

KATHOLO'ANA



PHOTO: RON WOROBEC

UNUSUAL HULA

With his 2018 show, *I Mua*, Kumu Hula Patrick Makuakāne expands his artistic vision, showcasing hula that escapes its familiar context.

by Constance Kiakahi Hale

One by one, they saunter in from the “yard” and enter a rectangular room in a cinder block chapel. They are Filipino, Vietnamese, Hmong, Hawaiian, African American, and white. Some go by nicknames like Gizmo and Aladdin; some stick to their given names. All enter dressed in light denim shirts (untucked), baggy blue pants (stamped “CDCR”), and bulky work boots. One by one, they shed their prison blues, stripping down to pure white T-shirts or tank tops and loose-fitting gym shorts.

After shifting around the room under the fluorescent lights, bantering with each other, and saying “aloha” to Kumu Hula Patrick Makuakāne, they form lines and do what every other student of hula does: bend their knees into *‘ai ha‘a*, breathe deep, and perform a warm-up of all the hula steps.

Then, it’s on to the repertoire. First, “Kalaniana‘ole,” in honor of a nineteenth-century prince. Then “Hālau Hanalei,” an ancient dance describing a place of infinite rain and power. Then “Onaona,” a piece of poetry chanted to welcome others.

“It’s unbelievable that that was on pitch,” Kumu Patrick says about that last one, teasing the men. “That must be because PeeWee’s not here.”

The men guffaw, then it’s on to a tribute to Queen Kapi‘olani and her efforts to keep her race thriving. On cue, they call out, “Ae, e ho‘i ke aloha i Ni‘ihau!”

“Be careful,” Kumu Patrick warns. “It’s not a growl. Remember the words mean ‘Love returns to Ni‘ihau.’”

I’m struck by how teaching hula to prisoners of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation is a lot like teaching ballet to football players. Only more incongruous.

I’m here as a journalist, to observe the Native Hawaiian Religious Group at San Quentin State Prison. The services—intended to celebrate the spirituality of Polynesian culture—have been going on for several years, and Kumu Patrick was tapped to lead them two years ago. “I was thinking about finding a place to volunteer my services,” he says. “Then I got the phone call to try this.”

Kumu Patrick says that it’s not always an easy gig—it’s a long drive each way, and he never knows who will show up. He must let go of the structured environment of *hālau*, its culture of respect, and his own craving for perfection—not to mention that he must work within a considerable bureaucracy and unfamiliar protocols. “I often enter as a curmudgeon,” he says, “but I always leave inspired.”

It’s easy to understand why: As I observe the session, I feel I’m watching inmates shed their hard shells and become unlikely angels. Maybe not angels with wings, but angels with knees bent deep in *‘ai ha‘a*.

When it’s over, some men linger to talk. “It’s completely spiritual, it’s therapeutic, it’s equivalent to yoga,” says Jimmy Vu.

“It’s about bonding with other men,” says Aladdin, whose words seem at odds with his tattoos. “I have been down [incarcerated] for 23 years. This makes me feel alive.”

And Moua Vue, whom the guys call Gizmo, says that this is a religious practice he can relate to, even though he is Asian and he’d



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never even met Pacific Islanders before coming to prison at 22 after a life in gangs. “It’s different from being on the yard,” he says. “You don’t feel the prison politics; there’s a purpose. When you support another person’s culture, you are giving him a sense of happiness.”



The story of the religious services at San Quentin—of the prisoners who drop their prison blues to dance the hula—is one of several new numbers to be premiered this October in the annual show of Nā Lei Hulu i ka Wēkiu. *I Mua: Hula in Unusual Places* is a step forward in Makuakāne’s evolution as a choreographer, but also a step toward a future in which hula itself sheds its usual costume.

“This title, *I Mua*, is the key to my thinking,” Makuakāne says. “We are progressive; we are taking hula to new places—not just physical places, but also artistic and emotional places.”

The verb *mua* means “to progress,” and Kumu Patrick defines *hula mua* as dance that “takes from the past and brings to the future.” Its movements rely on the vocabulary of *‘auana* and *kahiko*, but many of the movements are stylized, and the music is all over the map. Sometimes other movements are mixed in—a little modern dance, maybe, a little Broadway, a little hip-hop. But Kumu Patrick is clear: “There is always that thread—or rope—that ties us to traditional Hawaiian dance.”

In addition to the segment about hula at San Quentin, *I Mua* breaks boundaries in other ways. There is “The Flower Duet” from *Lakmé*, danced to live opera singing. There is *Hit & Run Hula*, based on flash-mob-style performances the hālau did in San Francisco and New York. “Mana Wahine” honors iconic women with music by artists as diverse as Billie Holiday, Bette Midler, and Myrtle K. Hilo (“The Singing Cab Driver”).

And let’s not forget the hula-goes-swing segment, to the accompaniment of the Hawai’i-based band Kahulanui (“The Big Dance”).

