

Footsteps of Laka

by Loryn Yim

In its purest form, the hula, the dance of the ancients, is as sacred as prayer. Each movement of the hands, feet and body; each facial expression; each phrase in the accompanying chants carries special meaning and purpose. Through the hula, the voices of the past come to life. Through the hula, the history, the beliefs, the traditions and ultimately the pride of the Hawaiian people are preserved and perpetuated.

In the Hawaiian pantheon, Laka is revered as the goddess of the hula, a sylvan deity who could transform herself into the plants and flowers of the woods at will. Tales of Laka abound, one of the most intriguing of them set more than 1,000 years ago, during the Polynesians' Age of Discovery. Between 750 A.D. and 1250 A.D., many centuries before the first European explorers ventured across the Atlantic, waves of courageous pioneers set sail from the South Pacific in canoes carved from massive tree trunks. Traveling northward, they eventually discovered and colonized the islands of Hawai'i.

It was during the time of these great migrations that a woman named La'ila'i came to the island of Moloka'i. She settled high atop Maunaloa mountain on the west side, in a place called Kā'ana. Here she introduced the hula—rhythmic dances that no one in Hawai'i had previously seen.

Word about this dramatic new art spread quickly from

island to island, and curious spectators converged at Kā'ana to watch in awe as the La'ila'i 'ohana (family) performed. They, too, wanted to learn the chants and gestures, but La'ila'i's progeny protected their secrets for five generations.

A hundred years passed. Then, Kapo'ulakina'u, a granddaughter five times removed from La'ila'i, agreed to teach the hula to outsiders, but only if they came to Kā'ana in humility, willing to make the necessary sacrifices and completely dedicate themselves to the dance.

The response was overwhelming. In order to accommodate the many students who wished to learn, Kapo'ulakina'u asked her youngest sister, Kewelani, to join her as a teacher. Kewelani became the La'ila'i family's most accomplished dancer, and in recognition of this, Kapo'ulakina'u conferred three new names on her: Ulunui, Laea and Laka.

Realizing that she was the guardian of a powerful gift, Laka felt compelled to do more. From Kā'ana, she journeyed to each of the Hawaiian islands, sharing the dance with those who did not yet know about it—urging them to study, to practice and, in turn, to teach their children, so that the stories and traditions of the hula would never be lost or forgotten.

Even long after Laka's passing, dancers looked to her for inspiration. In their prayers, they beseeched the patron of the hula

to dwell within them, so that their voices, hands, feet and bodies would reflect her grace, strength and passion.

To please Laka, *hālau* (meeting halls) for hula instruction and performances were built of the finest wood, thatch and cord. While construction of their *hālau* was underway, dancers were expected, as Nathaniel B. Emerson notes in his authoritative *Unwritten Literature of Hawai'i*, "to maintain the greatest propriety of demeanor, to suppress all rudeness of speech and manner, to abstain from all carnal indulgence, to deny themselves specified articles of food (including crustaceans, certain types of fowl, and dark-fleshed fish such as aku and 'ahi), and above all to avoid contact with a corpse. If anyone, even by accident, suffered such defilement, before being received again into the fellowship or permitted to enter the *hālau* and take part in the exercises he must have ceremonial cleansing. The *kumu* (teacher) offered up prayers, sprinkled the offender with salt water and turmeric, commanded him to bathe in the ocean, and he was clean."

The *hālau* was viewed as Laka's hallowed abode. As a reminder of this, a *kuahu* (altar) was set up in the structure and always adorned with fresh foliage in her honor. Emerson points out:

PHOTO BY RANDY JAY BRAUN/PHOTO RESOURCE HAWAII



“The gathering of the green leaves and other sweet finery of nature for (the kuahu’s) construction and decoration was a matter of so great importance that it could not be intrusted (sic) to any chance assemblage of wild youth who might see fit to take the work in hand. There were formalities that must be observed, songs to be chanted, prayers to be recited. It was necessary to bear in mind that when one deflowered the woods of

their fronds of ‘ie‘ie and fern or tore the trailing lengths of maile—albeit in honor of Laka herself—the body of the goddess was being despoiled, and the despoiling must be done with all tactful grace and etiquette.”

