

# Hana Hou!

THE MAGAZINE OF HAWAIIAN AIRLINES



Vol. 17 No. 6

December 2014-January 2015



## A Hawaiian in Paris

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So many people nurture fantasies about Paris—the two-thousand-year-old “City of Lights”—that it’s as much a dream as an actual place. In the Paris of fantasy, Edith Piaf still sings, the Impressionists paint dancers beneath the windmills of Montmartre and Hemingway sits in a brasserie scribbling about bullfights. Couples kiss on the Pont Neuf, beautiful girls bicycle down the Champs-Élysées and even the dogs are fashionably coiffed, poised beside their owners in the shade of Le Tour Eiffel.

The real Paris is all of this, but more: grittier, more diverse and brimming with lively contradiction. If the celebrated French capital is often mistaken for its postcards, it’s not alone. It shares that distinction with the world’s *other* most desirable destination: the Hawaiian Islands. Everyone dreams of escaping to Hawai‘i; few expect to explore the depth of its indigenous culture.

Kilohana Silve has spent her life navigating the nuances of both paradises: Parisian and Hawaiian. She’s discovered that when they mix, magic happens. In Montparnasse, her regal carriage, commanding gaze and extra-long black mane might draw second glances; in Honolulu, they’re immediately recognized as the hallmarks of a kumu hula (hula teacher). For twenty-two years Silve has run the only hula hālau (school) in Paris, serving as a living conduit between the Old World and Oceania.

She first arrived in France in 1972, a twenty-year-old art history student from Mānoa, O‘ahu. A family friend told the adventurous girl that she needed to leave Hawai‘i in order to find it. The remark proved prescient. In Paris, as anyone might’ve predicted, she fell in love. She married a handsome French sculptor and set up house in the ninth arrondissement—the home of the magnificent Opéra de Paris and former haunt of the Impressionistic painters.

Silve dove into the French art world, working as a curator, critic and professor. Hawai‘i was never far from her thoughts; every franc she earned she spent on airfare home. These globe-spanning trips doubled after the birth of her daughter, Vanessa Leilani Thill. When Thill was old enough to express an interest in hula, her mom—who doesn’t do things in small measure—studied up and opened Hālau Hula o Mānoa, Paris’s first hula school. In 2012, the hālau celebrated its twentieth anniversary. Rather than throw a party, Silve launched a citywide hula festival. Why not, she thought, seize the opportunity to introduce Paris to traditional Hawaiian arts?

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The French may be familiar with Tahiti, but their knowledge of Hawai‘i tends to begin and end with stereotypes of big wave surfers and smiling girls in coconut bras. Two decades ago the Maison du Cultures du Monde (World Cultures Institute) hosted an exposition celebrating the indigenous arts of Polynesia—excluding Hawai‘i. When Silve complained, the organizers told her, “We don’t want all that kitschy Waikiki stuff.”

Little did they know. It would take time, but the Parisian kumu hula would deliver the real deal. For the inaugural Festival des Arts d’Hawai‘i in 2012, Silve and Thill (who now assists her mother in running Hālau Hula o Mānoa) invited some of the most renowned Hawaiian cultural practitioners and musicians to Paris. Luminaries included slack-key guitarist Makana, ‘ukulele virtuoso Taimane Gardner, chant and protocol master Sam ‘Olu Gon III and members of Hālau Mele, the school started by revered kumu John Lake.

Silve’s running joke is “Ou va faire quelque choses de très simple”: Let’s keep it simple. Whenever she says this, her haumana (students) brace for work. Before their first big fête was finished, Hālau Hula o Mānoa began planning the next one. In June of 2014, the international team reassembled to host the second Festival des Arts d’Hawai‘i: a ten-day whirlwind of hula, ‘ukulele and slack-key guitar, lei making, seminars and storytelling. Several thousand people attended events at venues scattered around Paris. The delicious cultural exchange gave Parisians a true taste of the Islands, and visiting Hawaiians a chance to indulge in impeccable French fare.

The 2014 fête began with a stirring performance of sacred Hawaiian dance at the prestigious Musée du Quai Branly. Just a few blocks from the Eiffel Tower, the Branly houses artifacts from Africa, Asia, the Americas and Oceania. It served as a perfect backdrop for hula kahiko, the Hawaiian Islands’ oldest dance form.

The state-of-the-art theater filled with the sweet, unmistakable fragrance of maile, hand-carried from Hawai‘i. The Hālau Mele dancers from O‘ahu joined their French hula siblings on stage. Together they embodied the ancient stories of the Hawaiian archipelago, from the *Kumulipo* to the epic tale of Hi‘iakaikapoliopole. The swish of ti leaf skirts and reverberating heartbeat of the gourd drums transported the audience from central Paris to the cloud-wreathed summit of Haleakalā and the smoldering caldera of Kīlauea.

