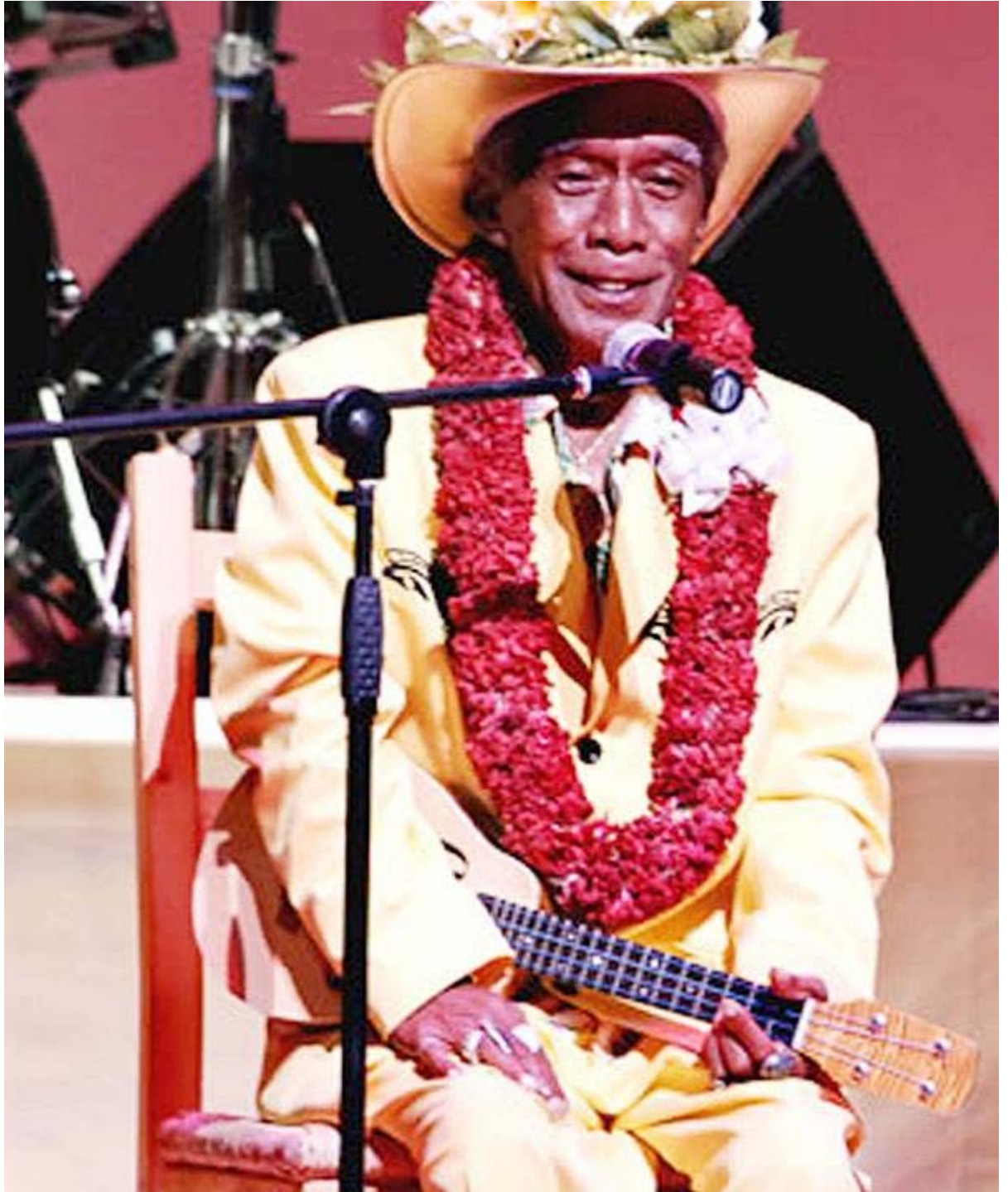


GEORGE NA'OPE TRIBUTE

By Tiffany Edwards Hunt

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George Na'ope performs a song on the ukulele for the 2006 NEA National Heritage Fellows concert. - National Endowment For The Arts

Kumu Hula George Lanakilakeikiahiali'i Na'ope, Hawaii's hula ambassador credited as one of Merrie Monarch Festival's founding fathers, died early Monday, Oct. 26, 2009. He was 81.

Na'ope was surrounded by family at the time of his death at his Waiakea Uka residence, according to his sister Bernadette "Bernie" Konanui. He reportedly suffered from cancer, had lost a lung last year, and discovered a brain tumor earlier this year.

