



MASTERS of MELE

Nearly a dozen vintage recordings of *mele* (songs or chants) for ancient hula have been resurrected, remastered and compiled on a new album, *Ancient Hula Hawaiian Style, Volume 1: Hula Kuahu*. **BY JENNY QUILL**

“I HAD A LONG JOURNEY,” says Dr. Amy Ku‘uleialoha Stillman, the producer of *Ancient Hula Hawaiian Style, Volume 1: Hula Kuahu*, a labor of love that took nearly 12 years to come to fruition. Stillman, an authority on Hawaiian music historiography, worked on the album and wrote the liner notes in her spare time, while teaching American studies, ethnomusicology and hula at the University of Michigan. She also co-produced and co-wrote the Grammy Award-winning album, *Tkena*, and its Grammy-nominated follow-up, *He Nani*, both of which were performed by singer

Tia Carrere and singer/songwriter and co-producer Daniel Ho. This fall, she returns to Hawai‘i to assume the role of Dai Ho Chun Distinguished Visiting Professor at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, where she’ll teach an undergraduate course on Hawaiian music and a graduate-level research seminar focused entirely on Hawaiian music historiography—the first time in the university’s history that it has offered a graduate-level seminar on the subject.

Ancient Hula Hawaiian Style began to take shape in the early 1990s, when Stillman was corresponding with Michael Cord, owner of Cord International/Hana

Ola Records. “I said it would be great to have an edition devoted to the chant material,” says Stillman. “[Cord] immediately wrote back and said, ‘Give me a call, let’s talk.’ It was very much on his radar. He simply needed someone who knew the tracks and the performers.”

For 30-plus years, Hana Ola Records has been in the business of producing out-of-print, Territorial-era Hawaiian music recordings. The company’s catalog includes approximately 152 albums of everything from classic Hawaiian slack key guitar to Japanese Big Band albums recorded after World War II. And yet the company

PHOTOS: CREDITS ON FOLLOWING PAGES EXCEPT, TOP RIGHT: PARADISE OF THE PACIFIC

had never produced an album of historic chants. “[Hana Ola has] so much hapa-haole material,” says Cord. “I never realized that we had amazing traditional material until Amy brought it to life.”

Many of these chants were sitting, perfectly preserved, in Cord’s record room, a temperature-controlled, vintage-Hawaiian-music time capsule of sorts that contains about 5,000 records. “Despite the

extensive catalog [Cord] has and all the things we’ve done over the last 25 years, the material on this album is something we couldn’t address,” says Harry B. Soria Jr., one of Cord’s frequent collaborators and producers and the host of the 31-year-old *Territorial Airwaves* syndicated radio show. “First of all, I’m not qualified to do hula and chant. Second, we had always wondered about the marketability. Twen-

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ty years ago, we may not have considered doing this [album]. But with a generation of formal education in the Hawaiian language, this [type of project] became more of a realization, as traditional Hawaiian recordings are more and more sought after.”

Stillman began by sifting through recordings from 49th State Records (Cord licensed the rights to 49th State’s catalog in 1991), a recording company that opened up shop prior to statehood and produced hundreds of 78 rpm records during its heyday. Stillman identified the tracks she knew to be chants, and then expanded her search to include tracks from the historic Hawaiian Transcription, Bell and Waikiki record companies. “I just happened to have the licensing rights for some of the material, and the rest I got from other labels,” says Cord. In the end, Stillman had enough material to fill two albums—the current volume, *Hula Kuahu*, and a second, *Hula ‘Ōlapa*, which is slated for release in about a year.