Anyone who came expecting a saccharine recital of *Lovely Hula Hands* likely had their fuses blown. As the program progressed, the French dancers showed the caliber of their training—performing grueling seated dances and adeptly incorporating kala‘au (percussive sticks). In a show of respect, the Hawaiians brought their finery to the festival: rare māmāne

seed lei and hand-stamped kihei (capes) made especially for the occasion. Lucky Parisians witnessed choreography and costumes of a quality that even Hawai'i residents rarely get to see.

Outside, the sky had finally darkened after a languorous twilight. People streamed back onto the streets, shaking open umbrellas against a light summer rain. The evening's performance might have prompted some local Parisians to wonder if this rain shower had a distinct identity and name, as so many rains in Hawai'i do. This sensual opening night was just the beginning, the amuse-bouche of the moveable feast to come.

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The following afternoon, the Branly's garden amphitheater fairly glowed with gold and red daisies, the colors of Hawaiian royalty. Vanessa Thill and Therese Multz broke open the bouquets and passed out flowers along with instruction in the art of lei-making. Young mothers helped toddlers pluck blossoms from the stems and thread them into necklaces and crowns. Elated with their creations, the normally decorous children scampered through the garden.

"Très bien... maika'i," Thill said, encouraging a gentleman who, despite his tailored trousers, settled onto the ground to trim leaves as accents for the flower lei. Multz meanwhile demonstrated how to braid ferns together into kupe'e, or bracelets. Wrapped around the wrist the leafy fronds acted as magic amulets, causing whoever wore them to wave their arms. Hula, it seemed, was infectious.

Inside the museum, Silve and a few haumana taught an introductory Hawaiian dance class. People of all ages packed the smallish studio. With sustained enthusiasm, the novices swiveled and swayed their hips, picking up several basic movements in an hour. The twenty-five or more people who had to be turned away sat outside to watch through the floor-to-ceiling window. They could still hear and feel the vibration of the chanting, the echoing beat of the gourd drums and the pounding of the dancers' feet.

By evoking such tangible experiences of Hawaiian culture, the festival underscored the similarities between the people of Hawai'i and France. Both tend to be romantic and obsessed with food. Both love beauty for its own sake, pay homage to history and zealously protect their native tongue. While the French formality and fussiness over manners seems the very opposite of a laidback Islander's approach, it is mirrored by the Hawaiians' fastidious attention to protocol. Indeed, the Hawaiian royals had little trouble assimilating to European courts when they attended Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887.

Makana referenced Hawai'i's history as a sovereign nation later that night during his solo slack-key guitar concert. He spoke of the long tradition of Hawaiian musicians traveling the world, sharing their innovations and techniques. Opening with a heartfelt rendition of *Hi'ilawe*, the song popularized by *The Descendants* soundtrack, he filled the theater with rich and resplendent serenades to waterfalls and sunsets.

"Hawaiian music is vast," he said. "Maybe more than any other music, it has influenced and been influenced by other forms. That's why I love it. We embraced all of the music that came to Hawai'i: the songs of the missionaries, the whaling ships and the Prussian bandmasters, the piano and the music of the cowboys. What you hear today as 'traditional Hawaiian music' is mixture of musics from around the world through the sensibility of how Hawaiians see life."

Thill had the job of translating the guitarist's stage banter for the French-speaking audience. The poised young woman capably interpreted on the fly, but fell speechless for a

moment when Makana called her mother onto the stage. Later she confessed that seeing her mother dance hula alongside one of her favorite musicians was an unexpected gift.

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Back in 1992, when Silve first advertised hula lessons in the *Paris Voice*, she wondered: Can I really bring this culture to life so far from its roots? She had a decent foundation to build upon. As a young girl, she had learned from beloved kumu and songwriter Emma Bishop, and later from Helen Castillo and George Holokai, whose photos she still carries in her wallet. John Lake taught her oli (Hawaiian chant), and when he passed, she continued under the direction of his student Sam ‘Olu Gon III.

Her teachers granted her permission to share the secrets of hula with those interested back in Paris—with some caveats. The most sacred dances, those involving the pahu (ceremonial drum), were restricted to Hawaiian soil. “Some felt the dances shouldn’t be taught to foreigners,” said Silve. “It was a burning question in the hula world for many years.”

In the beginning, all of Silve’s students were expats. Most had ties to the Aloha State. Eventually native Parisians began to trickle into the studio—which begs the question: What compels a European to embrace hula? As any hālau member will tell you, it’s not just dance class. It’s a way of life.

Silve’s students rattle off reasons why they’ve devoted hours, weeks and years to practicing this exotic art form: it’s great for balance and flexibility. It establishes discipline and patience. Urbanites especially crave the connection with the natural world. Probably the biggest lure is the strong sense of ‘ohana, or family, cultivated in a hālau.

