

merrie monarch festival history

merrie monarch festival history traces the origins and evolution of one of Hawaii's most significant cultural celebrations. Established as a tribute to King David Kalākaua, known as the "Merrie Monarch," this festival highlights the rich traditions of Hawaiian music, dance, and arts. The festival has grown from a small community event into an internationally recognized celebration of Hawaiian heritage, attracting thousands of visitors annually. Understanding the merrie monarch festival history provides insight into the revival of Hawaiian culture following periods of suppression and the importance of hula as a sacred art form. This article explores the origins, cultural significance, and development of the festival, along with its role in preserving Hawaiian identity. The following sections delve into the historical background, the festival's founding, its cultural impact, and the modern-day festivities.

- Origins and Historical Background
- The Founding of the Merrie Monarch Festival
- Cultural Significance and Revival of Hawaiian Traditions
- Development and Growth of the Festival
- Modern Merrie Monarch Festival: Events and Impact

Origins and Historical Background

The merrie monarch festival history begins with the reign of King David Kalākaua, the last reigning king of Hawaii. Known affectionately as the "Merrie Monarch," Kalākaua was a patron of Hawaiian arts

and culture during the late 19th century. He sought to revive and preserve native Hawaiian traditions, including hula, music, and storytelling, which had been suppressed under previous missionary and colonial influences. His efforts earned him a reputation as a joyous and culturally devoted leader, inspiring the festival's name and spirit.

King David Kalākaua's Cultural Renaissance

King Kalākaua's reign from 1874 to 1891 marked a significant cultural renaissance in Hawaii. He promoted the revival of hula, which had been banned in public due to Western missionary pressure. Kalākaua himself participated in traditional ceremonies and encouraged the practice of native arts as a form of national pride and identity. This cultural revival laid the foundation for the merrie monarch festival, which celebrates his legacy and the traditions he sought to protect.

Historical Challenges to Hawaiian Culture

Before the festival's inception, Hawaiian culture faced numerous challenges. Western colonization brought about the decline of native customs, language, and arts. The banning of hula and the imposition of foreign religious and social norms led to a loss of cultural continuity. The merrie monarch festival history is intertwined with efforts to reclaim and revitalize these endangered traditions, making the event a symbol of resilience and cultural preservation.

The Founding of the Merrie Monarch Festival

The merrie monarch festival history as an organized event began in 1963, founded by George Naope, a respected Hawaiian kumu hula (hula teacher) and cultural advocate. The festival was established in Hilo on the Big Island of Hawaii to honor King Kalākaua's legacy and to promote the practice of hula and Hawaiian culture. Initially a modest celebration, it quickly gained popularity for its dedication to authenticity and cultural education.

George Naope and the Festival's Vision

George Naope was instrumental in shaping the merrie monarch festival's direction. His vision focused on creating a venue that respected traditional Hawaiian arts and provided a platform for hula practitioners to perform and compete. By emphasizing cultural integrity and education, Naope helped the festival become a respected institution that contributes to the ongoing survival of Hawaiian heritage.

Early Years and Community Support

In its early years, the festival was supported primarily by local communities, cultural practitioners, and Hawaiian organizations. Events included hula competitions, cultural workshops, and celebrations of Hawaiian history. The festival fostered community pride and encouraged younger generations to learn and continue Hawaiian traditions, setting the stage for future expansion.

Cultural Significance and Revival of Hawaiian Traditions

The merrie monarch festival history is deeply connected to the broader Hawaiian cultural revival that began in the mid-20th century. The festival played a critical role in reestablishing hula as a respected and sacred art form, countering previous stigmatization. It also helped to revitalize Hawaiian language, crafts, and music, reinforcing cultural identity among Native Hawaiians and educating visitors about the islands' heritage.

Hula as a Sacred Tradition

Central to the merrie monarch festival is the hula, a traditional Hawaiian dance characterized by its storytelling through movement and chant. The festival distinguishes between two main types of hula: *hula kahiko* (ancient hula) and *hula ʻŌiua* (modern hula). Both forms are performed during the festival, showcasing their historical and contemporary significance. The merrie monarch festival history highlights the dance's spiritual roots and its role in preserving Hawaiian myths, genealogy, and values.

Promotion of Hawaiian Language and Arts

Beyond dance, the festival underscores the importance of the Hawaiian language and other cultural practices. Through chants, mele (songs), and educational programs, the merrie monarch festival fosters language revitalization and artistic expression. This holistic approach enhances understanding and appreciation of Hawaiian culture among participants and audiences alike.

Development and Growth of the Festival

Since its founding, the merrie monarch festival history has been marked by significant growth and increased recognition. From a small local gathering, it has evolved into an internationally acclaimed event, attracting thousands of visitors, cultural practitioners, and media attention. This growth has helped to further the festival's mission of cultural preservation and education.

Expansion of Events and Competitions

The festival now encompasses a wide range of events beyond the hula competition, including craft fairs, art exhibits, educational workshops, and cultural demonstrations. The hula competition itself has become more structured and prestigious, featuring divisions for men, women, and groups of all ages. This expansion has enhanced the merrie monarch festival history by making it a comprehensive celebration of Hawaiian culture.

