

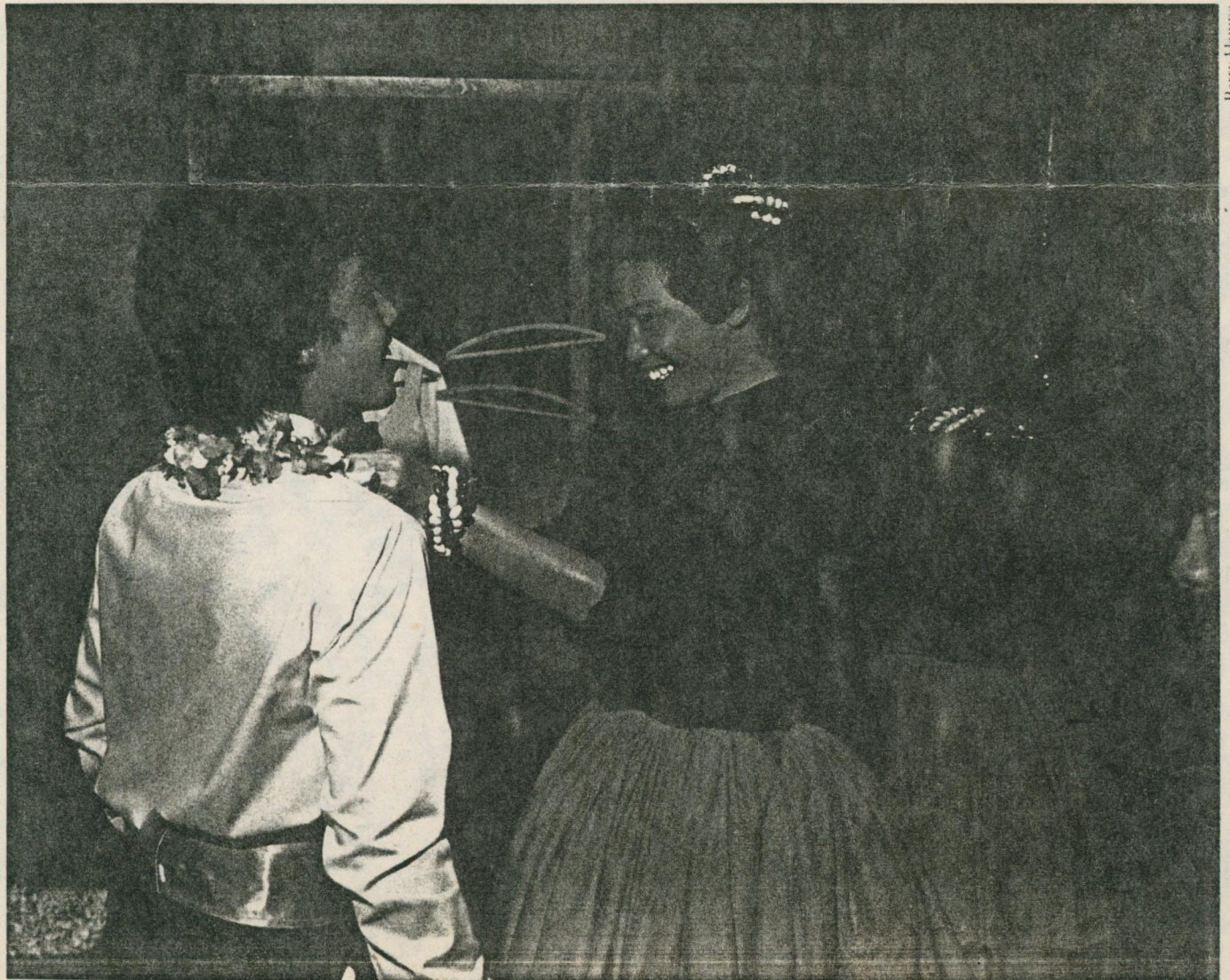
# HALAU HULA KAWAILI'ULA PREPARES FOR THE MERRIE MONARCH FESTIVAL

BY BARRY HAMPE

The beat begins on the *pahu* drum. Ta-tum tum, ta-tum tum. In a wide room above a line of stores in Kailua, Oahu, twenty-three young women place their fists on their hips and assume a basic hula stance—knees flexed, body balanced, *okole* centered over the heels. They're barefoot, wearing T-shirts and warm-up pants.