The Hawaiians believed that when Laka chose to manifest herself, she assumed the forms of her favorite plants and flowers—and to embellish the kuahu with anything “outside this ordained and tradi-

tional range would have been an offense, a sacrilege,” writes Emerson. In particular, the goddess fancied the fragrant maile, the sturdy ‘ie‘ie vine, the wispy crimson pompons of the lehua, the bright yellow hibiscus, the long smooth leaves of the ti plant, the delicate golden ‘ilima, and the life-sustaining breadfruit and banana.

Prayers to Laka were offered at the kuahu with great joy and thanksgiving. One such *mele*

The Best of the Hula

The 34th annual **Merrie Monarch Hula Festival** is slated for March 30-April 5 in Hilo on the Big Island. Activities include Hawaiian entertainment, arts and crafts exhibitions and demonstrations, a parade, lei contest and cultural fair. The hula competition itself will be held on Thursday, April 3 (Miss Aloha Hula); Friday, April 4 (hula kahiko); and Saturday, April 5 (hula auana or modern dances). Twenty hālau from California and throughout the Aloha State are scheduled to perform.

By this time, tickets for the three hula competitions are probably sold out, but you can get “front-row” seats by tuning in to KITV-Channel 4, which will air them live, in their entirety. For more information, write to the Merrie Monarch Hula Festival c/o Hawai‘i Naniloa Hotel, 93 Banyan Drive, Hilo, Hawai‘i 96720, or call (808) 935-9168. A tip: mail-order ticket requests for the 1998 Merrie Monarch Festival will be accepted beginning early next January.

Kumu hula John Kaimikaua has also been instrumental in the growth of the seven-year-old annual festival **Moloka‘i Ka Hula Piko**, a celebration of the birth of the hula on Moloka‘i. This year’s Ka Hula Piko will be held Saturday, May 17, at Papohaku Beach

Park at Kaluakoi under the theme He Paepae Pōhaku, He Kumu O Moloka‘i—“The Foundation of Moloka‘i is Like a Stone Platform.” Events include performances by hālau, musicians and singers from around the state, island foods and Hawaiian crafts including quilting, woodworking, featherwork and deer-horn scrimshaw. Kaimikaua and his hālau will present hula demonstrations, lectures and storytelling during the week preceding the festival at various locations on Moloka‘i. Call the Moloka‘i Visitors Association for details at 553-3876, or toll free (800) 553-0404 inter-island.

A dancer performs hula kahiko at the Merrie Monarch Festival.

PHOTO BY TAMI DAWSON/PHOTO RESOURCE HAWAII



kuahu (altar song) exults:

*E Laka, e!
 Pupu we‘uwe‘u e, Laka e!
 E Laka i ka leo;
 E Laka i ka loa‘a;
 E Laka i ka waiwai;
 E Laka i na mea a pau!
 O goddess Laka!
 O wildwood bouquet, O Laka!
 O Laka, queen of the voice;
 O Laka, giver of gifts;
 O Laka, giver of bounty;
 O Laka, giver of all things!*



The words of this mele are especially significant to kumu hula John Kaimikaua, for it is the hula that defines his mission in life. He considers the “gifts...bounty...all things” mentioned in the mele to be knowledge—knowledge that he, like Laka, has dedicated himself to sharing.

Kaimikaua traces his hula genealogy through Laka, all the way back to the woman named La‘ila‘i who supposedly brought the art of the dance to Hawai‘i. “My hula genealogy,” says Kaimikaua, “is an unbroken lineage that goes back to the year 900 A.D.—to the very beginnings of the hula in Hawai‘i.”