Dating back to the early 1800s and recorded between 1930 and 1960, the mele featured in this first volume are known as *hula kuahu*, or altar hula. “This term, *hula kuahu*, refers to those hula that were transmitted in the presence of a *kuahu* (altar), during that era when the *kuahu* altar rituals were observed,” says Stillman. The mele on the album are divided into four sections: The first group, *hula pahu*, is one of the oldest, most sacred forms of hula, and is performed with the sharkskin-covered pahu drum. The second, *hula ‘āla‘apapa*, is accompanied by

Dr. Amy Ku‘uleialoha Stillman is a renowned authority on Hawaiian music and will be teaching at UH this school year.



PHOTO: MATT MALLANS

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the *‘ipu* (bottle gourd). “The earlier hula *‘āla‘apapa* and hula *pahu* consisted of repertoire created under the indigenous (pre-Christian) system surrounded by ritual *kapu*,” says Stillman. “The later 19th-century hula *‘ōlapa* came into being after the acceptance of Christianity, so the hula *‘ōlapa* was not sacred, from the time of the *kuahu*, in the same way that hula *‘āla‘apapa* and hula *pahu* were.”

The third section, *mele* honoring Pele, is the album’s only deviation from the strict definition of hula *kuahu*. These *Kalākaua-era* *mele* follow the standard, two-line-stanza structure of hula *‘ōlapa*.

“From a purely technical standpoint, all three of these Pele dances are in the format of hula *‘ōlapa*, and should have been held over for volume two,” explains Stillman. “But the two volumes would have been unbalanced.” Stillman also notes that



Hula master Roselie Lōkālīa Lovelle Montgomery (first woman from the right) stands with other lei-decked passengers at a ship’s dock.

PHOTOS: BISHOP MUSEUM



Renowned chanter and songwriter James Ka‘upena Wong at the Bishop Museum.

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while these *mele* are indeed dedicated to Pele, they are not to be confused with *hula Pele*, the sacred dances in honor of Pele. “I believe that these are not technically hula Pele because they are all late 19th-century and early 20th-century compositions,” she says. “The *mele* that are marked as hula Pele in the Bishop Museum and other sources are *mele* whose texts were incorporated into the epic saga of *Hi‘iakaikapōlioPele* ... so I did not want to dishonor the hula Pele by calling those

four tracks hula Pele, because they are not.” The fourth and final segment, *mele ma‘i*, or genital chants, are reproductive chants that were dedicated to the genitalia of the ancient *ali‘i*. While they predate the *mele* honoring Pele, they were placed at the end of the album because they are traditionally used at the closing of hula programs.

One detail that’s sure to set this project apart is Stillman’s decision to group the chants together, rather than taking the more traditional approach of organizing

them by artist. Doing so, she says, “privileges the chant over the chanter,” and gives listeners the opportunity to hear the subtle distinctions between the chanters’ performances. “One thing you would never see on a ‘normal’ album is the same song by different artists right next to each other,” says Maile Loo-Ching, the executive director of the nonprofit Hula Preservation Society. “However, in this context, it is extremely educational as it is another reminder of *‘a‘ole pau ka ‘ike i ka hālau*

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Kumu hula George Nā'ope, seated with an 'ipu (bottle gourd) drum.

PHOTO: STEVE BRINKMAN

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ho'okahi, or ‘not all knowledge rests in one hālau.’ To hear so readily the different ways the same chant is presented, depending on the hula line (and the island and teachers associated with it) reminds us to honor all hula traditions, even if they are not our own or they do things differently than us, and to be open-minded to the various ways and styles of chanting our sacred stories.”

One of the goals, and challenges, of making this album, says Stillman, was to include the most accurate textual interpretations of these mele, the understanding of which have evolved over the years. “With a project like this, I try to find or develop the

best reference version of a mele,” says Stillman. “There are several instances where I ended up with text that doesn’t entirely jive with the performance. That’s not to say that those chanters got it wrong. We have access now to resources ... that the performers 50 or 70 years ago did not have access to. It’s very much a statement about the state of knowledge about mele at any given time.”