"Hela."

To the beat, the dancers extend one leg, touch toes to the floor, return to the basic position, and repeat with the other leg. In the front line, the torso, head, and arms of each dancer remain still, while the legs take on a graceful life of their own. New students go in the back line and learn by watching those in front. Back there the bodies sway a little and feet sometimes scrape the floor as the dancers change weight from one foot to the other.



Barry Hampe



**I**t is October. The Twenty-third Annual Merrie Monarch Festival in Hilo, March 30 to April 6, 1986, is still six months away, but it already looms large over Halau Hula Kawaili'ula. Named in honor of King David Kalakaua, the festival features three nights of hula competition.

Thursday night solo dancers compete for the title of Miss Aloha Hula. Friday night is the *kahiko*, or ancient hula, competition. Saturday night the dancers compete in the *'auwana*, or modern hula. Not every *halau* chooses to compete, but most view Merrie Monarch as the Olympics of Hawaiian hula.

Kawaili'ula is a contender. In 1985 the men placed second in *'auwana* and second overall. The women placed fifth in both events. Marlene Kau'ilani Keahi was first runner-up for Miss Aloha Hula.

The *kumu hula* of Kawaili'ula—the teacher—is Howell Kali'ula Mahoe, Jr. (pronounced Ma-HOY), known to everyone as “Chinky.” He explains that his brother favored the Portuguese side of the family when he was born, “and I pulled more of the Chinese. My mother thought they'd brought her the wrong baby. So my grandmother called me ‘Chinky.’”

Kawaili'ula (pronounced Ka-

VYE-lee oo-LA) was his grandfather's name. It means “water mirage,” the appearance of shimmering heat waves rising on a hot day. “My grandfather told me that was my name, too. That Kali'ula stands for Kawaili'ula.”

Mahoe was an excellent athlete, considered one of the top canoe paddlers on O'ahu, when he became interested in hula. He was twenty-two. He had been excited by a performance of Robert Cazimero's *halau*, Na Kamalei, and wanted to begin studying right then. But it was not the time of year when new members were accepted. “I was so anxious I started

