

# THE WORLD CATCHES UP WITH BRUDDAH FRANK

Beautiful songs, electrifying hula, Frank Hewett does it all. On the eve of his 25th annual Hō'ike, a look at how the renegade became a master. **CURT SANBURN**

**T**he dancer moved around the grass hula mound at Moanalua Gardens to the traditional song "Hi'ilawe." He lifted his long-fingered hands up to express the heights of Waipi'o above his head, his eyes following the gesture to the vision above. A beat later, his hands shook spastically, electrically, as they fell from the heights, mimicking the water dropping at Hi'ilawe. The movement shocked. A yelp went up from somewhere in the crowd, the connection was made, and the dancer smiled as he stepped catlike into the ha'ina.

Frank Kawaikapuokalani Hewett, 48, danced alone to begin his hula hālau's midday presentation at the Prince Lot Hula Festival last month. Wearing a coat-length, long-sleeve, lei-print shirt and white pants, and draped with ginger and maile lei, he stepped and wheeled decisively, fluidly, in the sun-dappled grass. Hair pulled back in a silver ponytail, his large face showed the untroubled confidence of a master. Whenever his eyes followed his upraised hands, they shone. "I always look up when I'm dancing," he told me later that night, "because I see God."



from Hewett's hālau to back up his steady baritone. Songwriter and performer Haunani Apoliona of Olomana brilliantly arranged the choruses. The music was at once old and new, with traces of Hawaiian chant and Protestant hymn fused into the composer's lovely, often yearning melodies. *Makalapua 'Oe*, now a more-or-less neglected, yet classic, example of the potential for contemporary Hawaiian music, won the 1983 Na Hōkū Hano Hano Award for Traditional Hawaiian Album.

Since *Makalapua 'Oe*, Hewett has written, by his own estimation, over 90 songs. Together with Dennis Kamakahi and Palani Vaughan, he is among Hawai'i's top Hawaiian-language songwriters, in terms of the number of times his songs have been recorded by others. He has released five albums of original material and appeared on several others. His most recent album, *Native Grooves* (Pumehana, 1998), a collaboration with LA-based producer/songwriter Freddy Von Paraz in which new Pele chants mixed with deep drum 'n' bass grooves, got mixed reviews and was not a success. But it was daringly different.

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## 'I'm not the norm.'

**W**e were sitting at the Paradise Lounge at the Hilton Hawaiian Village, late in the evening after the Prince Lot, when

Hewett told me about his conversations with God. Hewett (or "Frank" or "Brud-dah Frank" or "Brother" or "Kawaikapu" or "Kumu," as he is variously called) was in Waikiki to dance a few songs at a gig with Olomana in the posh, upholstered Rainbow Tower lobby lounge. Between numbers, we talked.

"I'm not the norm," he said when I asked about his resolutely renegade place within the Hawaiian cultural community.

Hewett is not the norm, even with his gorgeous, Hōkū-winning Hawaiian-language songs, and his day job at the Waimānalo Health Center as a cultural healer, and his hānai children, Amos, Kua and Ula, raised by him as a single parent, and his well-established, Kāne'ōhe-based hula hālau, and his impressive and venerable array of teachers and kūpuna who imparted to him his vast knowledge of Hawaiian ways.

"I'm not the person who follows," he said. "I always create my own path."

"I'm an enigma — that's the word I use."

Hewett sipped water. He slipped off his big slippers and brought up a nasty remark made a year ago by Hawaiian music expert Kimo Alama Keaulana to a *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* reporter.



Top: Frank Hewett at home in Kāne'ōhe. Above and on Page 7: Hewett's hālau dances "O Pana'ewa 'Ōhi'a Loloa" at the 1985 Hō'ike. Also on Page 7: Hewett dances "Hi'ilawe" at the 1980 Kanikapila.

"Check it out. Kimo Alama," he spat.

In the July 27, 2001, article about preserving old Hawaiian-language songs, Keaulana told reporter Gary Chun, "I think the younger generation is confusing traditional Hawaiian music with popular island music from people like Keali'i Reichel and Frank Kawaikapuokalani Hewett."

"I'm progressive," Hewett said, "because I got it a long time ago." His voice was light and sure as a whisper. "Nothing remains the same. From one minute to the next, there is change. I have to move with the change."

"Same with culture. Some people want to go backward. The legacy my kūpuna left me wasn't to go backward, it was to go forward. Every generation moves one step away from the last."

