



Auntie Mae
Kamamalu Klein is
a living link between hula
past and present

Keeping Step

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PHOTOS BY DANA EDMUNDS

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One day in the summer of 1959, Mae Kamāmalu Klein went with her older sister Dorothy to Kapi'olani Park, the idyllic, three-hundred-acre green at the foot of Diamond Head. They were there to see the Royal Hawaiian Band but also to continue reconnecting: The sisters had been separated since their father died seventeen years earlier. Mae was by this point 27 years old and a mother of three. She had so many questions for her sister, including this big one: "What does it mean to be Hawaiian?"

"There was a lot of stigma then," she recalls. "People were saying that Hawaiians are ignorant and lazy. I thought to myself, 'But I'm Hawaiian and I'm not that way.'" While the band played, Mae and Dorothy watched several hula classes perform. The dances were a revelation. But the larger revelation was in the ineluctably Hawaiian spirit of the teacher, Maiki Aiu. "There was some kind of magic," Mae says. "Such charisma! From day one I said, 'I'm not leaving this woman.'"

Maiki went on to be known as the "mother of the Hawaiian Renaissance," and

Mae became one of her most important protégés. Today, at 85, she is a critical link connecting hula's past, present and future. If Maiki focused on preserving the rituals of traditional hula, then Mae frets about ensuring that contemporary dancers carry these traditions forward. To that end she is



creating an archive of her life's work. She has also embarked on an oral history with me—a journalist and student of one of the many kumu hula (hula teachers) she has trained. The motivating question behind all of this activity is no longer, "What does it mean to be Hawaiian?" but rather, "How do we save hula?"

Both Maiki and Mae came from homes that had been sundered by death, poverty and hardship. Margaret Maiki Souza was born on O'ahu in 1925 and spent her childhood in Pālolo and Nānākuli. She attended Honolulu's St. Francis Convent School as a young girl and went to live with the nuns after her hānai (adoptive) parents died. She and some classmates formed a Hawaiian club. One of her cohort tracked down Lōkālāia Montgomery, a practitioner of a once-sacred form of dance that had been driven underground by Protestant missionaries, and the girls began studying with her. Class visitors included scholar Mary Kawena Pukui and renowned dancer Sally Moanikeala Wood. Maiki stayed with Lōkālāia, graduating as a traditionally trained teacher in 1948.



At 85 years old, Mae Kamāmalu Klein (pictured above and on the opening spread) witnessed hula's twentieth century revival and is now contemplating its future preservation. Mae's kumu hula (hula teacher) Maiki Aiu was known as the "mother of the Hawaiian Renaissance"; among Maiki's early influences were renowned cultural practitioners Lōkālāia Montgomery and Mary Kawena Pukui (pictured together at top in 1950, with Pukui playing the flute).

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Lin Cariffe

In 1984, shortly after Aiu passed away, Auntie Mae founded her own hālau hula (school). She has since graduated thirty-seven kumu hula through a rigorous training known as 'ūniki. Here she is pictured at a 2007 'ūniki ceremony in Marin, California, for Hālau Mā Lei Huhu I Ka Wākiu. On the facing page, she's pictured at the Papa 'Ūniki Laua'e at Maunawili, O'ahu, in 2003.

Maiki opened Margaret Aiu's Hula Studio in 1946, first on Wilder Avenue in Honolulu, then moving many times after that and renaming the school Hālau Hula o Maiki. In 1953 she and others started Hui Hoa Aloha, a group to celebrate Hawaiian culture. In 1970 she did something radical: She put an ad in the paper offering the kind of formal training she had received from Lōkālā. This system of training is referred to as 'ūniki, a word that derives from the Hawaiian niki, "to tie"; the idea is that through rigorous training, knowledge is "bound" to the student. In the Maiki tradition, it involves years of study and culminates in a high-pressure performance before hula elders. The best students graduate as kumu hula, vested with the honor of training more disciples.