To Kaimikaua and his students, Hālau Hula O Kukunaokalā, the hula is “sacred, a very spiritual thing. It is not entertainment. I tell every person who is a potential student that if you are coming into this hālau (dance troupe) because you like to entertain or want to go into competition, this is the wrong place for you. On the other hand, if you’re coming here because you have a deep desire to learn about the cultural and spiritual aspects of the dance, then this is the place for you. The most important thing to me is carrying on the traditions.”

Kaimikaua’s interest in things Hawaiian began when he was just

As John Kaimikaua drums and chants (far right), dancers brandish canoe paddles at the annual Moloka‘i Ka Hula Piko festival.

PHOTO BY PHIL SPALDING III

five years old. He recalls, “My maternal grandmother and great-grandmother came to O‘ahu from the Big Island to live with us. They would tell me stories about Pele and how she was related to us. You see, for centuries back, my mother’s family were all *kāhuna* (priests); that was their position in the ancient community.”

Learning about the traditions of his family, Kaimikaua believes, helped prepare him to meet the woman who forever changed his life—his mentor, Kawahinekapu-heleikapōkāne. “At the time,” he recalls, “I had a Hawaiian garden with several varieties of taro, banana, all kinds of plants. My great-grandmother always spoke to me about the kahuna ti leaf, and I wanted to acquire that for my garden. She explained to me that it looked like the regular green ti leaf, but its ends were ruffled and it was very rare.

“One day my friends and I were driving up to Keaīwa Heiau Park, which is above ‘Aiea High School. I happened to turn to my left, and I saw a yard bordered

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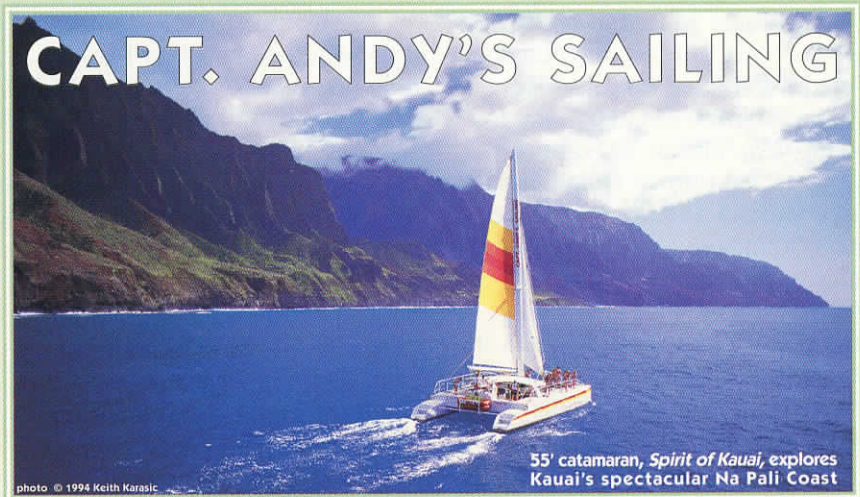
with this green ruffled ti leaf. Although I had never seen it before, I knew it was the kahuna ti leaf.

"My friends went on up to the park, but I went to the house to ask if I could have some of this ti leaf. I knocked on the door and out came this 92-year-old woman. When I asked her if she would give me some leaves, she said, "Sure." I went out to the yard with her and watched as she cut the leaves for me. Then she invited me into her home.

"We were talking, and in the middle of our conversation, she asked me if I was interested in things of the old. I told her yes, I was very interested in things of the old. And so she introduced herself. She said that she was from Moloka'i, and that she had all of these prayers, chants and dances that no one in her family wanted to learn. She said that she had been praying for a long time for someone that she could teach these things to, and when I came and asked for the kahuna ti leaf, she saw that as a sign. She said no one my age—I was only 14 years old—would have known about the kahuna ti leaf because it was rare even during the ancient times."

