

ISLAND LIFE

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The high spirits of Uncle George Naope

Merrie Monarch patriarch still loves a good party, hula

- **Video:** [Merrie Monarch founder talks about festival's history](#)

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One of the not-to-be-missed sights of the Merrie Monarch Festival hula competition, which begins Thursday in Hilo, is a little man in a big hat, wearing startlingly bright colors, shiny patent-leather shoes and a bulky ring on every finger. He's generally surrounded by Japanese visitors, who clamor to have their pictures taken with "Ahnkoo Jaw-joo-san."

This is George Lanakilakekiahialii Naope — flamboyant and irresistibly charming. His health is failing now; he's in a wheelchair and doesn't like to talk on the phone anymore, so he couldn't be interviewed for this story. But, says his former student kumu hula Ray Fonseca, "All you gotta do is mention a party and he'll be there — wheelchair and all."

There is another Naope, too, but first let's meet the one most of us have seen tottering onto the Merrie Monarch hula competition stage during the vote-counting break, when kumu hula fill the time with nostalgic dance.

That Naope is the man known in his early hula and musical career as "The Menehune," for his small stature but magical (and hilarious) stage presence:

- Who Merrie Monarch Festival executive director Auntie Dottie Thompson has called "the original free spirit."
- Who is sometimes teased by friends with the title "Dandy" Naope, after King Kalakaua's court hula master, "Dandy" Ioane, who wore a top hat, a purple and pink velvet vest and flourished a cane.
- Who kicked off his career in 1948 in Hilo winning, of all things, a territory-wide Japanese singing contest (he still credits his teachers, Mrs. Yamamoto and Mrs. Tsubaki, with his accomplished pronunciation and technique, which would serve him well later when he traveled to hula-mad Japan and became a sought-after celebrity).
- Who, like many Hawaiian performers in the 1950s, found his largest audiences on the Mainland, in Canada and Mexico. He traveled with Ray Kinney's troupe and his specialty was comic hula, a strain of the dance rarely seen today. A signature, for example, was the 1880s composition "Anapau." (And all you need to know about this song is that translates as "Frisky" and that it's danced in a style where the hips do it all while the feet are relatively still.)
- Who so loves pageantry that, in the early days of the Merrie Monarch hula competition, he organized a court of 30 or 40 people, gorgeously attired in period dress (there are fewer than a dozen now), depicting the whole Kalakaua family and entourage.

But there is another Naope, whom fewer and fewer know or recall. This one, no less charismatic, is a rebel rather than a rascal.

He is the son of merchant seaman Harry Naope Jr., of Hilo, and grandson of the famed Haili Church choral master Harry Sr. In his young years, as was the custom in hula families, he lived with his great-grandmother, kumu hula Malia Naope of Keaukaha, down the coast from Hilo; he still calls himself "a Keaukaha boy." Before her death at 103, Malia Naope served as a key informant on Hawaiiana for Bishop Museum scholars, and she is the one who taught Naope the old ways.

Throughout his career, he has bounced back and forth between O'ahu, where he was born, and the Big Island, where he was raised and trained to dance. And he has also bounced back and forth between tradition and expediency.

This is a man who has been active in and led numerous Hawaiian civic organizations, working on such projects as protecting the Kaloko Fish Pond on the Kona Coast and re-creating the Pu'uhonua O Honaunau Place of Refuge for the National Parks system. ...

- Who studied dance, protocol and ritual with the woman known as the 20th century's foremost exponent of traditional hula practices, 'Iolani Luahine, and also with the mother of Auntie Edith Kanaka'ole (for whom the Merrie Monarch's stage home is named), known to



Naope sang at the 42nd Merrie Monarch Festival in 2005. At 81, even a wheelchair and faltering health can't keep the colorful kumu hula from attending — and enjoying himself.

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Naope performed at the Merrie Monarch Festival in 1982.

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THE MERRIE MONARCH FESTIVAL

Begins today in Hilo with daily free hula shows. Craft fairs open Wednesday, and there will be free ho'i ke by Halau O Kekuhi and guests Wednesday night. The hula competition begins Thursday night with the Miss Aloha Hula competition, continuing Friday and Saturday with group competition.

all as "Mama" Fuji.

