

The 30th Mokuhan Festival Lights Up Kauai

As a native son finds his life's rhythm, a sleepy island awakes each September

BY PRISCILLA PÉREZ BILLIG

As a schoolboy, Nathan Kalama was cruelly silenced. Forbidden to speak Hawaiian in class, uttering a single word of his native tongue would bring the punishment of picking the thorny lawn weed, pua hilahila, bare-handed. Decades later, Kalama would reclaim his voice as a singer and composer, hula teacher and crusader for Hawaiian culture.

"I was playing with two boys in the Malie Trio and we used to write a lot of original material, individually and sometimes collectively," Kalama says from his home at the foot of Kauai's Sleeping Giant. "I realized that if we were writing so much music, there had to be other people on the island who were writing music, too."

He would go on to create the Kauai Composer's Contest and Concert in 1984, first held at the Kauai War Memorial Convention Hall with a seating capacity of 1,200. "We were lucky," Kalama says. "There were maybe 50 people in the audience and we made a \$5 profit."

On that night, and after a chance meeting with event organizer Lee Mentley, the composer's event would blossom the following year into the Kauai Mokuhan Festival, growing to include 60 events over nine days and drawing crowds in the thousands. Kalama formed the nonprofit Malie Foundation to oversee the festival, manage a scholarship program and preserve Hawaiian music, dance and arts and crafts.

"We brought in the tourists and made them a part of the community," Mentley says. "Visitors love being inside the community. It's what they come for, really. People want their local experience. They don't want to just be on a hotel property. When they are able to go out to Waimea to hear music and watch hula, surrounded by local families and little children running around, real Hawaiian barbeque, and homemade everything, they love it. It's a wonderful experience."

The Kauai Mokuhan Festival celebrates its 30th anniversary Sept. 21-27. The islandwide event includes the Kauai Composer's Contest and Concert at Waimea Theater, a Children's/ Youth Music Competition at the War Memorial Convention Hall, a three-day hula competition and craft fair at the Kauai Beach Resort and a cultural workshop at Kauai Museum. Hula halau, kumu hula and individual performers from throughout Hawaii, including a Japanese halau from Oahu, will perform.

"Kauai is uniquely different from other islands," Kalama says. "It has always had that spirit of independence and defiance. This island allowed me to grow as an artist and composer. I found so much inspiration in this place; it gave so much more back to me."

Kalama says he "liked singing the old-fashioned Hawaiian songs for the kapuna." But while he respects the hula tradition, he says he wanted the hula to be modern and the song competition contemporary because the culture keeps evolving and this is what will be handed down to the next generation.

"The Mokuhan Festival has connected with different parts of the travel industry," says Maka Herrod, festival director. "One of the reasons my Uncle Nathan elected to have the Mokuhan Festival in September was taking that into consideration."



ABOVE: Kumu hula Nathan Kalama BELOW: Dancers from Halau Ka Lei Mokuhan O Leina'ala PHOTO BY JOE OLIVAS, MALIE FOUNDATION

He understood the importance of bringing people to Kauai. Having it in September was the perfect time because it's a down time for our Islands. Having different events throughout the week brings people here and lots of return guests that specifically mark their calendars and come back just to be a part of the Mokuhan Festival."

Of the four counties, Kauai's visitor industry is the most dependent upon tourism, especially from the U.S. mainland. Kauai is "benefiting from a strong recovery of tourism," says Jack Suyderhoud, professor of business economics at the University of Hawaii Shidler School of Business. Accommodation statistics logged by the

Kauai Visitors Bureau lists 36 percent of visitors staying at hotels, 29 percent in condos and 26 percent in timeshares.

Last year, the average hotel occupancy rate on Kauai was about 69 percent, up about a half-percent from the previous year, but still below the 75 percent to 78 percent range seen before the recession, reports the University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization (UHERO). Visitor arrivals from international markets other than Japan—primarily Canada, China, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand—rose 8.6 percent.