And so young Kaimikaua became Kawahine's chosen protégé. Nearly every day for the next three years, he went to her home after school, after chores, to study with her. During that time, he recorded in English and Hawaiian 156 chants that Kawahine had memorized. The shortest contained 928 lines.

On the very last day of his training, Kawahine chanted her hula genealogy for Kaimikaua—and then passed it to him. Says Kaimikaua, "She told me that if there were any other kumu who had a hula genealogy that went back to pre-Western times, their genealogy had to hit one of the names of the genealogy that she was giving to me, because the hula came from one place. She also said that this genealogy gave me the authority to teach, and that when I taught and when I spoke, all the



"Awesome Stuff" Everyday

NA PALI, KAUAI, HAWAII - Hey, sure "awesome" is a really overused word these days, but you know what, its absolutely the one best word to describe the entire Capt. Andy experience. As a travel photo-journalist, I've been on a lot of boats and a lot of tours in a lot of far-flung places. Few of those could prepare me for my outstanding time aboard Capt. Andy's *Spirit of Kauai*.

We were on our way to see Kauai's majestic Na Pali Coast. It is a place we've seen in our dreams of tropical paradise, as well as countless Hollywood movies and National Geographic spreads. No image on the big screen or in skillful photogravure could ever prepare us for the reality of seeing it up close and personal aboard the *Spirit of Kauai*. "Awesome" is too small and insignificant a word to describe the feeling of gazing up at the jagged, sawtoothed ridges towering more than 2,000 feet directly above us. The colors, the interplay of sea, cliffs and clouds make Na Pali a place that causes even the most jaded traveller to feel fortunate to be alive and lucky enough to experience such a sight in their lifetime.

As luck would have it, just a few hundred yards outside of the harbor, a huge pod of spinner dolphins sidled up to us. These graceful, playful characters frolicked like joyful family pets, jumping clear out of the water just inches from our outstretched hands as we lay across the trampoline. The spinners performed acrobatic feats right in front of us for several hundred yards before veering off and returning to their endless hunt for fish.

Soon, we too were hunting fish, but in a very different manner and for a very different purpose. It was time to snorkel. We

were loaned top-quality silicone mask and snorkel sets and given detailed expert instruction about how to use them. Next, Capt. Andy called up his "trained fish act". He tossed bread scraps off the bow bringing the sea to a rapid boil as dozens of small, brightly colored reef fish shot to the surface to catch a free meal. As an experienced diver, I can safely say that few experiences compare to the thrill of being surrounded by a school of beautiful fish scurrying around you. A private freshwater shower made exiting the warm, crystal-clear ocean as pleasant as entering it. While still at anchor, we were served a bountiful buffet lunch complete with salads, sandwich fixings and fruit, along with plentiful drinks.

It was obvious all along that every detail of the adventure had been thoughtfully planned. From stems to sterns, the one-half million dollar *Spirit of Kauai* was designed with the utmost comfort of her passengers in mind, including teak-trimmed shaded cabin areas and real bathrooms.

The ultimate ocean adventure, a six-hour Na Pali Coast cruise, is just one of the fabulous sailing adventures available from *Capt. Andy's Sailing*. Try the romantic, two-hour sunset sail complete with lots of snacks and cocktails, including the Captain's famous "Sneaky Tiki".

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people in my genealogy would be behind me.”

Kawahine passed away in 1975, shortly after Kaimikaua completed his studies with her. He graduated from ‘Aiea High the following year, and in 1977, at the age of 19, he formed Hālau Hula O Kukunaokalā. For the past three years, Kaimikaua has served as a judge at the Merrie Monarch Festival, the doyen of Hawai‘i’s hula celebrations, but this year, in observance of his hālau’s 20th anniversary, he will bring his dancers to Hilo as participants.

Explaining his style of *hula kahiko* (ancient dance), Kaimikaua says, “The movements are not choreographed; they are old, they are set, they are exactly how Kawahine taught them to me. Because of this, they may appear unusual to most people. At various hula conferences I’ve attended, there has been talk about using ‘creativity’ in the dance. Because of my own foundation in the hula, it’s difficult for me to say that I can ‘create’ an ancient dance; I only

preserve what has been handed down to me.