It was this 1970 class that Mae joined. But it was hardly the only tie that bound the two women. Born Mae Claire Marie Kamāmalu Miller in 1932, Mae was the eighth of nine children in a family that lived in a close-knit neighborhood in Kalihi. Her father—a Maui boy, maker of mango chutney and pipe fitter at Pearl Harbor—died when she was ten. Her mother remarried and moved to Kaua'i. Two brothers were already in the military; the younger ones joined as well. Mae's oldest sister, Dorothy, took the teenagers, but Mae and her younger sister were taken to the orphanage at Sacred Hearts Convent. Like Maiki, Mae was raised by nuns. "The convent was a safe place," Mae says, but adds, "We

lived by bells and set rules." She missed her little sister, Antoinette, whom she saw only at dinner.

For high school Mae moved to Saint Francis Convent, in Mānoa—seven years behind Maiki Souza. "I gave the nuns a bad time," Mae says, chuckling. She recalls her stark room, more "cubicle" than home. "I went out to the garden to pick an orange blossom and put it in my vase, just to brighten up my dresser." This drew a lesson from one of the sisters: "I had picked the flower that could have been fruit that could have been jam that could have been on my bread."

Mae graduated, moved to St. Andrew's Priory and began working at Crossley's Hawaiian Flowers. After reconnecting with a brother home from the Korean War, she met and married his friend Henry Klein, a German-Hawaiian-Chinese veteran. They had three daughters.

As she tells me this, Mae and I are sitting at a table at Zippy's, near downtown Honolulu. The contradictions in her countenance are at times striking. She says she was an "imp" when she was young and giggles as she recounts events, but her eyes well with tears when she talks about her father. There are traces of the nuns: She arrives early, dressed in crisp white pants and a magenta blouse. She is rail-thin but easily polishes off a club sandwich and orders custard pie for both of us.

The pie arrives and she continues her



Whyne Iha

story. After that fateful day in Kapi'olani Park, and at her sister's suggestion, Mae enrolled her daughters in classes with Maiki. "I was sitting in on her classes—eventually for three hours, watching one girl after the other, absorbing what she had to offer. I fell in love with this woman through my children."

Mae was content to be a hula mother, until Maiki enlisted Henry's help in getting her to dance. Mae started taking a class one night a week, and the relationship with Maiki deepened. "She became that mother I hadn't had," Mae tells me. "I danced with Maiki for twenty-six years. I advanced quickly through the classes, until I was in the top class performing in Waikīkī. In the late 1960s I began as a student teacher in the children's class." Soon Mae was performing three nights a week, all while tending to her family in Kailua and working at Bank of Hawai'i for eleven years and then Kamehameha Schools for twenty-two.

There was a two-year period when she left Maiki's hālau (troupe). But she returned, undergoing Maiki's famously strict tutelage and graduating from the historic 1972 'ūniki class as a kumu hula. She chose to stay and act as Maiki's kōkua, or assistant, as she graduated many more kumu hula (forty-two in all). Mae was at every 'ūniki, helping and watching.

"Maiki woke up something in me that I didn't know was there," Mae says quietly. "We had a long discussion in 1984... she asked me to open a school. I said, 'Not as

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Kumu hula Patrick Makuskāne (foreground), one of Mae's graduates, is known for his innovative hula mua (literally "hula that evolves").



Jack Wolford

Dancers in the Aiu lineage are known for their fluid, occasionally understated movements, as demonstrated here by dancers from Hālau o Ka Hanu Lehua.



Both images: Marshia Agom

long as you're living." Four days later, on June 19, 1984, Maiki suffered a fatal heart attack. "I was at a loss, really at a loss," says Mae, not bothering to suppress her tears. "I still feel it."

In July 1984 Mae founded her own hālau, Kukalehuaika'ohu ("the lehua that stands in the mist") in her Kāne'ohe home. She started with a group of seven dancers known within Maiki's hālau as the Gracious Ladies. On that foundation she built a hālau that grew to one hundred students. Henry Klein became the school's master craftsman, fashioning the various percus-

sion implements used to accompany ancient hula.

The words "lineage" and "genealogy" carry special meaning to Mae, and she ponders them regularly. Hula was traditionally passed from parents to children, within extended families. In the twentieth century, elders took on the role of curating a certain style, and the hālau replaced the family as the carrier of that style. Today, with the proliferation of hula schools, lines can get blurred. Not all kumu hula observe the traditions Mae considers inviolate, and not all students stay within one hula line.