"Culture must create or it dies," he said. "Without the creative element, there's just death. What if the volcanoes stopped? The islands would die and dis-

appear. But the volcano is creative, so the islands live."

## Makalapua 'Oe

**A**t age 24, Hewett wrote the now-classic song "Ka Wai Lehua 'A 'Ala Ka Honua." Recorded in rapid succession by the Cazimero Brothers, the Peter Moon Band and Karen Keawehawai'i, the song won the prestigious Haku Mele Award in 1981. That honor, awarded annually to a new, original song selected by a special panel of experts, measures a song's poetical — and proper — use of the Hawaiian language and its musical composition.

In 1982, Hewett recorded and released his first album, *Makalapua 'Oe* (Prism), produced by Alan Yamamoto, was a revelation, astounding for its maturity, for its simple melodic dignity and for its use of an unschooled chorus of women's voices

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Hewett's song "Poli'ahu" (as recorded by his cousin, Teresa Bright) won the Haku Mele Award and the Na Hōkū Hano Hano award for Song of the Year in 1991. In 2001 "Ka Pilina" won the Song of the Year. Hewett's third Haku Mele came just this year for the song "Ke'alah."

Still, not everyone is impressed. There are jealousies and different kuleana to protect. I called up Hawaiian cultural preservationist Kimo Alama Keaulana, the man who put Hewett in the same "island music" boat with Keali'i Reichel and sunk it to ask him what he meant.

"Frank Hewett wasn't seen as someone who was part of the old-time school," Keaulana explained carefully.

I asked him to name some Hawaiian songwriters he admired. He named Alic Namakelua, Mary Pukui, Lena Machado and Johnny Almeida as "good examples of Hawaiian language composition."

But they're gone, I said.

Keaulana confessed, "I'm not a Hawaiian renaissance person, that's just the way I was raised. These songwriters are part of my life, and I learned from them. They are my sense of orientation."

"You're always going to get different opinions," said one of Hewett's oldest friends, Jerry Santos of Olomana. The two met through Auntie Emma DeFries in the late '70s, on a boat to Kaho'olawe. "I'm attracted to Frank's songs because the melody lines are so nice to sing. He writes so pretty, so simple, so understated."



"Frank has a certain strength of character," Santos said. "He's sure about himself and his foundations. He's willing to stand up and create new things."

"I don't think he's as controversial as he once was," said Alan Yamamoto, producer of *Makalapua 'Oe* and president of the Hawai'i Academy of Recording Arts. "What changed? The music evolved. Frank was cutting edge, but musical acceptance has caught up with him."

## Inhaling the hā

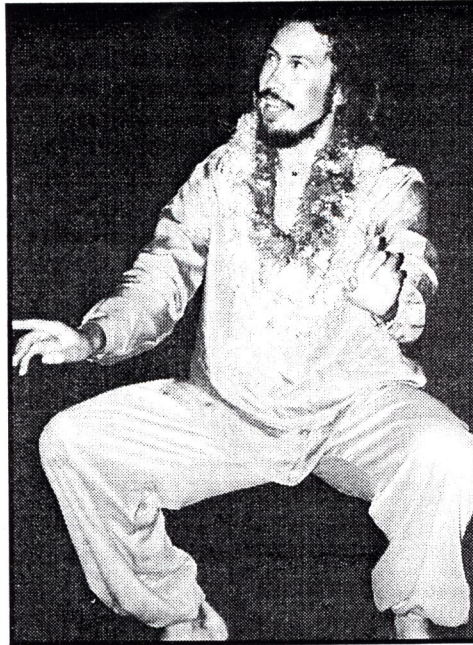
**L**eialoha Kaluhiwa of He'eia remembers when cousin Frank was a young boy. A few years older than Hewett, she baby-sat for the child whenever his maternal grandmother, Iwa Wahineali'i Rowan Kana'e, was too busy, while his mother Alice worked long hours away from home to support her nine children.

"He was a good and happy boy, very respectful," Kaluhiwa told me. "I was momona and he was skinny. He was a white Hawaiian, looked like a haole, and I was dark. He looked anemic, but he always had a mana about him."

Mostly though, the boy was in the care of grandma Iwa from the time of his premature birth, on Feb. 22, 1954, until he left Ha'ikū and home for college at UH-Hilo.

