

Ku'ulei and Maunalei Preserve Hula Heritage

"Harriet Ku'ulei Nani Stibbard has an ability to radiate and proclaim her love of life by her performance of the hula. Her special charisma can be seen on the faces and in the dancing of most younger women. When she dances, she appears to float across the floor. Her face shines radiantly...her whole being is lovingly devoted to what she is doing. Every motion, every movement of her body is perfectly coordinated. She commands attention with her magnetism and stage presence. When she dances, every eye is upon her and there is a smile on every face. But, the expertise Ku'ulei has accomplished wasn't easy to come by. She had to work very hard to attain it." Those sentiments were written about Ku'ulei Stibbard 14 years ago. Today, at the age of 83, she finds it difficult to walk at times but when she starts to dance, every word of the above quote still holds true.

Harriet Ku'ulei Nani Sheldon started learning the hula when she was a young girl on Kauai. "In those days, the local people were very particular about who danced the hula and where it was danced," she remembered, "At the parties when a hula was performed, I was sent out of the room. My family did not believe that it was proper for a young girl to watch the hula being performed." Being naturally curious, one day she managed to return quietly to the room after she had been sent away. She recalls her feelings at the time: "I could not take my eyes off the dancer. She was so graceful, so happy. From that moment on, I was determined to learn the hula."

Before the Westerner arrived, the hula was deeply imbedded in religion and tradition. Since the Hawaiians had no written word, the mele hula served as an unwritten history. The sacred chants or stories of their legendary past were passed from master to student. The hula passed to Ku'ulei by Alice Keawikani Garner, and a little later by Auntie Loke, Auntie Malia and Auntie Alice. Ku'ulei recalled, "Three Hawaiian women who had seen me dance at a party approached me and offered to teach me the hula. I knew they were famous for their knowledge of things Hawaiian. They had been taught the old mele and chants when they were young and now wanted to pass them on to me. Being so young, I felt I should pay them for whatever they taught me. This was very wrong because they offered to teach me from their hearts and offering them money insulted them. When they realized how sorry I was, they agreed to teach me."

Ku'ulei graduated from Teacher's College in Honolulu and taught grade school on Kauai, Maui, Hawaii and Oahu over the next 40 years. When she first started teaching school, she found it rewarding; yet something was missing. She realized she would never be totally happy unless she taught what she had learned of the hula.

She married Harry Stibbard and soon after started giving hula lessons on Maui. "During the war, we had the Buck Stibbard Hula Troupe and did a lot of USO work. We put shows on for the soldiers and officers on leave every weekend. We even had parties at our home for them." When entertainer Ray Kinney put a hula troupe together for a Mainland tour, he auditioned girls from the entire state. Many of the girls he picked came from the Ku'ulei Nani Hula Studio including four of her "babies" whom he brought to Honolulu for an engagement at the King Theater.

Upon moving back to Oahu, Ku'ulei opened the Ku'ulei Nani Hula Studio. She wanted to maintain a hula school of the highest standards, teaching not only what motions to make, but the meaning. She explained the Hawaiian words and encouraged the students to remember that while they were dancing, they were not just moving their bodies but also telling a story. She was a strict teacher who would stand for no nonsense, yet the girls loved her. "I made it a point to bother with the smallest details, such as hand and foot movements and facial features — these help to

make a good dancer great." Ku'ulei said.

The studio became well known, with as many as 300 students enrolled. Ku'ulei became known for her keiki dancers, as hers was one of the few hula studios which would start children at 3 years old.

Ku'ulei's studio has appeared on the covers of both Time and Newsweek and her students were featured in Paradise of the Pacific (Honolulu Magazine's forerunner) and Colliers Magazines, as well as in numerous newspaper articles. Though she achieved what many consider to be great success, she was always eager to learn more. "I attended every hula show and performance that I could because I felt that there was always something new to be learned and I still feel that way today."

As the years passed, Ku'ulei's health began to fail her and to her regret she could no longer keep up with her classes. Then Ku'ulei's granddaughter, Vanelle Maunalei Love took over, assisted by Ku'ulei's former student Hattie Elderedge. It is Maunalei, who now continues the tradition. She also studied under the late Eleanor Hiram Hoke. "I literally grew up in the hula

(continued on page 14)



Maunalei Love with daughter Allana and some of the Thursday afternoon class.

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