“Kawahine told me that the time would come when I would fully understand the responsibility that came with the knowledge that she was giving to me. She told me the responsibility of this knowledge was great, and that I would have to choose whether or not I wanted to take it upon myself. If I took the responsibility, she said, I would bear it all the days of my life.

“It wasn’t until 1977, when I started my hālau, that I realized what Kawahine meant about responsibility. Simply put, my responsibility is to educate all people of our ancestors through the chants, dances, genealogy, history—the multitude of information she gave me. Ever since then, education has been a priority for me.”

It is fitting that Kaimikaua has named his hālau “Kukunaokalā,” which means “the rays of the sun.” Just as the sun’s far-reaching beams illuminate the world, so does Kaimikaua hope to bring the light of knowledge to people near

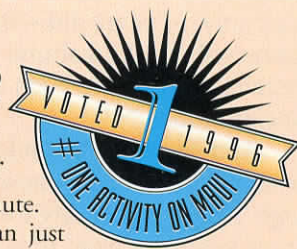
and far. The hula, he feels, is one way he can share the truths he has been given and help Hawaiians build a spiritual connection with their ancestors.

“When my hālau dances, we tell the stories of our ancestors; when we chant, we speak their words,” he says. “These words ring in the heavens, and our ancestors come to be a part of our dance; we can feel their presence. The hula is the only thread that links us, the present, to our ancestors, the past. For those few moments that a chant is being recited and a dance is being performed, our ancestors live!”

To Kaimikaua, the true beauty of the dance lies not only in what is seen but what is felt. “The hula is like a time capsule that embraces our ancestors’ language, their experiences, their thoughts, their spirit. That is why we dance—to hold onto and preserve these things...not only the tangible part of our culture, but the spiritual part, the unseen part, the part that enlightens the soul.” ❧

Trilogy Chosen #1 On Maui

By Ron Kenar



“A trip to Maui without a Trilogy Adventure would be like a week without sunshine!” Stephanie Czerniecke, MN. Those sentiments seem to be the

conventional wisdom around Maui these days as Trilogy Excursions prepares to celebrate 25 years of meeting or exceeding their guests expectations. In a 1996 independent survey of over 11,000 Maui Visitors, Trilogy was chosen the #1 Activity on Maui and the #1 Sailing Company! “The Sailing Coon Family” as the Trilogy founders and owners are known, have earned this reputation by building their business on state-of-the-art sailing equipment, personalized service, and uncompromising attention to detail. Besides having the only commercial access to Lanai’s private Hulopo’e beach, Trilogy has the newest fleet of hi-tech sailing catamarans in Hawaii.



Of course, many of the folks who return to sail with the Coon Family, say it is Mom’s homemade cinnamon rolls that bring them back year

after year. I don’t disagree for a minute. But I know it is much more than just cinnamon buns that makes Trilogy so popular.

Maybe it is the way the Trilogy Captains learn everyone’s name before they are through serving breakfast! Perhaps it is the personal snorkeling instruction everyone receives before they are escorted into the Hulopo’e Marine Sanctuary for what is a truly transcendental experience. To some it may be the Lei greeting and warm feeling of Aloha they receive from the Lanai island resident who takes them on an air-conditioned van tour of the island’s interior. For others, it is the All-You-Can-Eat Hawaiian-Style BBQ. I think it is all of these. But Carl & Rosie Burg of Springfield, Ill. may have summed it up best when they wrote **“We felt like King & Queen for a day!”** Now, isn’t that the way you deserve to be treated!



Trilogy also offers daily 1/2 day trips to Molokini as well as a 1/2 day snorkel/sail from Kaanapali. So, for the best day of your vacation, call Trilogy direct from any island at **1-800-TRI-COON.**