Teaching hula was never a commercial enterprise for Silve. “I could have launched a fad here, a real moneymaker,” she said. “But I didn’t want that. Uncle George Holokai was a master and his classes were \$5. He cooked big pots of beef stew for his students. That’s what I wanted for my daughter. I wanted it to be as close as possible to what I remember of growing up in Hawai‘i—the spirit, that’s the main thing.”

Nothing captures the essence of the Islands quite as much as a family lū‘au. A potluck thrown by two of Silve’s students on the third day of the festival showed that she had been successful in her aim. Paris possessed a healthy measure of aloha spirit—which isn’t so different from joie de vivre.

Therese Multz and Jean-Christophe Blanchard welcomed guests from near and far into their large apartment on rue de Liege. Like Silve, Multz came to Paris decades ago to study art and gained a French husband in the bargain. The two women discovered they were neighbors and became fast friends. Eighteen years ago, Multz asked Silve to be godmother to her daughter and they became family.

Hālau Hula o Mānoa often conscripts Multz and Blanchard’s home as practice space, so accomodating several dozen performers for dinner wasn’t much of a stretch. The hostess, a neo-conceptual painter, pushed her enormous canvasses against the walls and opened the windows onto the street. The balconies overflowed with flowers procured for the festival. As people poured in, they kissed cheeks French-style and touched foreheads and noses Polynesian-style.

Instead of island staples like poi and poke, the massive dinner table filled up with delicacies from French markets: ripe cherries, sweet melon, Champagne, Bordeaux, baguettes, cheese and more cheese. The Hawaiians ogled a bright green wedge that owed its shocking color to fresh basil, and the heart-shaped neufchâtel, a cheese that originated in Normandy circa 1035.

With plates piled high, everyone settled down for storytelling. In rapid-fire Hawaiian, chanter and slam poet Kalama Cabigon described how Pele the volcano goddess fled from the amorous attentions of Kamapua‘a, the pig god. The linguists in the audience had fun translating Cabigon’s saucy anecdotes into French and English. The stories, laughter and kanikapila (musical jams) continued late into the night.

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Silve and Thill had democratic aims in planning the 2014 festival. They wanted to showcase both ancient and contemporary Hawaiian art forms. They also hoped to reach people who wouldn’t necessarily go to museums or seek out Polynesian art. Thus, the jam-packed schedule hit every note, from highbrow soirées to jam sessions at indie art galleries. Sponsored by the American Embassy, nearly all of the events were free.

A houseboat-turned-café on the left bank of the Seine served as the festival’s sunniest, most summery venue. From the upper and lower decks of Petit Bain, festivalgoers could watch tour boats idle down the river and colorful metro cars zip across Pont de Bercy. The day was dedicated to the ‘ukulele: starting with lessons, then an open mic session, and finishing with a sunset concert. Parisian ‘ukulele enthusiasts came dressed in their closest approximation of aloha wear: pastel shirts and flowers tucked in their hair. One stylish madame sported rockabilly gingham. She took fastidious notes and was among the first volunteers at the mic later that evening.

The instructors dressed for the occasion, too. Anne-Sophie and Nathalie Coelho Da Silva wore floor-length ruffled mu‘umu‘u—the charming kind seen less and less frequently in Hawai‘i. The identical twins were eleven years old when they first heard Hawaiian music on an episode of *Magnum P.I.* Enchanted, they searched for its source. Sixteen years later, they found Hālau Hula o Mānoa. During their first practice with the troupe, they were thumbing through Multz’s record collection and discovered *He Pua Wehiwa*—the song from *Magnum*. They’ve been hooked on hula and Hawaiian music ever since. During their workshop, the twins taught in French but sang in Hawaiian. Their lovely, sonorous voices drifted across the river.

“It was amazing,” said seventeen-year-old Louis Deville of the ‘ukulele lessons. “I learned new chords and a new strum.” The French teen initially fancied himself a guitar player, but now favors the Hawaiian instrument. “It’s easy to travel with, relaxed and beautiful,” he said. The festival afforded him his first face-to-face instruction—and a chance to perform for an audience. One by one, local songsters approached the microphone to belt out French pop tunes accompanied by sweet ‘ukulele strums.

After the amateurs took their bows, Taimane Gardner rocked the houseboat with her amplified ‘ukulele. As glamorous as any chanteuse, she wowed the sunburnt crowd on the upper deck with dizzying fingerpicking. Her set ranged from Spanish serenades to rock ballads, demonstrating the versatility of the humble ‘ukulele. Downstairs, in the houseboat’s galley, chef Eric Leterc of the Pacific Club in Honolulu prepped island-style dinner specials. Waitresses whipped by with plates of ginger-steamed fish served whole.

