


 A close-up portrait of Māhealani Uchiyama, an older woman with grey hair styled in braids. She is wearing a dark blue patterned top and a long, light-colored tassel earring. Her hand is near her chin, and she has a thoughtful expression. The background is a blurred wooden lattice.

MĀHEALANI UCHIYAMA

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Māhealani Uchiyama

The Voice That Remembers

Interview by Lyia Meta

“Every now and then, a voice finds you — not through sound, but through something far older than memory.” Lyia Meta

What first drew me to Māhealani was her voice — deep, expressive, and resonant with a quiet strength. It wasn't just the sound of it, but the way it seemed to carry stories — of many lands and generations. I love a voice that tells of where it's been; each nuance revealing how much it has lived. When she sings, it feels less like performance and more like remembrance — as though each note rises from a place between earth and spirit, between shadows and salvation. Through her music, I could sense the rhythm of her culture, not as spectacle, but as heartbeat — something sacred and lived. Her artistry isn't confined to the stage. It moves through her — in the way she speaks about her heritage, in the grace of her gestures, in how she holds space for the past and the present to meet. There's a reverence in her approach, yet it never feels distant. It's human, immediate — like the echo of something familiar you can't quite name. Listening to her, I began to understand that her music is both bridge and offering: a connection to something larger, yet profoundly personal. In her songs, I sense the pulse of lineage — the voices of those who came before her, shaping the one she carries now. There's something timeless in the way she weaves history into melody, as if each phrase is a thread binding memory to moment. It's this alchemy that stays with me — how her music doesn't just reach the ear, but the spirit. It reminds me that art, at its truest, isn't about performance or perfection, but presence — the courage to reveal where you come from, and who you've become. It's rare to encounter an artist who embodies both strength and vulnerability so completely. Māhealani's voice lingers long after the song ends, and her words — spoken or sung — carry the same quiet conviction. In this conversation, she opens up about her creative journey, the spiritual roots of her music, and what it means to live between tradition and transformation.

LM: Your work connects people through traditional dance and music—how do you keep the traditions alive while also letting them evolve?

MU: Thank you so much for the question! I have been blessed with exposure early on to incredible masters of the hula tradition who instilled in me a respect for established practices and a structure in which heritage ways are protected. This allows me to innovate in a manner that is respectful to the classic way of doing things. There's a phrase (I can't recall who coined it) to the effect of “freedom through discipline”. To me this means that when you are well grounded, you are then free to evolve in ways that honor both the past and the present. In a way see it in a similar way to planting seeds and cultivating a garden. The only way that you can enjoy the fruits and flowers of your garden is to be certain that your plants are well rooted and nurtured.

LM: You offer everything from Hawaiian hula to African drumming. How do you make these traditions feel authentic but still approachable for people who might be completely new to them?

MU: Speaking for what I myself teach (hula, 'ori Tahiti, mbira) it is essential to respect that these are communal traditions. None of them evolved to emphasize an individualistic way of doing things. The community is everything. Creating an atmosphere where students are expected to bring their uniqueness and have those traits celebrated (while firmly and gently guiding them into technical discipline) means that participants can feel a sense of belonging to one another and mutual support. This is how we celebrate the different ethnicities and gender expressions in our student body while training them to reach their highest potential.

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Regarding other traditions at our non-profit, our mission is to “connect all people through traditional dance and music in order to foster a greater understanding of our shared human history and promote cross-cultural communication.” Our wonderful faculty and the traditions that they hold are selected with this mission in mind.

LM: Dance seems to bring people together in ways words can't. Have you seen a moment where it really bridged cultures or communities?

MU: Some time ago, I was privileged to be on the team of the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival. This was an event created with the expressed purpose of bringing diverse communities together in dance and music.

For over 40 years this Festival highlighted performances of traditional dance companies in the Bay Area by bringing them to the big stage, enveloping them in the highest level of production and marketing, and letting the magic then do its thing! Often the performances featured amazing transitions from one group to the next where (for example) a flamenco dancer would interact with a Chinese classical dancer using the shared motif of the fans they were holding.

That said, there are so many other times when dance touches the heart of an observer even though they may be from another culture entirely. I have seen it everywhere from the Merrie Monarch Hula Festival to the back yard of a family celebrating an 80th birthday.

LM: You teach students of all ages—can you tell me about a time a student really surprised you with a breakthrough or transformation?

MU: I am blessed enough to see a number of children born, start to dance and become amazingly accomplished exponents of the form. On the other side of that, we have our Kupuna (senior citizen) group made up of some individuals who had never danced before, yet are now strong enough to perform on the competition stage!

LM: When you bring in teachers or collaborators, what's the secret to choosing someone who fits with the spirit of the Center?

MU: It is not really a secret. First they must be well grounded in what they purport to do. Secondly, they must love teaching and nurturing others.

LM: Some of these traditions can feel completely foreign to newcomers. How do you make the learning process feel welcoming without watering things down?

MU: By moving slowly and explaining why things are the way they are. We don't believe in moving fast. We are also not geared towards doing public performances. The real work, the fun, the sheer joy of it, is what happens on the studio floor.

