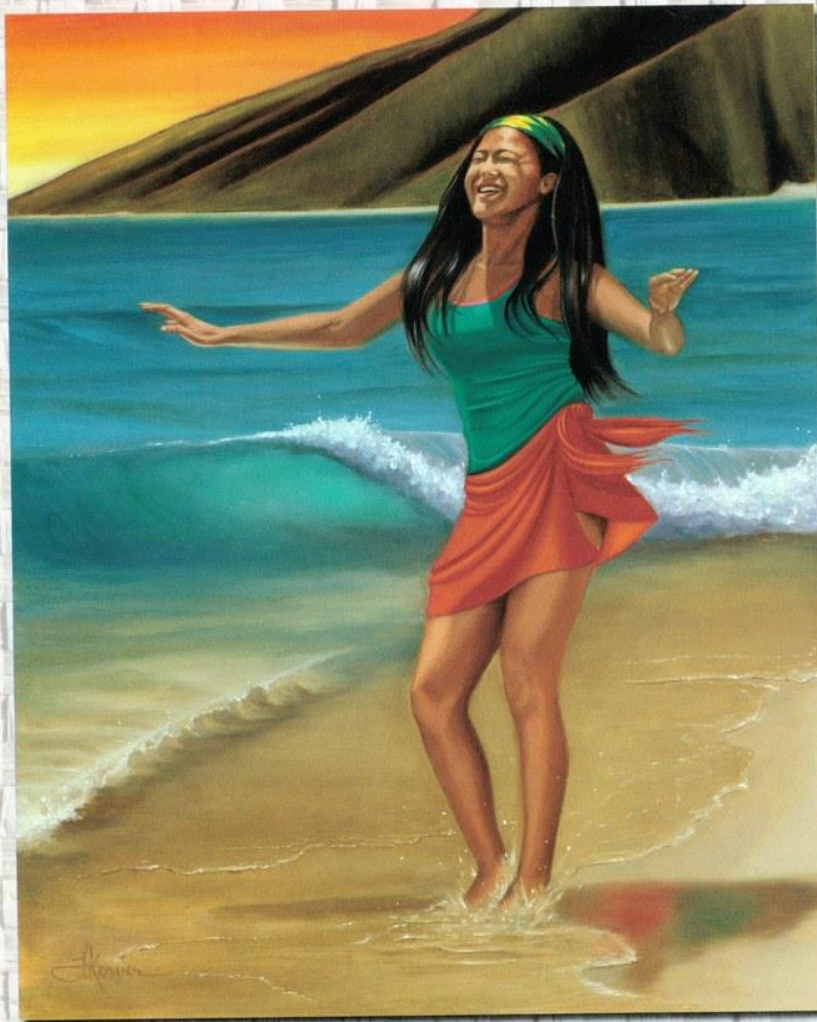


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# Moving with the **Aloha Spirit**



© Louanne Korver 2009

Original oil painting "Splash" by  
Santa Cruz artist Louanne Korver.

## **ANCIENT ART OF HULA TAKES HOLD IN SANTA CRUZ**



A chill, east wind is blowing outside the Pacific Cultural Center, but you wouldn't know it by looking at the people inside. Men in colorful aloha shirts and women in sandals are settling into folding chairs. Two barefoot children skitter past pots of palm and Bird of Paradise as the scent of gardenia fills the air. It's one of those only-in-Santa-Cruz moments: a sold-out crowd braving the cold in tropical dress for a two-hour hula show.

"It's the grace, the rhythm and a fascination with Hawaii. That's why they come," says Pat Benfield as she surveys the crowd that has turned out for Te Hau Nui dance company's 10th anniversary show. Benfield is a deejay with the mainland's only all-Hawaiian radio station, KAPU-LP 104.7 FM in Watsonville. She goes by Pupule Paki or Crazy Pat.

"Hula just draws you in," she says.

Crazy Pat may have the best explanation for why – along with surfing, ukuleles and aloha shirts – the ancient Hawaiian art of hula has waltzed its way into the heart of Santa Cruz.

About 200 women study hula here, with five schools, sometimes called halau,

### By Peggy Townsend



Aili Colfer, one of Te Hau Nui dance company's youngest dancers, after her performance.

dedicated to the art. The dancers, who range in age from 7 to 70, say hula has changed their lives. They say it has taken away stress. They tell stories of how it

Te Hau Nui dance company performs on the east cliffs of Santa Cruz.

helped them lose weight and gain a sisterhood. They say it reminds them of what is important in life: family, the earth and kindness to one another.

