

# Aloha, Uncle

## The light always lived in Uncle George Na'ope.

He was my *kumu* (teacher). When I met him, I was in a hula studio in Kāne'ohe. And he walked into the studio, and he was all dressed in pink: pink hat, pink pants, pink shirt. We just didn't know what to think. He was very proud and very stern. He said he would teach the girls, and then he said, 'Look, why not let me teach the drummers, too?' He told us boys to get Clorox bottles to use as *ipu* drums. He named the beats. He taught us the *kāhela*, the *kūkū* and the *pā*. And he explained that these three beats make up all of the hula steps. And I really connected with this. It felt exciting even if it was very basic. He said, 'You guys practice, and I will come to check on you.' So he began coming back every three months.

Uncle George always called hula the ballet of Polynesia. He said, 'Our hula can be smooth or strong, masculine or feminine.' He used to say that the hula is actually a spirit. You *noho* and ground yourself and everything flows in you. To *noho* means to sit or dwell, to come to your *na'au* (core) and connect. He taught us this. He would never stand in front and dance throughout the whole class. Instead he would show you the motion, and then you would find it and dance. He would explain, 'I don't want you to look like me; I want you to look like you!' I have often gone back in memory and said to myself, 'Wow, he was just so open to everything.'

Uncle was famous for reviving the *kāne* (men's) hula. In the '60s, not many *kāne* danced. Uncle would say, 'That is so wrong because the men were the first dancers!' Uncle believed that the hula was part of Hawaiian spiritual life. He always said the *oli* (chant) would awaken the natural elements, our only true judge. But when I was young, there was a stigma. I never told any of my friends I was in hula. Today they see me and say, 'When did you learn?' and I say, 'In high school.



Remember all those football games I said I couldn't go to because my mother was punishing me? I was in hula.'

Uncle was so loving, and yet in class he would take me apart joint by joint. But then he would put me back together. He had us all in the palm of his hand. Not once did we say, 'I am thirsty,' though sometimes we would dance for five or six hours. And he was so connected to the culture. He saw Hawaiian culture as a vehicle for perfecting everything. He founded the Merrie Monarch Festival competition in 1967. I remember he said, 'We are going to start up a hula contest in Hilo.' It was at the Civic Auditorium, and the ticket was an Aloha Week button for \$.75. You couldn't give a button away. Let's just say, Uncle didn't predict how relaxed Hilo would be. At the time, he said, 'No matter, this will go around the world, because the hula is love.' And of course he was right.

The Merrie Monarch Festival became the most important event in hula today. He received plaques and certificates from all over the world, from presidents and mayors and foreign artists.

Just before he passed, he told his brothers and sisters, 'I want us to go to Lāna'i.' He paid everybody's way. They all spent the weekend, and then they went to Maui and to Hilo. His sister, Auntie Bernie, got him dressed up, and he told her, 'I have done everything I wanted to do, and I am tired now.' Three weeks later, on October 26 of last year, he passed.

Uncle taught me that the hula makes you want to learn about you. And he taught me the morals you live by as a hula dancer: to *lōkahi*, to unite; to *ha'a*, to humble yourself in dance; to *ahunui*, to be patient with yourself and with others. So many words, I can go on and on. **HH**

*Etua Lopes is a kumu hula in Kona who studied with hula legend George Lanakilakekiahiali'i Na'ope for more than twenty-five years.*

[ By Etua Lopes as told to Liza Simon ]

PAU HANA