Sometimes individuals come to us because they want to learn something quickly. We are not that type of studio. In the relatively few times this has happened the individual figures out fairly early on that it is not a good fit. We like to take the time to ground people in the tradition they are there to learn.

LM: The Center has been going strong for decades. Where do you see it heading in the next 10–20 years?

MU: There are a few long-term goals:

1. Completing and graduating a team of kumu hula (hula instructors);
2. Escorting bi-annual huaka'i (cultural visits) to Hawai'i so that the students can see first hand the places they are learning about in their dances, and;
3. Expanding a version of our annual Kāpili Polynesian Dance & Music Workshops which would feature multi-cultural offerings

Additionally, I hope to continue to bring my dancers to Hawai'i to participate in conferences and competitions, as well as engaging cultural experts to train us in forms we are not familiar with.



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LM: Losing your original studio must have been tough. How did you pivot to keep serving the community?

MU: It was indeed very painful. This was a place where some of my current dancers started with us when they were children. In addition to our classes, we hosted mini performances, Christmas parties, workshops - it was a cultural center in West Berkeley. We were there for 25 years.

Loosing our lease was a challenge, but we were fortunate to find a wonderful new space not too far away. It is smaller, but has a lot of heart. Our students have been encouraged to look upon each other as extended family. Because of this the transition was actually fairly smooth, with just a few weeks down time.

LM: Your work often touches on social justice and equity. How do you bring those themes into your teaching or performances?

MU: I always try to remind people of where these beloved traditions come from, and how close we were to loosing them altogether. One cannot realistically dance songs about the Hawaiian Monarchy without having an understanding of what actually happened in Hawai'i in the 1800s, and how that history impacts people currently living away from their islands, or are otherwise impacted by colonization. This history has to be part of the teaching and inform the presentations that we do.

Similarly with mbira, students must have an understanding of how that tradition was being demonized and undermined, and how it ties into the struggle for self-determination in the face of strong colonial push back. They should understand that although the music itself is fun to play and beautiful to hear, it has strong ceremonial and spiritual underpinnings which should be respected.

LM: You're a kumu hula, musician, and choreographer—how do those different art forms inspire each other in your work?

MU: Being a kumu hula means that it is my job to choreograph as well as to pass on certain pieces that I learned without change. My becoming a musician came out of my teaching, and wanting to accompany my students in the same way that my Kumu, Joseph Kaha'ulēlio did for us.

It is important to understand that the expressions of music and dance are traditionally not considered separate things. Dancers sing and play instruments. Musicians move as they sing. Very often everyone starts off doing the same thing and then are drawn to do more of one thing over the other.

LM: Your albums capture so much of your heritage. How do you decide which stories or traditions to put into your music?

MU: I have a number of subjects I want to tackle while I can. Which one of those becomes ascendant can depend on what may be going on with me personally at a given time.

LM: Here's a quirky one—if a student came to you saying they wanted to mix hula with skateboarding or a silent disco, what would you say?

MU: "That is really amazing, luv. But I don't think we are the best fit for that."

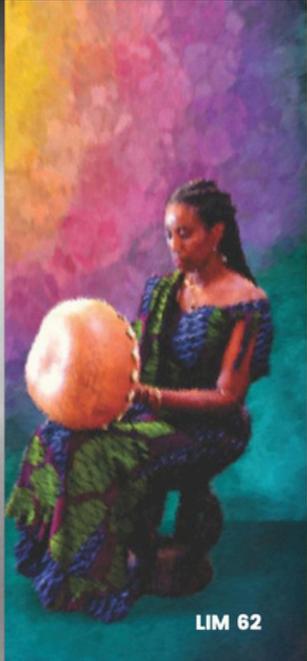
LM: Looking back over the years, is there a single moment that really makes you proud of what the Center has created?

MU: Not a single moment, but many times I look at some of the young people dancing and doing music with us now who are older than their parents were when their mom or dad started with us. Seeing these beautiful ones growing up surrounded by a community centered on the performing arts is what makes it all worthwhile.

LM: Looking ahead, what exciting directions or new projects are on the horizon for you, MU?

MU: I already have the next recording project in mind, as well as the subject for my next book, after I finish writing my memoir!

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Connect with Māhealani Uchiyama:

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ABOUT COLUMNIST

LYIA META



Lyia Meta is an international, multi-award-winning singer, songwriter, producer, and the Founder of Lyia Meta VoiceCraft Studio. She is a featured artist on the GRAMMY®-nominated album THE FURY by Antonio Vergara and serves as a GRAMMY® Voting Member of The Recording Academy. Beyond music, she is also an exhibited visual artist and the author of Unfold, Break, Rebuild, Find Yourself and All In, No Net - Life on Stage.

Her musical influences are as wide-ranging as they are distinctive, spanning rock, gothic rock, contemporary blues, traditional pop, jazz pop, traditional country, country blues, soul, R&B, and symphonic rock. This diverse palette fuels her fearless approach to artistry, where each project breaks new ground and defies easy categorization. As a full-time performer and creative force, Lyia continues to expand her artistic reach, leaving a lasting imprint across music, visual art, literature and vocal mentorship.

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