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In guarding the Maiki lineage, Mae is preserving a movement vocabulary and a distinctive style: fluid, funny, sometimes understated, always lovely. Kumu hula Patrick Makuakāne says the style can be summed up with a code-word used in the Maiki line: *mannerisms*. It describes a turning step in which the hands tug gently at the mu'umu'u and the dancers nod gracefully, inviting the audience in on a secret. "Simplicity, crossing over into elegance," he adds. "All the love and lessons from Auntie Maiki captured in a nod."

Makuakāne, who is my own teacher, is one of thirty-seven kumu hula Mae has graduated. He and twenty-five others now lead their own schools. Only two of these hālau enter hula competitions; for her protégés, as for Mae, preservation is paramount. This next generation extends the lineage through "mannerisms" but also through a repertoire that includes the powerful kahiko (ancient dances) inherited from Lōkālāia, as well as beautiful 'auana (modern dances), many of which Maiki herself choreographed. A classic example is "Pua 'Āhihi," a mele (song) composed for Maiki that compares a sweetheart to the 'āhihi blossom, from a low-spreading bush that grows profusely in the Nu'uaniu Pali gap. "'Pua 'Āhihi' is our signature song," says Mae. "It is a love story, and it has so many innuendoes. It cannot be rote: You have to tell a story. No two people love alike. So when you dance it you dance it for the person you love deeply."

Mae's role as a teacher doesn't stop at coaxing out the dancers' expressiveness. She also expects "respect, unity and healing" among them. "No ego," she adds. While she has a reputation as a taskmaster, she is easily intimate with those in her hula circle, signing off on e-mails with "Me kealoha pau'ole" ("with everlasting affection") or, simply, "Luv You."

Mae is no longer teaching hula, but she shows up frequently at competitions, whether the Merrie Monarch Festival, King Kamehameha Hula Competition, Queen Lili'uokalani Keiki Hula Competition or contests at high schools. She is often a judge, though this is not always a happy occupation. She and some peers reward fealty to tradition, but Mae worries that "entertainment" often trumps more important values.

"Hula is proliferating in places where hula is not understood," Mae continues soberly. "Many kumu do not have the knowledge a kumu should have." This

starts, she says, with knowing the one hundred steps of traditional hula and when to use—or not use—each one. It requires understanding the difference between a chant expressing aloha and one welcoming a student into a place of learning; of knowing which flowers and ferns to entwine for a ceremonial lei po'o, or head lei.

"She is always attentive to the whole of hula as a living culture, but she gives great honor to her lineage," maintains Puakea Nogelmeier, a professor of Hawaiian language at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa and another of her graduates.

Nogelmeier says that Mae views hula as a fabric made up of many threads. "She is really invested in not having it fray away. How do you prevent silk from turning into burlap? If you lose the integrity of the fabric, one strand can get knotted up, or isolated and lost."

"I was up at 2 o'clock this morning."

Mae says when we meet again—again at Zippy's. The dilemma that is keeping her up at night is whether to publicly lament the fraying of the fabric. "How do we save hula?" she asks, urgency animating her voice. For the moment she is answering her own question by collecting material for her archive. She is considering to whom she will pass on her legacy. And she is "saving hula" every time she judges competitions and witnesses ceremonies.

"She has angered some kumu by calling off an 'ūniki," says Nogelmeier. "If she sees too many breaks with tradition, she'll say, 'This is not an 'ūniki. This is a hō'ike [recital]'. The 'ūniki will come later.'"

"She can get disappointed," agrees Naomi Losch, a retired University of Hawai'i language professor who has known Mae since they both danced with Maiki.

"But in the Maiki line she is *the* authority. And she's one of the last ones to insist on tradition," Losch notes the contradiction between Mae's important role and the fact that she is known primarily among hula insiders. "She's very private," Losch says, "and not one to flaunt her knowledge."

For her part, Mae explains her commitment as kuleana, that distinctly Hawaiian way of conceiving one's role in the world: your responsibility and your calling. "I made a promise to Maiki in 1984," she says, "to teach not only her hula 'auana and kahiko, but to include the rituals of 'ūniki. My kuleana is to preserve what Maiki gave me and to pass it down as it was given—not adding, not deleting. When we step into the old, the old *lives*." **HH**