

John Piilani Watkins

I was born in Ewa in an area that was known as Watertown. The Airport is now there. I was born on December 24, 1928. I became interested in the hula at age 10 through my grandmother and my mother. My grandmother was a dancer way way back. And my great-great grandfather was a chanter for Kaua'i. My grandmother, Lokalia Kaahumanu Ho'oulu, died when she was 102. My mother was instrumental in helping me along the way with the stories and traditions of Hawaii and with all of my compositions. Her name was Abbie Apina Watkins. I would compose the music and she would compose the words to my songs. On my mother's side the family is all musical. These are the Lindsey's, the Parker's.

My first and only kumu was my grandmother. She knew she was getting old and the tradition in our family was to pass it on before you die. It was more like a gift for me. She tried it on the whole family but it didn't take so I was the last one. It worked on me so she told me I was going to get this gift and I should continue this gift. I was then supposed to go into a much deeper hula but my mother stopped me. My grandmother was the keeper of the keys for Luka the Queen. She was also an interpreter of dreams and signs for the Queen. She had a very big, thick book of history, and chants and traditions that was supposed to be given to me at her death. When I was a little boy I was always over her house and she used to do a lot of singing and a lot of chanting. I was very young at that time and I really didn't understand it. She was very very strict but she said not to worry if I wasn't getting it quickly because it would all come to me because it was a gift from the ohana.

My Dad died when I was 7 but he left me a piano and that's how I got started in music. I lived with my grandmother for awhile and I remember very vividly another lady coming to visit my grandmother and together the two of them would chant. Everyday they would wear their hair up but when they ~~inagam~~ chanted they would let their hair down and it would fall all over their bodies. My grandmother wanted me to learn kahiko because I was the next in line to be the caretaker of Kamehameha's body. I was supposed to learn the chant that would allow me to cross the waters and then I would have to rub his body with oils. But my mother was a very strong Christian and forbade me to be involved with this because of her beliefs. In 1951 to 1953 I joined the army and served in Korea and during that time my grandmother died. The book died with her. My mother was very afraid for me and she did not want me to get ahold of that book.

My grandmother told me that when she was living she couldn't do anything for me. But when she left that's when I would know. After she passed away I began to have dreams. Everything came to me in dreams. I would be standing on a hill looking down at a great big pond of water. I would start tossing ti leaves into the water. I would see the dances, I would see the costumes. Sometimes I wouldn't understand certain symbols and then I would ask my mother. Even till today I still have these dreams. I began teaching when I was sixteen years old. We had our home in Damon tract and we also had a home in Nanakuli which was my grandmothers. We would go back and forth between the two. At that time I was connected with the Salvation Army. We would travel and deliver coffee and people would ask for entertainment. I got together a few people and we put together a little show of hula auwana. I would venture into a little kahiko later on but I've basically stayed with Hula auwana.

I've made a lot of sacrifices. When I was starting out in the hula and for a long time after it was not considered right for a man to be teaching the hula. People would talk and there was a time in my early career when I wanted to leave the hula. ~~My mother told me that I should not do that and she told me that I should not do that and she told me that I should not do that~~ But I always felt that this was a gift from my ohana and my mother told me as long as I remained unmarried I would carry this talent. This is the reason I am still single today. When I graduated from Farrington ~~When I graduated~~ I went to Hana Maui on a vacation and ended up staying there for seven years. That's when I began to get popular. I began to start composing and I got a job at the Hotel Hana. They had a show there so I began to train the dancers and that's how I got started. Hana was supposed to be the birthplace of my father of whom I know very little of.

The best thing I've ever done is to take kids off the street and train them to do the hula and the rest of the Polynesian dances. Many of them were into drugs and they became so involved with hula that they left drugs. Many of them are all over the world working now and doing well.

I think it was the music that brought me into the dance. And when I heard the chants I immediately felt it was something that I should do that I should learn because it was so beautiful. I believe I was the first to branch out into the rest of the Polynesian dances.

~~When I saw them~~

My favorite mele is Kaulilua.

I think it's important for the kumus of today to go back and do research on the history of each dance so they can stay within certain guidelines.

~~When I saw them~~ I'd like to see more men dancing. With today's audience you have to go with faster dances. If you explain the ancient to the audience you end up taking too much time. So I see the Tahitian taking over now although we retain our auwana and holo dances. I think what the young people of today are doing is terrific. When I saw the Merry Monarch I felt I had missed something in my life in terms of the kahiko that I wanted to learn. I think the community is beginning to understand the kahiko and I only wish the Merry Monarch was over here so people could learn more.

John Piilani Watkins

(Damon Tract)

Piilani Watkins was born in Ewa, Oahu in the area which today is Honolulu Airport. He became interested in the hula at the age of 10 and was trained by his grandmother, Lokalia Kaahumanu Ho'oulu.

When I was starting out in the hula and for a long time after, it was not considered right for a man to be teaching the hula. People would talk and there was a time early in my career when I wanted to leave the hula. But I always felt that this was a gift from my ohana and as long as I was unmarried I would carry this talent. This is the reason I've remained single till today.

I think it was the music that brought me into the dance. When I heard the chants I immediately felt it was something that I should learn because it was so beautiful. She knew she was getting old and the tradition in our family was to pass the knowledge on before you die. My grandmother was the keeper of the keys for Luka, the Queen and she interpreted dreams and signs for the Queen. She had a book filled with history and chants and traditions that was supposed to go to me at her death. She had tried passing it on to the whole family but nobody wanted it so I was her last chance.

I lived with my grandmother for awhile and I remember very vividly another lady coming to visit my grandmother and together the two of them would chant. Everyday they would wear their hair up but when they chanted they would let their hair down their hair down and it would fall all over their bodies. (My grandmother wanted me to learn kahiko because I was the next in line to be the caretaker of Kamehameha's body. I was supposed to learn the chant that would allow me to cross the waters and then I would have to rub his body with oils.)

I was very young at the time and I really didn't understand the kahiko but my grandmother told me not to worry because it would all come to me when it was time. She said that, when she was living she couldn't do anything for me but when she left that's when I would know. But my mother was a very strong Christian and after awhile she grew afraid for me and forced my grandmother to stop the lessons.

From 1951-1953 I joined the Army and served in Korea and during that time my grandmother passed away and the book was lost with her. After her death I began to have dreams. Everything came to me in dreams. I would be standing on a hill looking down at a great pond of water tossing ti leaves into a great pond of water. I would see dances, I would see costumes, and I would see symbols. Even till today I still have these dreams.

I began to teach at the age of sixteen-years-old. I was connected with the Salvation Army at the time and we would travel and deliver coffee. After awhile people started asking for entertainment so I started training dancers at a family home in Damon Tract and at my grandmother's home in Nanakuli. I got together a few people and we would put together a show of hula auwana. When I graduated from Farrington High School I went on a vacation to Hana. Hana had been the birthplace of my father who died when I was seven and that was the start of my composing and my popularity as a songwriter. I got a job training the dancers at the Hotel Hana and I ended up staying there for seven years.

I think the best thing I've ever done is that I've took kids off the street who were into drugs and trained them in the hula and other Polynesian dances. Many of them are all over the world working now and doing well.

When I saw the kahiko being danced at the Merry Monarch Festival I felt like I had missed something in my life and I wanted to learn more. I think what the young people of today are doing is terrific but the kumu should go back and do research on the history of each dance so they can stay within the guidelines of the dance.

I believe we have to find a common ground between teaching the children for purely the sake of education, and training the student to be a professional Polynesian dancer who can make a living when he goes off into the world. The children have to be sent off with something more than just memories of a competition, or a class.