"For me, it (hula) is a respect for nature and an appreciation for life," says Amy Culver, a dark-haired family-practice physician who grew up in Hawaii and is dancing in the Te Hau Nui show.

"The dance connects me to a feeling of aloha," Culver says. "It creates a pocket of 'ohana (family) right here in Santa Cruz."



"Hula is the key to Hawaiian culture," says Santa Cruz author Jim Houston, whose latest novel, *Bird of Another Heaven*, explores the shared past of Hawaii and California. "It goes right to the heart of everything."

Ancient Hawaiians had no written language, Houston explains, so their history, creation stories, battles, love stories and genealogies were memorized by chanters. When the Hawaiians held ceremonies, which they did often, hula dancers would

Photo: Bill Lovejoy

be called upon to act out certain of the chanter's songs.

Girls were chosen to be dancers at an early age and trained by master teachers called kumu hulas. It was a sacred calling. Women dedicated their lives to the dance and the hula goddess Laka.

In the 1770s, an illustrator named John Webber accompanied Captain Cook on his third Pacific voyage and made the first European drawing of hula dancers. They were pictured in knee-length skirts of ti leaves, with ferns encircling their heads, wrists and ankles, and their long dark hair floating around them – much like traditional dancers look today.

The sensual storytelling dance, however, scandalized the western missionaries who came to Hawaii, and they managed to force it underground for 50 years. But in February 1883, a group of hula dancers came out to celebrate the coronation of Hawaii's last king, David Kalakaua. Hawaiian culture began its first comeback, Houston says.

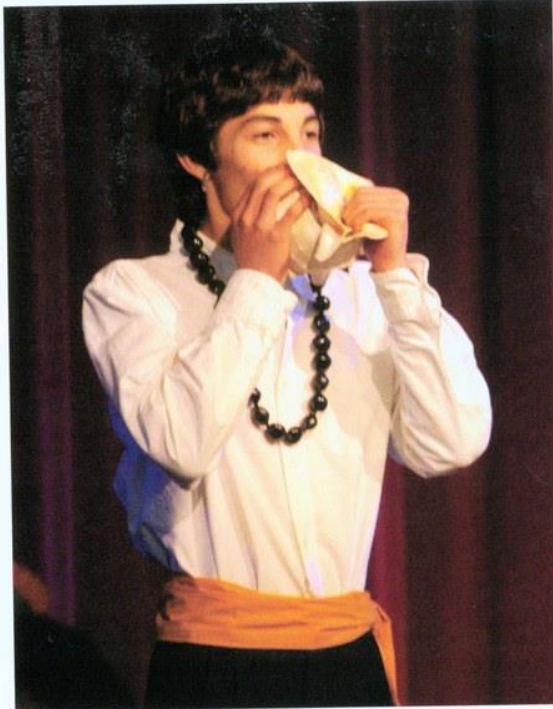
Hula is now central to the cultural renaissance that has been going on in Hawaii for the past 40 years. It is also the focus of one of the biggest hula festivals in the world, the Merrie Monarch, which occurs every spring on the Big Island of Hawaii. Scores of dance troupes come to perform both the traditional hula or kahiko – which is accompanied by drumming and chants – and the modern hula or 'auana – which is more western influenced and is usually accompanied by instruments like guitar and ukulele.

"Dance is just the way it is," says Mehana Thomas, a Santa Cruz hula teacher who can trace her Hawaiian family roots back six generations. "In Hawaii, dance is just a part of your life."



On a Tuesday night, Mehana Thomas stands in front of three long rows of women wearing colorful pa'u (gathered skirts) and explains one of the dance movements they are rehearsing for an Oct. 24 show to mark the 10th anniversary of her school.

"This is about the queen," says Thom-



Kasey Iokepa Moniz uses the pu (or conch) to announce the beginning of the Te Hau Nui dance company's show.

as, who cocks her knee and gracefully lifts her foot. "It's, 'oooh, her feet are so dainty.' Yeah?" The women laugh, but quickly correct their step to match the story being told in the song.

That's the way Thomas teaches – a blend of the strict methods she was taught as a youngster at a halau hula (hula school) in Hawaii and the more laid-back Santa Cruz style.