Overall, UHERO reports an expected 1.7 percent growth in visitor arrivals to Kauai this year, down from





LEFT: Soprano Dora Swain performs with her daughter, dancer Anna Velasco.

and appreciation of the Hawaiian culture," she adds. "Visitors come from as far away as Germany and Switzerland."

Most festival events are sponsored or hosted by hotels, such as "Under the Palms at Wailua" an evening with Hawaiian musician Lady Ipo Kahaunaele-Ferreira at the Aston Aloha Beach Hotel in Kapaa. "Lady Ipo is the freshest breath of Hawaiian air you ever want to enjoy," says Ray Bouin, general manager of the Aston Aloha Beach Hotel. Other sponsors

include Hawaiian Airlines, A&B Foundation, the County of Kauai and the Hawaii Tourism Authority.

"We're fortunate to have one night but always have our doors open for additional nights if they need a location," Bouin says. "Our banquet and catering and food and beverage

last year's 2.7 percent gain. Next year will see a stronger 3.6 percent rise because of healthier U.S. demand and increased airlift.

Festival Fever

"One of the unique aspects of the festival was we were looking for new art," Mentley says. "We wanted not just

tradition but new songs and new hula that celebrate the Hawaiian culture, not just celebrating the past but reflecting what is going on today—a culture continuing and having growth."

The Mokihana Festival draws visitors from around the world, says Carol Bain, festival media contact. "Japan has a special fascination

divisions, along with our rooms division, pull together and do whatever it takes to provide the physical support systems for the event, like staging, booths, food booths and tables, vendor tables, everything a typical banquet and catering department provides. It's kind of a natural gift-giving situation from our staff's point of view in that we do whatever it takes to support the event because we believe in it and we live it every day.

"The Mokihana Festival started a movement on Kauai that married the

visitor industry to the culture in such a way that has continued to blossom and flourish," Bouin continues. "I can honestly tell you there are visitors who come here every year during the Mokihana Festival, like a crusade, a movement. It's good quality, not a dinner show or an entertainment program. It's the living, breathing culture that we're fortunate to see and experience. It's a beautiful thing."

By 1984, when the Mokihana Festival debuted, the Hawaiian language had been outlawed in U.S. schools for

almost a century. Hawaiian language-speaking children under the age of 18 numbered less than 50.

Remembering the early prohibition against speaking his native language in school, kumu hula Nathan Kalama decided the Mokihana Festival would promote and sponsor the fledgling Punana Leo school for children, whose doors first opened on Kauai for the purpose of revitalizing the culture by reclaiming its native Hawaiian language. Punana Leo is the Hawaiian term for "nest of voices." ■



ABOVE: Mokihana Festival solo wahine dancer Lono Padilla
BELOW: Lady Ipo performs. PHOTO BY JOE OLIVAS, MALIE FOUNDATION

KAUAI MOKIHANA FESTIVAL
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SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

SUNDAY, SEPT 21
Kapa'a First Hawaiian Church Service

MONDAY, SEPT 22
Kauai Composer's Contest and Concert

TUESDAY, SEPT 23
"Eo, E Lili'u" Children's/Youth Music Competition

TUESDAY, SEPT 23
"Under the Palms at Wailua"

WEDNESDAY, SEPT 24
Hawaiian Cultural Presentation "Lau Niu"

THURSDAY, SEPT 25
Solo/Group Kahiko Nei Hula Competition

FRIDAY, SEPT 26
Group Auana Hula Competition

SATURDAY, SEPT 27
Solo Auana Hula Competition & Awards Finale

For individuals requiring an auxiliary aid or additional support to participate call Jodi Omo at 808-635-3295 seven (7) working days before the event.

Events sponsored in part by: Grand Pacific Resort Management, HTA, A&B Foundation, Kukui'ula Development, QLCC, Hawaiian Airlines, COK Office of Economic Development, Kauai Beach Resort & Aston Aloha Beach Hotel