Both Konanui and sister Eileen Crum noted that Na'ope had a full life with many accomplishments, and resigned to the fact that Na'ope's time had come.

"He said, 'I did all I wanted to do,'" Konanui recalled Na'ope said on his deathbed.

"He's been very nice to all of us children and his family," Crum said. "We have nothing bad to say about him. He had a good life." In all, Na'ope leaves behind three sisters, Eileen, Bernie and Emma, a brother, Frank, numerous nieces and nephews, and a hanai grandson, Hoapili Bower.

Na'ope was the Parks and Recreation director under the leadership of Helene Hale in the 1960s, when he and then-Managing Director Gene Wilhelm went to a Whaling Festival on Maui and came up with the idea for a Merrie Monarch Hula Festival in Hilo. In the years since, he has become an iconic figure in the hula community.

Na'ope was small in stature, but he had a very big presence, observed Sig Zane, a Hilo clothing designer, cultural practitioner, and kumu hula.

"I think what I always enjoyed most about seeing Uncle George is, whenever he went into a room, all eyes went on him," Zane recalled. "That energy, that responsibility he carried, he loved it. He loved that position, yet at the same time he had that mission, that responsibility to carry on the hula. It's really nice, this tiny little man could come in and the entire auditorium would stop. That says a lot about who he is."

While Zane is many years younger than Na'ope, the two men are both dragons according to the Chinese zodiac. Na'ope was born in Hilo in February 1928. He learned hula from his great grandmother Malia Pukaokalani Na'ope and refined his practice with kumu hula "Mama" Fuji, the mother of Auntie Edith Kanaka'ole, for which the tennis stadium that annually hosts the Merrie Monarch is named.

Zane, whose mother-in-law was Edith Kanaka'ole, said Na'ope's death didn't come as a total surprise, since his ohana has been in touch with those close to Na'ope. Na'ope grew up in Keaukaha right next to the Zane ohana's hale.

"Now we can call on him at any time," Zane said of Na'ope. "A wheelchair can't come out on a rocky cliff or a crest. Now we can call on him anywhere."

Describing Na'ope as the "ambassador of hula to the world," Zane credited Na'ope for conveying the importance of sharing hula to perpetuate the tradition.

"The more people who practice and carry on the tradition guarantees the dance will stay, it will always be around," Zane said. He observed that Na'ope had a "kalohe style" about his hula. While he was strict about keeping the traditions of the kahiko (ancient), Na'ope "definitely brought out that kaloheness" with the 'auana (modern).

In 2006, he was a National Endowment for the Arts fellow, according to Jacqueline "Skylark" Rosetti, a spokesperson and friend of the family. Na'ope has received the Na Hoku Lifetime Achievement Award from the Hawaii Academy of Recording Arts, Rosetti said. The Hawaii Visitors and Convention Bureau and Hawaii Tourism Authority both honored Na'ope with lifetime achievement awards, she added.

"Uncle shared hula with the world. It was his desire that hula be danced everywhere, and many of our kumu hula today are enjoying the legacy he leaves for all of us," Rosetti said.

"He was a consummate entertainer, and that's what he did for the world, with aloha," she said.

Services are tentatively set for the evening of Nov. 6, with a viewing, and the morning of Nov. 7, with a celebration of his life and a memorial, both at the Afook-Chinen Civic Auditorium.

Uncle George highlights

* Taught hula dancing for more than 60 years, and has taught in Japan, Guam, Australia, Germany, England, North America, and South America in addition to the Hawaiian Islands.

* First studied hula at three years old under his great-grandmother, Mary Malia Pukaokalani Na'ope, who lived to be over 100 years old.

* Studied with Mary Kanaele who was mother and teacher to Edith Kanaka'ole.

* Studied for 10 years with Joseph Ilala'ole. After graduating from high school, Na'ope moved to Honolulu where he opened the George Na`ope Hula School, then later continued his studies under Kumu Hula Lokalia Montgomery and Tom Hiona.

* Na'ope began to teach hula at the age of 13. His family was poor, so he taught hula for 50 cents per week in order to continue to pay for school. He taught chant and kahiko to the Ray Kinney dancers, and travelled with Ray Kinney.

* In 1964, founded the Merrie Monarch Festival, an annual week-long festival of traditional Hawaiian arts, crafts, and performances featuring a three-day hula competition.

* Honored with numerous other awards, including being named a "Treasure of Hawai'i" by President George W. Bush and the Smithsonian Institution and receiving the National Heritage Fellowship Award by the National Endowment for the Arts in 2006.

* Founder of the Humu Mo'olelo, a quarterly journal of the hula arts.

SOURCE: George Na'ope internet biography

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