"When I was born, you could see through my skin," Hewett told me, "and my grandmother took me and very carefully bathed me. I was born with teeth. I walked at 7 months. My grandmother knew I was special, so she taught me things that needed to stay in the family."

Little Frank was Iwa Kana'e's punahele, her favorite. She was a native Hawaiian speaker whose familial roots



went deep into the He'eia ahupua'a. Active in her Hawaiian Civic Club, she loved to dance the hula. Everywhere Iwa went, Frank went.

"She never said much," Kaluhiwa remembered, "but Frank was always at her side. He watched her. She'd talk story with his aunties in Hawaiian and he'd listen. When we went to lū'au, Auntie Iwa would get up and dance and he'd watch. They had good mana together."

"I guess that's why he teaches his hula students that they have to pay attention," Kaluhiwa said.

Hewett told me he met Auntie Emma DeFries, the venerated kahuna nui, in 1972 when he was 18, at the beach in Ka'a'awa.

A friend had told him that there was a kahuna woman swimming in the water, so Hewett went out after her. The old



woman floating on the Ka'a'awa reef was a descendent of Hewahewa, kahuna nui to Kamehameha. When he reached her, she said to him, "I want you to be my student," and he was, until her death in 1980 at age 76. By that time, the young man had become Auntie Emma DeFries' chosen protégé.

DeFries' students met for lessons at odd times and often at the beach. "The water was for cleansing," Hewett explained. "After the cleansing, we were taught the rituals and the prayers. Sometimes we had to meet at three in the morning. It all depended on what Auntie wanted to teach."

As usual, Hewett withheld the specifics of learning and teaching. I asked him if he could tell me something concrete he remembered learning from DeFries, but he was

confounding, or perhaps he obfuscated with a profound truth: "The transfer of knowledge is done through spirit," he said. "You want something concrete, but there is nothing. When the kūpuna talk, you inhale them and it becomes a part of you. The hā or breath is imparted when a kupuna talks to us, when they pule with us, when they feed us, when they call our name. ... Being her student meant helping her do the work she had to do. Haumana. All a student does is observe and mimic."

"Auntie taught me to find the beauty of hula within myself, not outside. When I dance the hula, she taught me to *become* the hula ... and she'd always say this proverb: 'Kuhi ka lima hele ka maka.' Where the hands go, let the eyes follow."



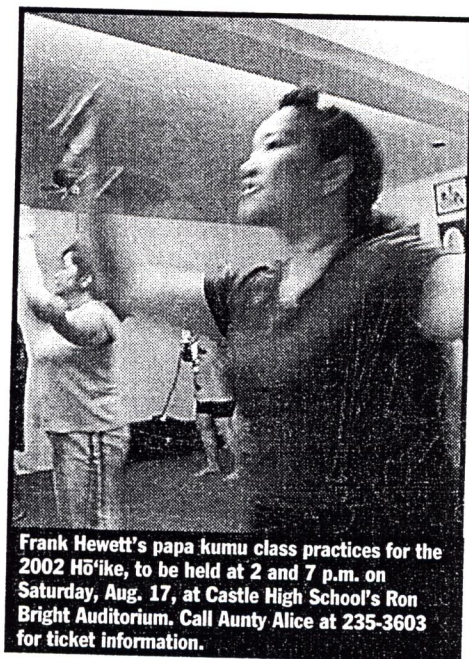
## Exhaling the hā

Every year since 1978, Hewett and his hula hālau, Kūhai Hālau O Kawaikapuokalani Pā 'Ōlapa Kahiko, have hosted an annual display — a hō'ike — to showcase the hālau's hula and to present music, much of it written by Hewett and played by special musical guests, for an audience of friends, family and folks in Kāne'ohe. Over the years, guest performers have included Auntie Genoa Keawe, Teresa Bright, Olomana, the Lim Family of Kohala, Del Beazley, Kawai Cockett, the Ho'opi'i Brothers, Mākaha Sons, Darlene Ahuna and Sean Na'auao — in short, a canny master list of some of contemporary Hawai'i's most interesting roots musicians.

Twice, the hālau welcomed the Kahelelani Serenaders of Ni'ihau, an extended, 'ukulele-wielding family of 12, dressed in plumeria lei and matching, blue-and-white, pareu-print aloha shirts and mu'umu'u. The family's sharing of their cherished, old Hawaiian songs and hymns was sweet as Kaua'i rain, and it had the perhaps unintended effect of illuminating some of the bedrock beneath the entire tradition of Hawaiian songwriting.

