. You cannot be writing songs about love if you've never been in love. The emotional aspect of your being gets put into your compositions.

I love competitions. Our people were competitive from the ancient times. Hawaiians were competitive in almost every aspect that you can think of. We don't enter competitions all the time because we don't want to make that our one and only goal. But competition brings out an excellence in the dancers that under normal circumstances would not exhibit. One of the main reasons we go to competitions is because we want to make a statement. We want to tell people that this is our halau, this is what we do, this is our foundation and this is us. Whether we place or not isn't important.

Ever since I started this halau, it's been number one in my life. I've lost jobs because I've had to choose between halau and work. I've been homeless because I couldn't pay my rent. But the halau has always been the number one priority in my life. When this music thing happened, it was very much by accident. Although I knew I could hold a tune, I never thought I was a great singer. I was singing in the

shower one day and as you know, everybody sounds good in the shower. Some of my friends were over and they said, "Wow, you should do an album." They kept bugging so after a while I said if they could get the money together, I'll do an album. I thought I'd nip it in the bud right there because albums are expensive to make. Well, they got most of the money together and I had to do my album. We didn't even put a band together because we didn't think it would be successful. We just thought some hula people would like it and that would be fine. We just wanted to break even on the expenses. All of a sudden, it went ballistic. Two months after the album came out, we realized we had to perform. Looking in the community and seeing how these compositions and this music affected people, I realized that it was a lot bigger than all of us. We now had an obligation to fulfill. I'm a reluctant performer. I stress out everytime we have to sing at a concert. It's better now but I would get to the point where I would want to throw up before a performance because I got so nervous. Chanting is different because you immerse yourself in the composition. I can 'oli in front of a million people and not be nervous but when you're singing, it's different.

It was a conscious decision and one that I didn't do very lightly, but for the first time in my life, I saw myself being financially secure. I told myself that this was not going to last long. This is going to be like a fad. At some point, Keali'i Reichel, the singer, will fade away into oblivion and I still believe that. So for the first time in my life, halau took second place. I've had to rely on our alaka'i to continue and to try and keep the halau together. We've lost a lot of students because of it. Over the last month, I've met with halau and we're doing restructuring and I'm recommitting myself. The singing stuff can wait. My halau is back to number one.