

LEILANI SHARPE MENDEZ

Well known as a musician and an entertainer, Leilani Mendez is the kumu hula of "Ka Mele Hula O Na Ku'u Pu'uwai", located in Wai'anae, Oahu.

My halau was formerly known as the "Hau'oli Hula Halau." This name originated under the direction of Aunty Pauline Kekahuna and Aunty Vickie I'i Rodrigues. In 1970, I joined their group as a dancer. However, after hearing me sing, Aunty Vickie decided I should also be included in the musicians line. Under their guidance, I accomplished many goals and learned valuable lessons which till today has helped me in my career as an entertainer.

After Aunty Pauline and Aunty Vickie passed away, my husband Joseph and I decided, with all due respect, that we also allow the name "Hau'oli" to be laid to rest. Thus began a new era in my life as a kumu hula. I then renamed my halau "Ka Mele Hula O Na Ku'u Pu'uwai", meaning the songs and dances of my heart. This name derived from my first recording entitled "He Mele Ku'u Pu'uwai."

Aunty Edith Kanakaole's mother Tutu Kekuewa used to come to Honolulu and visit with her cousin who at that time was my grandmother's neighbor. On one of her many visits she noticed that my mother was hapai and as was the custom in those days she asked for that "opu". She then stated that the child would be a girl and should be set aside for the hula. How she knew it would be a girl remains a mystery till today. Sure enough, on November 30, I was born.

My training began at the age of two, first learning simple Hawaiian phrases then later memorizing the words of chants and absorbing their meaning through meditation. When Tutu Kekuewa spoke I listened and paid close attention. Respect and discipline was of utmost importance. It was not until the age of five that she showed me how to express the words using my hands while in a sitting position. Unfortunately Tutu Kekuewa passed away when I was thirteen years old. Yearning to continue my hula, I studied with Aunty Iolani Luahine and Aunty Lokalia Montgomery. With Aunty Lokalia, I did 'uniki and continued to hula under her direction

until she passed away.

The 'auana was taught to me by Leilani Alama. Later, I danced with Aunty Sally Wood Naluai. In addition to the 'auana, Aunty Sally also taught me the hula pahu or traditional drum dances. Till today, I respect her as my immediate source of the hula.

Each of my teachers have contributed in significant ways to the invaluable insights I have for the hula. The most important lessons impressed upon me through the years were humility and respect. Humility allows you to absorb and retain knowledge and respect enables you to share this knowledge in a manner which adheres to the traditions of our ancestors. In order to possess these qualities one must have faith in the Lord. For he is the source of your gifts, the ability to sing and create the motions in perpetuation of the music of Hawai'i.

My first experience as a teacher was at the age of thirteen. I taught the hula to the officers' wives at Lualualei. During the summer, I traveled as a dancer with the Mormon Church on goodwill tours to the mainland. I traveled every year through at least twenty-eight states until I graduated from high school.

I feel that my style is very unique. In addition to the traditional basic steps taught in the hula, my students gradually acquire the smooth lift of their feet, which is often referred to as the "Hau'oli style". I feel this style derived from my training with Tutu Kekuewa, for when she danced she also lifted her feet and was light as a feather and graceful as a bird in flight.

My greatest accomplishment is that I have been able to train my daughters and instill within them the love and respect I have for the hula. Twyla Ululani Mendez was awarded Miss Aloha Hula at the Merrie Monarch Festival in 1984. She is gifted with the creative ability of the hula kahiko and continues to assist me as the 'Alaka'i of my halau. My daughter Cheryl also follows in my footsteps and has a show group in Hilo. She is gifted with words and I often call upon her to research and format my larger production shows.

Through the years I have seen a remarkable renaissance of the hula which has spread through many parts of the world. Although this has generated a strong interest in the preservation of this art, there are certain aspects I find very disturbing.

Today the name "kumu hula" is simply a title, for all that is required to become a teacher is a few years of hula and a general excise tax license. Unfortunately, due to their limited knowledge and training, they lack originality and must depend on the hard work of others to fulfill their requirements as a teacher. Another discouraging fact is that the use of modern steps and movements in the kahiko. If we allow these changes to continue, eventually, like our lands, language, and music, we will lose the roots or foundation of the hula. The hula will be transformed beyond recognition and this time we will have no one to blame but ourselves.

At one time a "kumu" was regarded with much respect, for they were the authorities or masters of the hula. Each individual possessed a unique style yet all shared a common goal, to preserve and retain the rich traditions of the hula as it was handed down by our forefathers.

Approved: 9/17/94
2/21/95