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Betty Ann Bruno says hello to hula again

Peter Hartlaub

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Betty Ann Bruno lived much of her life on camera.

Her years as a child actor included work as a Munchkin in "The Wizard of Oz." Bay Area residents know her as a socially conscious KTVU reporter who began her 20-year career with a five-part series on local prostitution problems, and memorably went on television to comment on the loss of her own home in the 1991 Oakland hills fire.

But the moment that shaped her adult life happened in her 20s, away from the TV lights and sets, when she met hula instructor Ida Namanu'okawa'a Wong Gonsalves.

"She was one of the most graceful dancers I had ever seen and one of the sweetest, most giving individuals I will ever know," Bruno remembers.

Decades later, Betty Ann Ka'ihilani Bruno has followed in Gonsalves' path, spreading love of hula. Now 80 years old, Bruno has found her island paradise in Sonoma, leading the performance group Hula Mai, which practices out of the Vintage House Senior Center.

Born to a Chinese Hawaiian mother and a Dutch Irish father, Bruno spent her formative years feeling like a stranger in her own skin. When she learned to dance as a child in the 1930s, it was because Hollywood filmmakers wanted little hula girls. Her mother denied her Chinese heritage and didn't teach the Hawaiian ways.

There were great memories, including her time on the set of the 1939 film "The Wizard of Oz." The producers didn't have enough small adult actors to play Munchkins, so they recruited a few children to stand in the back.

"It was filmed in November, and it was magic," Bruno says. "This was the Depression, and ... there was no Fairyland, there was no Disneyland. There was no color in people's lives. But the Munchkin set, it was miraculous."

But she never felt comfortable with discussions about her race. Later, as a political science major at Stanford, when questions about ethnicity arose, Bruno felt paralyzed.

"Auntie Ida" changed everything.

Finding a teacher

Deciding to confront her identity issues, Bruno looked up "Hawaii" in the yellow pages of the phone book and ended up at a nightclub on Fisherman's Wharf. Bruno writes in her mini-memoir "The 'Who' in Hula" that the floor show was mediocre, but a "special guest" was announced. It was Ida Wong.

"She hadn't done more than a couple of bars," Bruno writes, "when I nudged my husband and announced, 'She's the one! She's going to be my teacher!' "

Wong taught Bruno hula for 15 years, starting in the mid-1950s.

After narrowly losing a City Council race in Oakland, Bruno was hired by KTVU in 1971 to host community-affairs shows, then became a reporter covering social issues. Raising three children after a divorce and working full time, she couldn't dedicate the necessary time to hula.

But Wong remained a lifelong friend until her death in 1996.

"She was a teacher, a role model and an ethnic guide," Bruno says. "She welcomed me into her home."

Bruno retired in 1992 and later moved to Sonoma with her husband, former KTVU cameraman Craig Scheiner. Wong had once asked Bruno to someday carry on the traditions in her place. But Bruno didn't practice hula again until 2008, when Wong's grandson reconnected Bruno with Barbara Parkin and Jackie Simpkins, two fellow students from the old days. (That story deserves its own narrative, involving a christening, a psychic and a message from beyond the grave.)

Bruno thought she had lost everything hula-related in the fire - costumes, choreography and sheet music included. Former students Parkin and Simpkins scoured their own files to restore much of what was gone.

Her skills returned quickly, and Bruno was offered an opportunity to teach a six-lesson mini-course at Vintage House.

"I said, 'That's good, Betty Ann, but don't make a job out of it,' " Simpkins remembers. "You're retired. Don't get too crazy, enjoy your leisure life. Two years later she's got a band, more classes and all these dancers."

Hugs and greetings

On a recent Thursday, more than 20 Hula Mai dancers, singers and musicians file into Bruno and Scheiner's Sonoma home with hugs and greetings of "Aloha" for an extra practice in preparation for a June 22 performance at the amphitheater in Sonoma's downtown plaza.

The scene is filled with good food, laughter, light bickering and a lot of hula. Dancers, ranging in age from their early 50s to 85, spill into the kitchen. Bruno is at the center, keeping order with tough love while Scheiner - who handles everything from the computers to sewing for the troupe - is in orbit taking photographs.

Just walking down the street, Bruno looks a lot closer to 50 than 80. When she's dancing, you can see the young girl.

"When Betty Ann started this, it kind of filled that void," Simpkins says. "I found Auntie Ida through Betty Ann."

Bruno also teaches hula classes for beginners, and hosts a video called "Hula for Life," teaching hula basics for seniors. Looking at her Hula Mai troupe, Bruno starts talking about each of the dancers - stories of personal tragedy and bravery in difficult circumstances that make the 1991 fire seem a lot less world-ending.

"They feel beautiful when they're dancing," she says, beaming as she watches the group start a new hula. "And they are."

Hula Mai: 5:30 p.m. June 22. Grinstead Amphitheatre, Sonoma. Betty Ann Bruno's "Hula for Life" is available at www.hulaforlife.net. www.hulamai.org.

Peter Hartlaub is The San Francisco Chronicle pop culture critic. Twitter: [@PeterHartlaub](https://twitter.com/PeterHartlaub). phartlaub@sfchronicle.com

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