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Hula with Betty Ann

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By SUZIE RODRIGUEZ / Sonoma Valley Correspondent

The charm and spirit of Aloha are coming once again to Sonoma's Grinstead Amphitheater on Friday, when the popular Hula Mai group takes to the stage.



Betty Ann "Kai'ihilani" Bruno prepares the Hula Mai dance group for an upcoming performance at the Vintage House in Sonoma on Friday, June 17, 2011. (Christopher Chung / PD)

If all goes as planned, the sounds of ukulele and steel guitar, and the feel of grass skirts and leis will transport group founder Betty Ann Bruno back to Hawaii.

Bruno was born in pre-World War II Hawaii to a Hawaiian-Chinese mother and a Dutch-Irish father who was raised in Texas. "My mother taught me little hulas," she says, "nothing complex. Hawaiian was her first language, so I learned a bit of that, too."

The family soon moved to Los Angeles, leaving the islands, its language and dance far behind.

"In those days the goal of all mixed-race people was to fit into mainstream America," Bruno says. "I stopped learning about hula." She learned about other things, acting as an extra in movies and playing a munchkin in the 1939 film "The Wizard of Oz." She earned a degree in Political Science from Stanford University and continued with graduate work at George Washington University in Washington, D. C.

Eventually relocating to Berkeley, Bruno says she had an identity crisis. "I was in my 20s, and I didn't know what it meant to be Hawaiian. I decided to find out," she says.

She studied with Ida Gonsalves, a Hawaiian classical hula teacher in East Oakland, and danced with her for 15 years. "It was my way of becoming Hawaiian. That experience changed my life," she says.

Hula eventually fell victim to Bruno's demanding work as a KTVU news producer and reporter, as well as the responsibilities of raising three children. "I had no time for hula," she says.

In 2001, Bruno and her husband Craig Scheiner, a former KTVU cameraman, moved to Sonoma. They had fallen in love with it during an Arts Festival and always felt they belonged there.

Although officially retired, Bruno continued to work on time-consuming community projects. "I did a huge statewide project for the League of Women Voters," she says. "I was involved with insurance reform and immigration reform. It was very intense."

One morning a few years ago she woke up and thought, "I want to dance again. I want to hula." So she started in again and found that hula made her feel happy and alive.

From there it was a logical step to share that feeling with others, and in 2009 she offered to teach a class at Vintage House. Her students quickly grew close.

"The Hawaiian word for family is 'ohama,'" Bruno says, "and that's what we became: a new family." They called the group Hula Mai, which in Hawaiian means, "Come and do the hula."

The profound effects of hula has meant something different to each member.

"It has certainly added fun," says retired U. S. Foreign Service member Beth Heine. "Every

class is like a little mini-trip to the islands.”

Diane Wardell-Tuel, whose husband Mark sings with Hula Mai, says she had “never done the kind of dancing that comes from the heart, that gets you in touch with yourself. “Our motto is A ‘a ika hula, which means dare to dance. And daring to be on a stage, daring to convey the feeling of joy that comes from this dance is an unexpected gift.”

Linda Bodwell studied dance as a young girl for more than a decade, including hula. “When I decided to take a class again, I wondered if I could still do it,” she says. “But it’s like riding a bicycle: it all came back.

“This time around it’s the real hula, with songs in Hawaiian and complicated steps. It has been a fun challenge.”

Faye Behrens, who runs the Cottage Inn and Spa on First Street East, lived on Maui and Kauai for many years but never had time to study hula.

“So to take it in Sonoma is incredible,” she said. “The women are all ages, and it’s a real sisterhood. It really inspires me.”

And Liz Quinn, at 83 the group’s oldest dancer, credits Hula Mai with giving her the energy and peace of mind to continue on as caregiver for her husband, something she has done for 25 years.

“When I do hula, I zone out completely,” she says. “All I think about is my next arm movement, my next foot movement. For a caretaker, it’s essential to have something that takes you away so that you can return and do a better job.

“I’ve become so close-knit with my hula sisters. It’s a knitting together of all our personalities. It’s far more than just dancing.”

Hula Mai will perform at Grinstead Amphitheater in the Sonoma Plaza Friday at 6:30 p.m. Betty Ann Bruno teaches eight-week hula workshops three times a year at Vintage House. Call 996-0311 for more information.

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