"I was brought up with halau," says Thomas. She's sitting in the sunshine in Aptos the day before her class. "It was very strict."

Students would be drilled in dance steps and Hawaiian words. There was no questioning the teacher or being late to class.

"But this is Santa Cruz, yeah?" Thomas says. "I don't throw a lot of rules on my ladies."

Thomas, whose name "Mehana" means warmth, can claim 63 percent Hawaiian blood. Her family tree traces the ethnic history of Hawaii: White, Spanish, Filipino and Chinese mix in with her Hawaiian

blood. She has long dark hair, almond-shaped brown eyes and a sturdy, graceful body. She comes from a long line of hula dancers and started her own formal training at age 16.

"Before that, it was just adults pushing you. You know, go up and dance, follow the aunties," she says. "You learned from them."

Thomas' students memorize 25 basic hula steps along with their Hawaiian names, but the dance is more than just swaying hips and undulating hands.

"It is not just the motions," Thomas says. "It is the emotions. Hula comes from the na'au," she says, touching her fist to her stomach. "It comes from your center, your navel, where life comes from, and goes through your arms and out your hands."

She laughs. "Sometimes, the emotion stops at people's wrists, but I tell them to bring that feeling out." Spread it beyond themselves and into the audience.

Emotion is what hula's stories are all about. The dances tell tales of lovers meeting, ancient intrigues and sons returning home. They tell of the pleasure of eating fish roasted with a pat of butter, the joy of seeing blossoms dance on the water.

The dance is also firmly planted in the Hawaiian reverence for the land and nature.

In Hawaii, Thomas says, hula dancers will go into the forest to gather flowers, ferns and vines to weave into leis and head-dresses for the dance, being careful to pick only what they need. After the dance, they make sure to return their adornments back to the forest

"Everything goes back into the ground," Thomas says.

"Hula cannot separate the land and the ocean from the dance," agrees Lorraine Kalehua Keaikewekiu Kinnamon, a Polynesian dance teacher who graduated with a degree in environmental studies from UC Santa Cruz and now lives in Watsonville. "They are completely intertwined."

