

Nana I Ka Loea Hula
Kumu Hula: Palani Kahala
Interviewer: Lovina LePendu
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PALANI KAHALA

My full name is Frank Kimona Kahala. I carry the name of a grand-uncle, but I prefer to be known simply as "Palani". I've never had a studio to teach at, but I've worked out of such places as Keku Gym at Kamehameha, Highlands Intermediate and Palama Settlement. I've taught keikis as well as men and women. The hula training included hula kahiko, 'auana and 'oli.

I started hula at age 17 while a student at Kamehameha. My teachers were Robert Cazimero and Wayne Keahi Chang. They came to instruct for the schools Concert Glee Club. It was a novel idea to turn the training into a formal halau, so therefore, members of the group became part of the first men of Halau Na Kamalei. I stayed for three years learning hula.

I've never 'uniki(graduated) in the formal sense, yet I've maintained an extensive background in Hawaiian culture, having taken classes in Hawaiian language to speak proficiently. Included in the experience are culture classes in high school and college. What has helped tremendously is that fact that I hail from Kahana, O'ahu, where remnants of Hawaiian culture still exist.

When I returned from serving as an Intelligence Analyst with the 307th Army Security Agency in Ludwigsburg, Germany back in 1980, I had no plans to teach hula. I was actually planning to attend college to pursue a career in Communications, but things change. My aunt, Verna Wilson, encouraged me to teach a group of women and that was the beginning of my halau.

As far as the term itself, *kumu* means teacher/source and of course, with *hula*, it means hula source. There are those who might argue that a true kumu hula comes from a lineage of kumu hula. I say that is correct, but there are some very important teachers in the hula world who don't possess this particular hula genealogy. Their contribution far exceed many who have had that formal link with the past. In many respects, these people should be respected and recognized for their works. They've earned the right to be

called "kumu" by the amount of work and dedication they've put into it.

There are two styles of hula kahiko. There's what I term as "classical" or traditional hula kahiko, and then "contemporary" stylings of ancient hula. Traditional hula has been passed down from succeeding generations. For myself and other hula teachers, we should never change chants like "Kaulilua", "'Au'a 'Ia", "A Ko'olau Wau." We should never try to attempt to re-do something as historically valuable as these dances. If it is the way it was performed, say, 100 years ago, then it should be the same way 100 years from now. Yet, in the same light, this generation of Hawaiians are a source of tradition. Like our ancestors, we share the same spirit of creativity. Things we create today will become the traditions of tomorrow. There is nothing to say that we can't use the form of hula which our ancestors did.

I think I have a definite style of hula. Nothing specific, yet there are certain hula moves that can be attributed to me; certain concepts and ideas which I have helped to promote; things people would come back and say, "Hey, that's very Palani Kahala."

I don't believe in originality. I merely think that what is labeled as original is a recombination of ideas that have been tested before. A good kumu hula takes the very best of what they've learned and looks at it from another perspective. If that is originality, well, I'm guilty. I do it all the time. In developing style, I watch, look and listen -- not only to hula, but all forms of dance such as ballet, jazz, other ethnic dances and I can see the ideas that they've generated.

Composing mele is a means by which I can express the whole spectrum of human emotion. Some of my greatest moments of composing have come in times of personal strife. Times when I'm going through an emotional or physical crisis, this leads to creative moments that swell inside. I find myself being very creative and wanting to write.

I feel competition brought hula into the forefront of public attention. Performing in competitions have built my reputation. I'd be a nobody; just another unknown, had it not been for the exposure of the Merrie Monarch Festival and other competitions.

I felt in the beginning, and I guess it's my own immaturity or naivety, that winning was EVERYTHING. Now, at this point in my life, winning is not as important. What is ENJOYING what you do. There is a feeling of overwhelming

joy to perform. That feeling is more important than the opinions of the competition judges. No one can take that joy away. That feeling that you are a winner just for trying. A trophy merely is a symbol recognizing excellence and achievement, but that doesn't mean you didn't do well.

My students are my greatest accomplishment as a kumu hula. When I graduate my students, I expect them to do two things. First, they must develop a sense of discipline. Secondly, *ha'aha'a* or humility and compassion for others. If anything, those are the kinds of things that I try to instill in my teachings.