Midway through the festival, the Hawaiian contingent ventured out to Romainville, a suburb just outside the city. Thill, who lives there, said the multicultural neighborhood resembles Montmartre in the days of the Impressionists, filled with galleries and cafés, working artists and musicians. City outskirts are often where the action happens; certainly that proved true on this occasion. Alain Robak, who couldn’t have been happier to host the out-of-towners, opened up his cooperative art gallery and performance space, Laro Café, for a Hawaiian music night. Fifteen years ago, while shopping at Tower Records in San Francisco,

he found an album featuring 1930s lap steel guitar—the kind popularized in the Islands. He never played a regular guitar again.

On this night his rockin' steel guitar riffs dazzled the audience. Next Makana and Taimane played together, along with Chuck Tilton, a Honolulu musician and chanter with Hālau Mele. But the evening's wild card was a local violinist who had showed up after reading about the gathering on Facebook. He introduced himself simply as Orlean. The newly acquainted musicians exchanged nods and began trading musical phrases: fancy fiddling for fingerpicking. They discovered they shared a common language. With eyes fixed on one another and fingers flying across their various stringed instruments, they dared each other to ever more creative heights, building to a thrilling crescendo. The aspiring musicians in the crowd soaked up every note.

Before anyone knew it, night had surrendered to morning. Trains don't reach Romainville and even the buses had stopping running. The Hawaiians poured themselves into petite French cabs and headed back into the city.

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The festival's round-the-clock schedule required tremendous stamina on the part of the performers. But in between curtain calls, the visiting Hawaiians managed to drink in Paris in big gulps. Their Francophone hosts showed them how to navigate the labyrinthine Metro, order French coffee and crepes and wear scarves no matter the weather. Wide-eyed with cameras whirring, they followed Silve on a tour of Monet's garden at Giverny. Her knowledge of Impressionistic art proved as extensive as her hula expertise. Regrettably Monet's studio and famous water lily ponds could hardly be seen past the throngs of tourists, but Silve knew of a quieter spot.

At the far end of the quaint French village, a cemetery and church dating back to the Middle Ages retained a perfect solitude. Monet is buried there, under a profusion of flowers. The Hawaiians said a pule (prayer) above his grave and then took a peek inside the sanctuary. Two swallows swooped down and out from their perch within the vaulted chamber. In the Islands, these winged emissaries might have been regarded as 'aumakua, or ancestral spirits.

A trip to the Palace of Versailles yielded similar moments of serendipity. The US Embassy had invited the French-Hawaiian troupe to perform for diplomats on the palace grounds. Barefoot and dressed in bold floral prints, the dancers compelled the dignitaries to stand, sway and ultimately join in singing '*Ōiwi E*, a rousing piece composed by John Lake. After this cultural coup, the dancers rewarded themselves with an exquisite lunch at La Petite Venise, a restaurant occupying the former palace stables.

Silve led the group out through the palace's maze of perfectly trimmed hedges. They stopped once to dance just for fun—a sort of hula flash mob. A small crowd collected around them. In truth, the Hawaiians drew attention everywhere they went, distinguished by their colorful attire, distinctive lei and bright smiles.

Early one morning they visited the Trocadero—one of the most popular sightseeing spots in Paris—in full costume. A Japanese wedding party nearly disbanded when groomsmen ditched their posts to snap a few photos of the Hawaiian men dressed in malo (loincloths). Even the locals, who yawn over the most inconceivable fashions on the haute couture catwalks, did double takes.

For the final Soirée Hawaïenne, Silve booked the Maison du Cultures du Monde—the same institution that had pooh-poohed Hawaiian art so long ago. Here, the French and Hawaiian performers pulled out all the stops. First, Sam 'Ōhu Gon III presented an astounding audio-visual collage accentuated by live performance. Incorporating spectacular

photography, ancient chants and historic relics borrowed from Bishop Museum, he illuminated the vital connection between hula and the native ecosystems of Hawai‘i. Birdsong ricocheted through the theater. Images of scarlet honeycreepers flashed across a massive screen while a dancer brought the rare forest species to life. Overcome by the presentation, audience members expressed deep gratitude for the vicarious trip to the Pacific. Their reeducation was complete.

“Who would guess?” Silve asked. “Initially I thought maybe a handful of people would stick it out with my daughter and learn maybe two or three dances. Here we are over twenty-two years later, sharing hula with thousands of people.”

Later that night, all smiles, the ensemble performed a selection of contemporary hula. A dozen dancers took to the stage for the finale, done to Edith Piaf’s classic love song, “La Vie en Rose.” Dancing hula to the famous lyrics, they sang them first in French, then in English, then in Hawaiian. The hypnotic refrain talks of a lover’s embrace and seeing life in rosy hues—something people of both cultures can relate to. At the song’s end, the Parisians shouted a Hawaiian phrase they now knew by heart: Hana hou! Encore!