Of course, the soul of the hō'ike is Hewett, his now-coed hālau, his music ... and the aloha so consistently and generously transmitted to the audience.

Hewett's women dancers are by no means the prettiest or most athletic you've ever seen. Some are fat. Some are tiny. They don't smile particularly. Many are, at this point, middle-aged (that happens when dancers stick by their kumu for 25 years). The dancers' lines are not the neat-



Frank Hewett's papa kumu class practices for the 2002 Hō'ike, to be held at 2 and 7 p.m. on Saturday, Aug. 17, at Castle High School's Ron Bright Auditorium. Call Auntie Alice at 235-3603 for ticket information.

est, nor are the movements the most rigorously synchronized. But they do dance — fearlessly, cleanly and with tremendous discipline and great energy. The 'auana dances are all about human grace.

The effect of a stage full of Hewett's dancers moving together to a Pele chant or one of kumu's magnificent songs is elemental, spiritual: It's as if the dancers — and the hula itself — sprung right up out of the Kāne'ohe mud.

"The first time I saw Frank's hālau, they looked like they had just come out of the jungle. It was chicken skin," Skylark Rossetti told me by phone from Hilo, where she now lives. A founder of the Hawai'i Academy of Recording Arts, Rossetti has emceed nine of Hewett's hō'ike.

"They had that raw something," Rosset-

ti said. "It wasn't the flowery hula we all knew. It felt primitive, native, authentic. He took everyday women — they didn't have to have a particular beauty — taught them a male style of hula and molded them into a tough fighting machine."

"Kumu told us we were his boys," Auntie Mapuana Ringler, one of Hewett's longtime dancers, remembered. "When we were getting ready to go dance, he'd say, 'Come on, let's go, boys!'"

"Yup, we were his men." She laughed. Back in the Paradise Lounge, I asked Hewett how he teaches his dancers. After a reflective pause, he said, slowly, "I teach them to be humble, respectful, patient and to appreciate life. And to always be honest."

Two of his dancers had told me, "It's all about watching and following," or about ho'opili, clinging and mimicking.

"I practice with my students, and if I can do it, I expect them to do it," he said. "When I lift, they better lift with me. I am their standard. I'm the captain of the ship. I set the standard and they better live up to it."

"Because he's the teacher!" Auntie Genoa answered when I asked her why she calls Hewett kumu. "The source is there with him!"

Rossetti ticked off the things that the naturally stylish kumu reintroduced to hula: braided lau'e fern for haku lei and kūpe'e, kālā'au (stick dancing), women's bloomers down to the ankles under thick layers of dry ti-leaf skirts topped with fresh ti skirts, and his own signature black performance pajamas that look almost Chinese.

"All of this was unheard of," Rossetti said, "but these were all things his kūpuna gave to him, so he passed it on. These things were instantly copied by

other hālau."

"In the early days, it was all kahiko," Ringler, a big woman, said. "It was totally exhausting. One program has 14 kahiko numbers. Once the ipu was in kumu's hands, we wouldn't know what was going to happen. It used to upset me, he'd go so fast. But no matter how big I was, I was able to do it. Once the ipu was flying, it became spiritual, and you had to have the spirit in you to do it. I don't think kumu realized what he did in those times, either. I went through it, and there's no dancers like us now."

Mapuana Ringler has danced with Hewett since before he started the hālau. Now a kumu hula in her own right with her own hālau (along with at least nine other hālau graduates), she stays close to her kumu as one of his alaka'i, managing the hālau's affairs, especially the planning for the hō'ike.

"The hō'ike is our own Merrie Monarch," she told me, referring to the fact that Hewett has never sought out hula competition. "It's not a part of him."

This year's Hō'ike, the 25th, happens Saturday, Aug. 17, at the Ron Bright Auditorium at Castle High School.

"Kumu is the Hawaiian who doesn't exist anymore," Ringler said. "He's an old soul in a young man's body. ... He likes to play those tricks on people, those rhymes and riddles you read about in Hawaiian books. There are people who still do that stuff, but they're old already. ... Kumu's gifted and I know that. He's what aloha is. Everyone who's had tutelage under him, they appreciate what they've been given and they appreciate his ancestors, because that's where it came from."