One example of how interpretations can change over time is the mele ma’i “Pūnana Ka Manu,” performed by George Nā’ope. In the album’s liner notes, Stillman mentions that Mary Kawena Pukui, a

noted Hawaiian scholar, wrote in the 1936 lecture, “Ancient Hulas of Kaua’i,” that the recitation of vowels at the end of Pūnana Ka Manu represented the excitement felt by Hawaiians learning to read. However, Stillman also highlights a modern interpretation written by Kihei de Silva, a Hawaiian culture and language expert and songwriter, that alludes to the fact that the mele has a more tongue-in-cheek political subtext. The mele, de Silva writes, “concludes with a humorous poke at the very Westerners who tried to shame the genre out of existence. In the hands of this mele ma’i, the innocent, missionary-style,

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classroom recitation of vowels becomes an increasingly passionate recitation of sighs, beginning with a very interested ‘ah’ and ending with a thoroughly satisfied ‘ooh.’”

“I really think it’s important to get people away from thinking, ‘Who is wrong and who is right?’ That’s not the question that needs to be asked,” says Stillman. “The question that needs to be asked is, ‘What did these people know about these mele at the time they worked with them?’ It’s another way of saying I hope that people will be able to appreciate hearing those voices, regardless of whether those voices achieved the level of authoritativeness as it is defined in the present.”

Indeed, the voices of these “teachers of teachers,” as Stillman puts it, are the centerpieces of this album. Among the tracks, “Hole Waimea,” a mele that dates back to the 1820s, and is performed by the late hula



Kumu hula ‘Iolani Luahine, one of the foremost teachers and dancers of ancient hula.



A chanter and hula dancers, circa 1880.

master, Lōkālāia Montgomery, is a highlight. “Lōkālāia had a very intricate style of doing the ornamentation when she played the ‘ipu,” says Stillman. “It’s incredibly beautiful, and so clear.” Another outstanding performance is George Nā’ope’s rendition of “Kaulilua i ke anu Wai’ale’ale,” an ancient hula pahu that has become a foundation of modern hula practice. “These recordings represent another dimension of someone who is so well known,” says Stillman. “They’re a part of him that had almost gotten lost.”

Among the other chanters featured on this album are ‘Iolani Luahine, a kumu hula who was one of the foremost teachers and dancers of ancient hula; James Ka’upena Wong, a renowned chanter, composer and songwriter; and hula master Joseph Kamoha’i Kahaulelio. “There is nothing better than hearing the authentic voices of our treasured hula elders,” says Loo-Ching.

“It’s one thing to read about Auntie Lōkālāia Montgomery and her stern ways, or see photos of Auntie ‘Iolani Luahine dancing, but to hear their actual voices sharing the sacred chants of old is priceless. It really takes your breath away.”

Compiling these cultural treasures into a single album not only saves them from being lost forever; it also helps them reach a much larger audience. “I know many of those records, and I have most of them in my collection and yet I’ve never been able to prominently feature them because I

didn’t have a venue like the one Amy has put together,” says Soria. “This album is the perfect way to display this music.”

For Stillman, putting together an album of what are essentially the greatest hits of ancient hula was a priceless project, and one she hopes will provide today’s hula students with new insights into these ancient mele. “This repertoire is at the heart of the hula tradition,” says Stillman. “These are the voices of people who are revered among kumu hula, so to bring together the repertoire and the voices and to put them all together in one package ensures they’re now accessible again. Some of these chants are taught often and commonly performed. There are many students out there who have learned the dances. For them, the value of this is going to be hearing the voices of teachers that predate their own teachers by one or two generations. It’s a way of reaching the past, touching the past. It’s time travel—sonic time travel.”

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Contributing writer Jenny Quill recently ate her way through Kapolei for the “Exploring Kapolei” feature in our July issue.



Ancient Hula Hawaiian Style, Volume 1: Hula Kuahu is in stores now, and is also available for purchase online through the iTunes Store, as well as Cord International/Hana Ola Records, cordinternational.com.