- Who was teaching male students in the 1940s, when male hula had all but died out.
- Who, in 1972, issued a fiery rebuttal to a legal decision questioning Kamehameha Schools' Hawaiians-only admissions policies and called a public meeting of protest in Hilo.
- Who was among a group of pioneers in the 1970s who took hula into the men's prison at Kulani, an effort to reconnect inmates with Hawaiian values, and introduce discipline, pride and a calming effect in a place that had become chaotic and full of despair.
- Who, in 1977, ran for an Office of Hawaiian Affairs Big Island seat, because of his concern for "the future of my people." Despite name familiarity, he lost.
- Who, in 1983, was invited to be the first to perform an 'uniki (graduation) ceremony for 20 of his students on the hula pa (mound) Ke-ahu-a-Laka at Ha'ena, rescued from obscurity by Kauai's Kahiko Halapai Hula Alapai — the first time the ceremony had been performed on that site in half a century.
- A man who, for all his on-stage charm, humor and kolohe (rascal) ways, is a stickler when he's teaching.

Kumu hula Ray Fonseca of Hilo, who was just 10 years old when he met Naope and was uniki'd (graduated) by him years later, said he and other Naope students have taken many a crack from the back of a well-aimed 'ukulele wielded by Uncle George. "He was very strict. His voice was always very stern in class ... But we could have a really rough time in class with him by day and that night, it was like nothing. His whole personality changed when he was on stage."

Today, Fonseca still consults with Naope before making any substantive decisions about his Halau Hula O Kahikilaulani, just as Naope would often consult with his mentors. "He always went back to the source, whatever he did, he was always researching with different elders or peers," said Fonseca, speaking by phone from his Hilo home.

And Naope is careful not to overstep his knowledge. "He always says that what we do, if we don't know for sure, we should leave it alone. We should learn as much as we can, but we shouldn't make it up," said Fonseca.

On the other hand, Naope doesn't think Hawaiian culture should be frozen in time, Fonseca noted. "I remember once he said, what we see, what we smell, how we live versus how our kupuna did is two different worlds. We can be motivated by what we see today. Also, most hula are stories ... about incidents or happenings, so why can't we do that today?"

Naope speaks fluent Hawaiian and gets a little salty when anyone implies that he might not, though many in his generation never did acquire more than "hula Hawaiian." Fonseca says Naope would often mumble deprecations in Hawaiian when his students weren't meeting his standards; a way of relieving his frustrations without their knowing what he was saying.

Naope's connection to the Merrie Monarch Festival goes back to its very beginning, in 1963. As promoter of activities, appointed by then-Hawaii County mayor Helene Hale, he and Hale's administrative assistant Gene Wilhelm proposed a festival in honor of King Kalakaua as a way to drum up business for tsunami-ravaged Hilo. The first Merrie Monarch, in 1964, was a four-day festival loosely modeled on Lahaina's Whaler's Spree. The event lacked any significant hula component, and it didn't go well. Neither did the next three.

Then, in 1968, Hilo volunteer Dorothy "Auntie Dottie" Thompson stepped in to chair the Merrie Monarch, drafting Naope to help.

It wasn't until 1971 that competitive hula became part of the festival and, at first, it was tough to get enough participants, recalled Luana Kawelu, Thompson's daughter and appointed successor. (Thompson, like Naope, is ailing now.)

Despite (or because of) their very different personalities and skill sets, "they made a perfect team," said Kawelu. "She was the organizer. He knew the hula. It wouldn't have survived without both of them."

Naope was determined that the competition include kahiko (old-style) hula. But so few were the hula studios teaching the art that he had to travel the Islands, instructing kumu and students alike. Just 11 halau, all women (since so few men were dancing hula then), participated in the first competition 45 years ago. It lasted nearly five hours, and most of the audience stayed for the whole performance, which Naope then compared to events of King Kalakaua's coronation, when more than 300 hula were performed, at a time when hula had all but disappeared due to the influence of Westerners who found it objectionable.

Thompson still gets hot under the collar of her high-necked holoku when she recalls how difficult it was to get press coverage for Merrie Monarch, or to find anyone who cared as much as she and Naope did about making the festival a success.

Today, the festival is hard-pressed to limit the number of halau participating. Spots in the



Uncle George Naope applauded a performance by Halau Hula O Kahikilaulani at Naniiloa Volcanoes Resort last April.

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lineup virtually have to be inherited through death or retirement. Tickets, distributed only by mail order, sell out in a day.

Despite his frailties — his legs have given out and he's in a wheelchair — Naope, who has received pretty much every honor the state, the Hawaiian community and the music industry has to offer, including Living Legend status, maintains his wit and mental sharpness, Fonseca said.

Kawelu took her mother to see Naope recently; Thompson rarely goes out now, and the two hadn't seen each other in several years, though they have talked on the phone. (Kawelu said she herself now calls Naope for advice at least once a week.)

"There is so much respect and admiration between them," said Kawelu. "(Thompson) attended his 81st birthday party (a few weeks ago) and he told me, 'It meant a lot to me, Luana, that she was there.' "

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