*Kawaili'ula performs at Waikiki Shell during Aloha Week*



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Joe Carini

(ABOVE)  
*The women of Kawaili'ula  
on Kahiko night.*

(FAR RIGHT, TOP)  
*Chinky Mahoe on Kahiko night.*

(FAR RIGHT, BOTTOM)  
*The men of Kawaili'ula  
on Auwana night.*

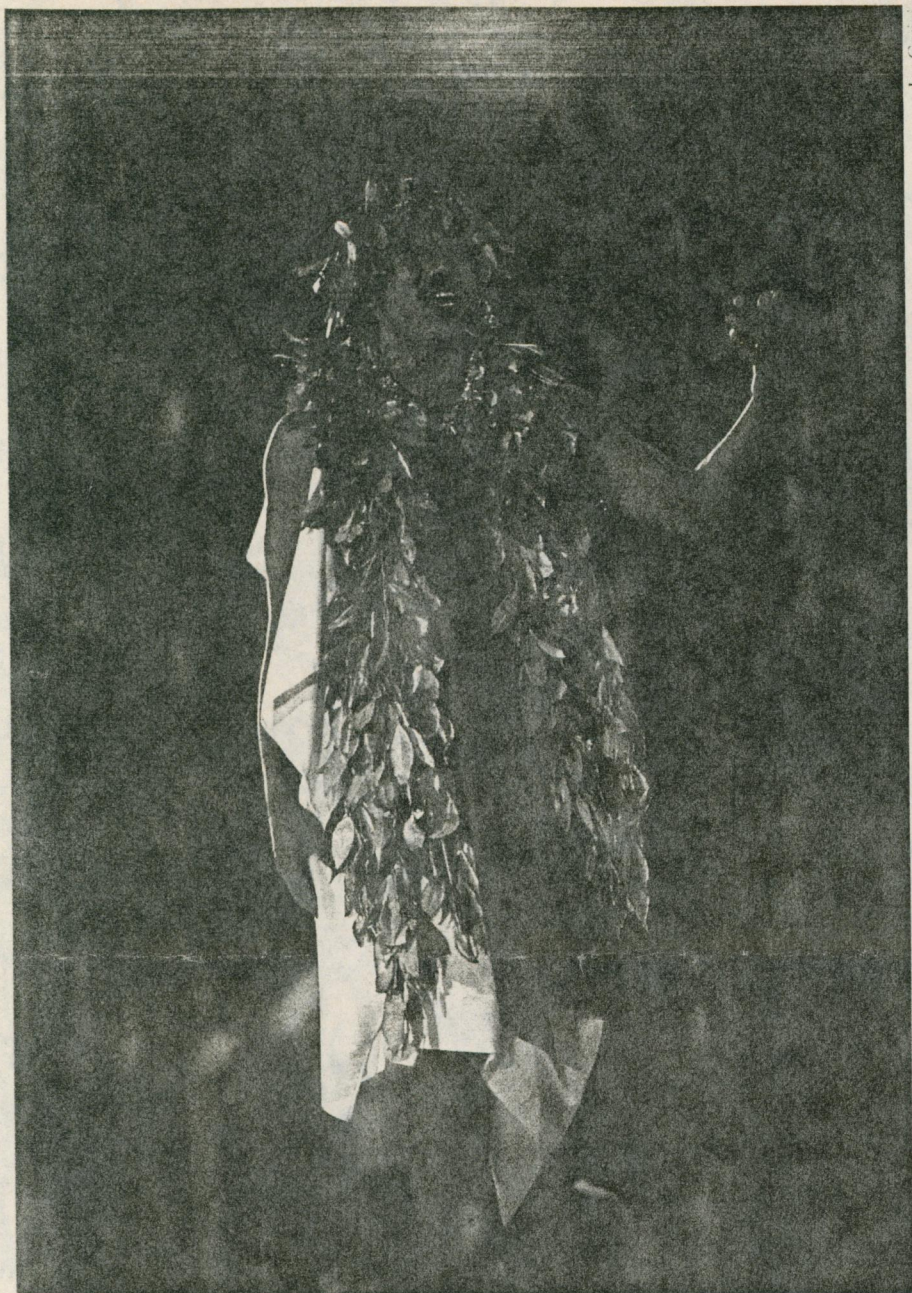
training under Uncle George Na'ope at Kalihi-Palama Culture and Arts Society." He learned the basics, and a year later joined Darrell Lupenui's halau Waimapuna. (Waimapuna has been a top competitor at Merrie Monarch. Lupenui's women's halau, Ke Ala O Ka Laua'e, took first place last year.)

Mahoe became a *kumu hula* by chance when he was asked to teach a hula to some boys with the Kailua High School Madrigals in 1979. He had to ask Darrell Lupenui for his consent. "He agreed as long as I didn't use anything taken from Waimapuna," Mahoe said. "I went to

teach one number, and that turned into three numbers, and then into a trip around the world" when the Madrigals were invited to make a world tour.

He eventually formed Kawaili'ula which is a relatively new *halau*. That plus Mahoe's own youth caused problems at first. But placing high in competition has increased his credibility with audiences, with the judges, and with his own dancers. "When Waimapuna came on stage, the audience expected a great performance. Now they expect it from us, too. And if I ask my dancers to do something, and it feels funny to





Joe Carini

them, they say 'Well, he must know what he's doing.'"

