

*1st draft sent
to Leilani*

LEILANI SHARPE MENDEZ

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

The name of my halau used to be "Hau'oli Hula Halau," a name given to me by Aunty Pauline Kekahuna and Aunty Vicky I'i Rodrigues. Actually it was the name of Aunty Pauline's trio and the senior dancers, the Hau'oli Girls. In respect for Aunty Pauline and Aunty Vicky after they passed away, my mother Lydia Sharpe, my husband Joseph Mendez and I decided that I take a new name and let that name go to rest. I changed my halau name from the "Hau'oli Hula Halau" to "Ka Mele Hula O Na Ku'u Pu'uwai." The name came from the first tape recording that I did, "Ka Mele O Na Ku'u Pu'uwai." I put in "Hula" so it means "songs and dances of my heart."

Aunty Edith Kanaka'ole's mother, Tutu Kekuewa used to come to Honolulu to attend the Mormon Temple in Laie. My mother who was a neighbor of her cousin was pregnant with me. When Tutu Kekuewa saw that my mom was hapai, she asked for that baby. And that's how I came about.

I danced when I was two years old, believe it or not. Everybody was outside playing when I was inside dancing. At two years old, I was learning how to say the words, how to do expression with my mind and my

eyes. I didn't learn expression with my hands until I was five years old, then I was able to get up and hula. I can remember clearly that I just sat down and mimicked what she was doing. When she talked, I had to listen and pay attention. And later on she showed me how to apply the hula with the hands while sitting. With the discipline went memorizing of what she wanted me to learn.

When I was fifteen years old, Tutu Kekuewa passed away. From that age, I went to Aunty Iolani Luahine and Aunty Lokalia Montgomery for my hula. I did uniki with Aunty Lokalia but not with Aunty Io. She didn't uniki any girl. I continued to dance with Aunty Lokalia until she passed away.

For my modern version of the hula, I went to Leilani Alama because she lived right down the street from us. After Leilani I went to Aunty Sally Wood Naluai who until today, I still respect as my immediate source of the hula. From Aunty Sally I learned ancient as well as the drum dances.

From 1950 to 1952, Aunty Edith McKinzie was my hula teacher. She taught in the old Catholic Church hall in Wai'anae.

In 1970 I became a dancer with Aunty Pauline's "Hau'oli Serenaders". Then Aunty Vicky decided that I should be in the music line. So that's how I was able to sing and dance and be a part of the Hau'oli group. When

George Naope came upon the idea of perpetuating the hula by including a hula competition at the Merrie Monarch Festival, the senior girls from Aunty's group competed in 1971.

I taught hula when I was thirteen. The Lualualei Officers' wives wanted to learn about the Hawaiian culture and what better way than to learn the hula. So my cousin recommended me to teach the wives of the officers. I taught there until I was fifteen when they changed commanders. I went on to other things such as do goodwill through the Mormon Church and travel in the summer time to at least 28 states so we could sell Hawai'i to the Mainlanders.

From all of my teachers, I learned many many things. The most important that stands out in my mind is the respect for the hula. You must remember that humbleness goes with the respect for yourself as a teacher. Always acknowledge the Lord because he is the one that gives us that talent and I feel that my talent is a gift from our Heavenly Father. I look at it as me being destined to be a hula teacher, otherwise I'd be a darned good secretary.

I like to think that I have my own style. My style is a smooth type of dancing with the oni to the hips and the expression with the body and the hands. I'm sure all halau takes that into consideration but my feet are the

most outstanding feature. I lift my feet everytime I dance, and that is the "Hau'oli" look. It is not Aunty Vicky's style but my own.

My greatest accomplishment is that I have been able to train my daughters. Twyla Ululani Mendez was awarded Miss Aloha Hula at the Merrie Monarch Festival in 1984 and my other daughter Cheryl Nelson follows my footsteps and has a show group in Hilo.

I don't want to be critical because I understand that as years go by, there are things that are inserted to the hula kahiko. Maybe because a certain individual wants to be more creative. But I think that some of these hula teachers don't have the roots to call themselves kumu hula. I see a lot of styles that don't belong to them but they say it is their's. Especially in competitions, I see a style of Johnny Lum Ho, a style of Louise Kaleiki, a style of Leilani Mendez, a style of Darrell Lupenui. I look at that and I am disappointed that they are given the free agency to create but they have the gall to call themselves kumu hula and have not been creative in their own personal way.