The jazzy music pays homage to the Royal Hawaiian Band in the 1930s, when horns and drums were a part of Hawaiian music. Erin Sweeney and Julia Fennell, students in Nā Lei Hulu’s junior class and accomplished Lindy Hop dancers, are teaching the company swing dance.




If these segments suggest other eras and other contexts, there is one more that screams “unusual places.” This is the “Hula on the Playa” suite, which had its inception in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert at Burning Man, the annual gathering dedicated to community, art, self-expression, and self-reliance.

Burning Man organizers call the event a “crucible of creativity.” Wikipedia calls it “a temporary city” and “an experiment in art and self-expression.” Kumu Patrick calls it “funky, surreal, and guttural.”

After going to Burning Man on his own in 2015, Kumu Patrick took a group of dancers there to perform in 2017. The costumes were edgy, the music eerie, the setting primordial—the flat plain, the background of white dust and amber light. The choreography was a mix of movements that existed mostly outside of time, place, and particular culture.

In August, Nā Lei Hulu will return to the Black Rock Desert to host a bona fide theme camp. “We’ll have a stage, ‘ukulele classes, hula classes, and performances everywhere!” Kumu Patrick says.

Somehow, he will translate this to the stage in October. “When I first took dancers to Burning Man,” he says, musing about how the experience expresses the progressiveness he is trying to capture in the show, “I hoped we would be appreciated. This is a festival about innovation, subversion, inclusion—it’s about radical self-expression, witnessed *without judgment*. This is my community.” 

Papa ‘Ūniki Maile: Mastering Hula at the Deepest Levels

By Kazz Regelman

In August 2019, Nā Lei Hulu will host an *‘ūniki* ceremony—the culmination of a nearly three-year, intense, invitation-only class for up-and-coming *kumu hula* (teachers), *ho‘opa‘a* (chanters), and *‘ōlapa* (dancers). While most of what happens at ‘ūniki stays at ‘ūniki, Kumu Patrick Makuakāne is willing to draw back the curtain to give us a peek at both the class and the ceremony:

- The term *‘ūniki* is related to *niki*, “to tie,” since knowledge was thought to be “bound” to the graduating student.
- Kumu Patrick graduated as a *kumu hula* in 2003, after founding his hālau in 1985. Thanks to a fellowship (and ATA’s \$1,500 unlimited annual travel pass!), he was able to travel frequently to Hawai’i for two years, completing his own ‘ūniki on O‘ahu with Aunti Mae Klein (who was “ūniki”ed by the legendary Aunti Maiki). Kumu Patrick’s deep experience at the time allowed him to graduate as ‘ōlapa, ho‘opa‘a, and *kumu hula* all at once.
- It’s rare to have an ‘ūniki on the mainland. No more than a handful have ever taken place, and all have been in California. Nā Lei Hulu held one previous ‘ūniki, in 2006, but no *kumu* were graduated at that time.
- Like all ‘ūniki classes, this one is named after a plant traditionally placed on the *kuahu*, or

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Papa 'Ūniki Maile

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altar, in a hālau. Kumu bestowed the name "Papa Maile" on the 2018 class because maile vines, once stripped, are twirled together to form fragrant lei, echoing the intertwining of several weekly classes into one cohesive 'ūniki group.

- There are no 'āuana in the 'ūniki repertoire—just kahiko. Many of the hula and *oli* (chants) are special to the 'ūniki class.
- Kumu Patrick required at least ten years of hula experience from all of the *haumana*, or students, entering his 'ūniki class, but many have more than twenty years of training.
- This particular 'ūniki began with fifty-two *haumana*. Today, more than thirty remain.
- Among the *haumana*, eight are candidates for kumu hula. All the current kumu candidates have already graduated as either *ōlapa* or *ho'opa'a*.
- A traditional drum-maker, Kumu Brad Cooper, came from Hawai'i to guide the kumu candidates in the making of their own *pahu*, large wooden drums with a shark skin head—or, more commonly today, cattle hide. The drums must be fashioned by hand. Kumu Patrick says that when he made his own drum, "every night I dreamt of power tools." He adds, with a twinkle in his eye, that for the current 'ūniki class, "there was a little electricity involved."
- In Northern California, candidates will complete a traditional ceremony known as *hu'elepo*, or "scattering of the dust," so named, presumably, because they kick up dust while dancing.



- Graduating kumu hula—even the vegetarians—are required to eat everything on their plates, including *uala* (sweet potato), *opihi* (shellfish), poi, fish, and meats.
- Why hold the 'ūniki now? "The impetus for this 'ūniki was to graduate kumu," Kumu Patrick says. "Several students have been teaching with me, and others have been guiding their own hula enclaves. They deserved to be 'finished,' as Aunti Mae would say. Other students—in the performance group and in weekday classes—have been with me for decades. An 'ūniki is a perfect way to honor their immense work and loyalty." 