*Makaukau!*"

In the upstairs studio the warm-up is complete and work begins on the *kahiko* chant they will perform. It is a Moloka'i chant about the goddess Hina who watched over the land. She controls a gourd with three winds she can release to warn, chastise, or destroy the people.

Every *halau* receives the same chant. But on the night of the competition, each *halau* will look and sound different. There is a saying: "No one *halau* has all the knowledge." Each must do its own interpretation. The



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*kumu* begins with the words of the chant, and that's all. Mahoe has researched the history and inner meaning of the chant. He has established the beat and worked out the melodic strain for the chant. And he has made up the steps and choreographed the dance. Now his dancers must learn it to perfection.

*Kahiko* is "ancient" in the sense that it is danced to the chant and uses the traditional implements such as the *ipu* gourd and the *pahu* drum. But it is living, growing, and changing as new chants are written, and new hulas are created to go with ancient chants.

The *'auwana* is "modern" because it is accompanied by "modern" string instruments such as the ukulele and guitar. But the dress of the dancers is often based on the Hawaiian monarchy period, and has a distinctively Victorian look.

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"When you take hula  
from Chinky,  
you don't just take hula.  
You join the halau."

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Mahoe thrives on competition. His biggest problem: fund raising. Last year the *halau* spent \$16,000 for travel, hotel, meals and costumes to compete at the Merrie Monarch Festival. The *halau* raises all the money, and everyone helps. "I expect at least one parent to be present at our fund-raising functions. I tell the older ones, 'If you don't want your parents around, bring someone else.'"

Kawaili'ula put on a party at McCoy Pavilion in Ala Moana Beach Park on September 1 and raised most of the money needed for the trip. As its reputation has increased, the *halau* has been asked to perform more often. An appearance at the Castle High School twentieth reunion brought in a fee. Other performances are benefits, such as an appearance by the children of the *halau* at the Bishop Museum.

"Once you have the money, then





Chinky Mahoe

Sylvia Hampe

anyone can be asked for help. At the Castle reunion party, Mahoe had already gone on stage to chant when it was discovered that one of the dancers had the wrong costume. A backstage mother reorganized that hula from eight dancers to seven, changed the lineup, and sent them out on stage with no one the wiser.

"You know," somebody else said, "When you take hula from Chinky, you don't just take hula. You join the halau." ☺

Barry Hampe is a professional writer who has written for many local and national magazines. As a film and television writer-producer-director he has produced more than thirty documentaries, "lots of videos, and countless commercials." Most recently he wrote and co-produced, "Golf, Good Friends and Music: Hawaii Remembers Aku" for KHON-TV. He and his family live in Kailua, on Oahu's Windward side.

you have to work out a budget, make reservations, design the costumes, get material, and start sewing." Costumes are the next major problem. The dancers need different costumes for *kahiko* and *'auwana*. Because the final selection of dancers to appear in competition won't be made until just before the festival, costumes must be created for all the dancers who might be expected to compete. Last year the costumes cost about \$8,000. And most of the sewing was done by people in the *halau*. Chinky, himself, sews some of the costumes. Each dancer has to make his or her own accessories.

"If you have come to all the practices, learned the routines, helped with fund-raising, and made all the accessories, you can go to Merrie Monarch," the mother of a dancer said. "But you still don't know if you've made the line."

As the festival approaches, the frequency of practices increases until, Mahoe said, "about the last month and a half we try to practice every night."

The pressure is to get past the mechanics of the dance to work on expression and performance. "He teaches us that our performance and attitude start in the studio itself," a dancer said. "If you can't smile at yourself in the mirror within these walls, you can't do it on stage."

Along with practice, there are performances. Parents and all those "others" drive dancers from place to place and help out backstage. Everyone is an "uncle" or an "auntie" and

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