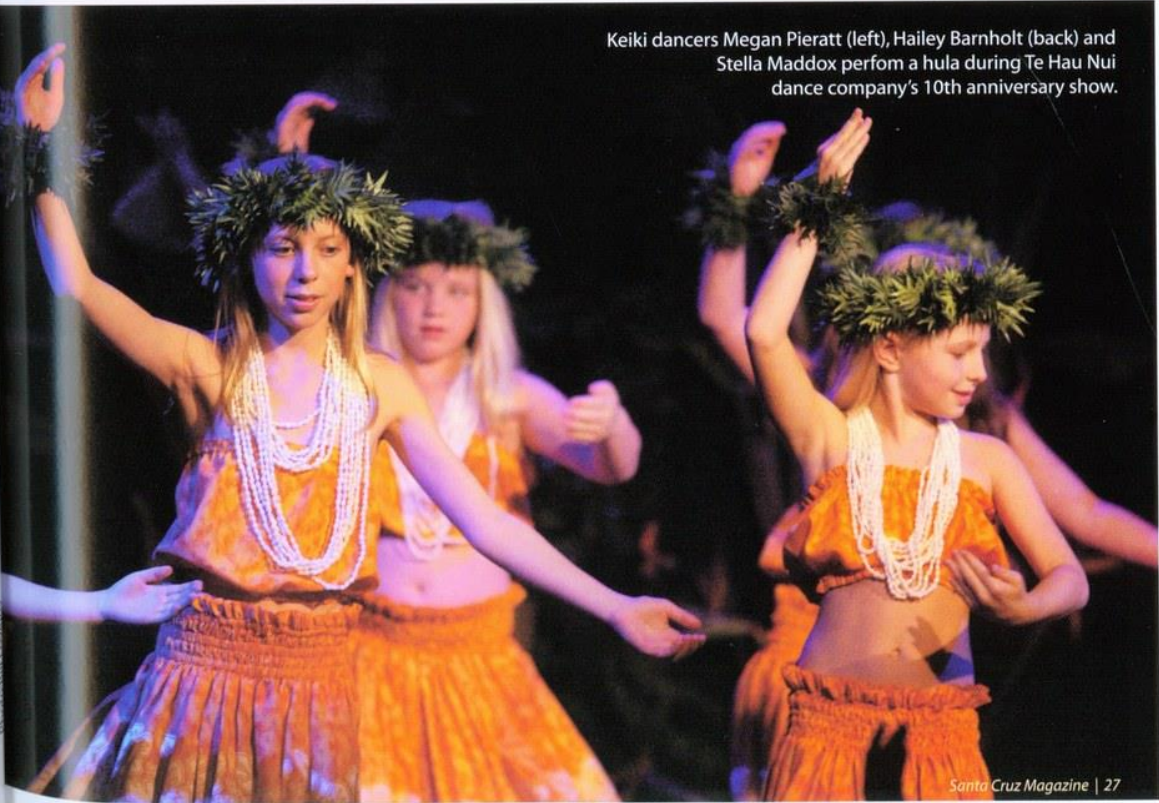


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Photo: Geoffrey Dunn Collection

Hula comes to Santa Cruz. The Honolulu Girls Glee Club on a 1938 tour with Duke Kahanamoku pose on the main beach at the Boardwalk.



Keiki dancers Megan Pieratt (left), Hailey Barnholt (back) and Stella Maddox perform a hula during Te Hau Nui dance company's 10th anniversary show.

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Love of the land is just one of the things that drew Kinnamon to hula. Trained in ballet, she took up hula when her family moved to the islands and later traveled the world with the Sounds of Young Hawaii dance troupe.

"It feels so natural to cherish the earth by using dance as an art form," she says.

That respect for nature – along with surfing, agriculture and the ocean – may be what draws Santa Cruz to all things Hawaiian. We have Hawaiian restaurants like Aloha Island Grille and Hula's Grill, says Kinnamon, ticking off evidence that, spiritually speaking, Santa Cruz could very well be the ninth island in the Hawaiian chain. We have a huge ukulele club and outrigger teams. We have an all-Hawaiian radio station and Dancing Cat Records, which pianist George Winston founded to document the Hawaiian tradition of slack key guitar. And, of course, we have a penchant for wearing aloha shirts, shorts and flip-flops all year long.

"It's like the spirit of Hawaii is just carried on in Santa Cruz," Kinnamon says.

In that context, hula's popularity here makes perfect sense.

Tall and fit, Kinnamon also is evidence of the health benefits of hula.

"Physically, it's incredibly strengthening, incredibly toning," she says.

Hula makes use of every part of the body, from the toes to the fingertips. Yet its gentle movement allows children and women in their 60s, 70s, and 80s to perform.

Leolani Lowry, who runs halau hula Ka Lei Wehi O Ka Mailelaloa in Santa Cruz, began studying at age 4. She is now in the middle of a rigorous program to become a kumu hula, a master teacher. It is a process that can take years.

Lowry says hula brings her back to her roots, to the small sugar plantation town called Hakalau on the Big Island of Hawaii where she grew up. It takes her back to the fish they used to catch and roast on the beach, to the seaweed they harvested to eat, and to the townspeople who would come to her family's house to play music and dance and talk long into the night.

A woman who loves the ocean and spent 14 years sailing around the world, Lowry says her students find their own answers in hula.

"Some of them come because they love the gracefulness of the dance, or because it tells a story, or because maybe they heard



Photo: Bill Lowery

Leolani Lowry began studying at age 4 and is now in a rigorous program to become a kumu hula, a master teacher.

**"It's like the spirit of Hawaii is just carried on in Santa Cruz"**

the music and fell in love with it," Lowry says, tucking her long, black hair behind one ear. "For some of them, it's that they went to Hawaii and felt a spiritual connection to the islands."

For Maryann Lax of Aptos, hula was life-changing.

"I was middle-aged and I decided I need to do something," says the slender, dark-haired woman as she readies herself for Thomas' advanced hula class. "I used to weigh 200 pounds. Through hula, my life took on a new meaning. The exercise, the dance, the way I perceive life. It's like my life is a whole new chapter." ❖



**If you want to hula**

**Santa Cruz's hula teachers include:**

- ❖ Lorraine Kinnamon, 722-9391
- ❖ Leolani Lowry, 420-0900
- ❖ Jacinta Maiva McGinnis, 336-8037
- ❖ Kalae Miles, 462-6749
- ❖ Mehana Thomas, 818-8072



Mehana Thomas leads her hula students on Tuesday nights at the La Selva Beach Club House.