Media Coverage and Global Influence

In recent decades, the festival has gained extensive media coverage, including live broadcasts and online streaming. This visibility has introduced Hawaiian culture to global audiences and increased interest in the islands' traditions. The merrie monarch festival history now includes its role as a cultural ambassador, promoting understanding and respect for Hawaiian heritage worldwide.

Modern Merrie Monarch Festival: Events and Impact

Today, the merrie monarch festival continues to be a vibrant and vital cultural event. Held annually during the week following Easter in Hilo, the festival is a highlight of Hawaii's cultural calendar. It draws thousands of visitors, including kumu hula (hula teachers), dancers, musicians, artisans, and cultural enthusiasts. Its impact extends beyond entertainment, serving as a dynamic platform for cultural education and identity reinforcement.

Key Events and Highlights

The merrie monarch festival features several key events:

- **Hula Kahiko and Hula ʻAuana Competitions:** Showcase traditional and modern hula performances judged on authenticity, artistry, and storytelling.
- **Parade:** A colorful procession through Hilo that celebrates Hawaiian culture with floats, music, and dance.
- **Craft and Food Fairs:** Opportunities to experience traditional Hawaiian crafts, cuisine, and products.
- **Workshops and Lectures:** Educational programs on Hawaiian language, dance, history, and arts.

Continued Cultural Preservation and Community Engagement

The festival's ongoing success supports cultural preservation by encouraging participation across generations. It provides a space for Native Hawaiians to express their identity proudly and for visitors to gain an authentic understanding of Hawaiian heritage. The merrie monarch festival history is a testament to the resilience and vibrancy of Hawaiian culture in the face of historical challenges.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Merrie Monarch Festival?

The Merrie Monarch Festival is an annual week-long cultural festival in Hilo, Hawaii, celebrating the art of hula and Hawaiian culture. It includes a prestigious hula competition and various cultural events.

When was the Merrie Monarch Festival established?

The Merrie Monarch Festival was established in 1963 to honor King David Kalākaua, known as the 'Merrie Monarch,' who was a patron of Hawaiian arts and culture.

Who was King David Kalākaua and why is the festival named after him?

King David Kalākaua was the last reigning king of the Kingdom of Hawaii, known for his efforts to revive Hawaiian cultural practices, especially hula. The festival is named after him to honor his legacy in preserving Hawaiian traditions.

How has the Merrie Monarch Festival evolved over the years?

Originally a small community event, the Merrie Monarch Festival has grown into an internationally recognized celebration of Hawaiian culture, featuring top hula halau (schools) from around the world competing in both traditional and modern hula categories.

What role does the Merrie Monarch Festival play in preserving Hawaiian culture?

The festival serves as a vital platform for the preservation and revitalization of Hawaiian language, dance, music, and customs, educating both locals and visitors about the richness of Hawaiian heritage.

Why is the Merrie Monarch Festival considered significant in the world of hula?

The Merrie Monarch Festival is regarded as the most prestigious hula competition globally, attracting the best hula practitioners and serving as a benchmark for excellence in hula performance and cultural authenticity.

Additional Resources

1. *The Merrie Monarch Festival: A Celebration of Hawaiian Culture*

This book explores the origins and evolution of the Merrie Monarch Festival, highlighting its significance in preserving and promoting Hawaiian culture. It covers the festival's foundation in the 1960s and its role in revitalizing the art of hula. Rich with photographs and interviews, the book offers an in-depth look at the festival's impact on the Hawaiian community.

2. *Dancing Through Time: The History of the Merrie Monarch Festival*

Dancing Through Time traces the development of the Merrie Monarch Festival from a small local event to an internationally renowned celebration of hula. The author details key figures and milestones that shaped the festival's growth. The book also examines the cultural and political context surrounding the festival's rise in prominence.

3. *Hula and Heritage: The Story of the Merrie Monarch Festival*

This volume provides a comprehensive history of the Merrie Monarch Festival, focusing on how it has preserved the traditional art of hula. It includes stories of legendary kumu hula (hula teachers) and dancers who have contributed to the festival's prestige. The narrative also emphasizes the festival's role in strengthening Hawaiian identity.

4. *The Spirit of the Merrie Monarch: Hula and Hawaiian Revival*

The Spirit of the Merrie Monarch delves into the cultural renaissance sparked by the festival, detailing how it has helped revive Hawaiian language, music, and dance. The book offers insights into the

festival's ceremonies and competitions, and how these elements foster community pride. Personal accounts from participants provide a vivid portrayal of the festival's significance.

5. *Merrie Monarch Festival: The Heartbeat of Hawaiian Hula*

This book celebrates the Merrie Monarch Festival as the pinnacle event for hula practitioners worldwide. It documents the festival's history alongside the stories of its most celebrated dancers and choreographers. The author also explores how the festival continues to influence contemporary Hawaiian culture.

6. *Guardians of Tradition: The Merrie Monarch Festival and Hawaiian Identity*

Guardians of Tradition examines the Merrie Monarch Festival as a cultural institution that safeguards Hawaiian traditions. It discusses the festival's founding principles and its ongoing mission to educate younger generations. The book includes analysis of the festival's role in cultural preservation amid modernization.

7. *Echoes of Aloha: The Merrie Monarch Festival's Cultural Legacy*

Echoes of Aloha presents a detailed chronicle of the Merrie Monarch Festival's historical milestones and cultural contributions. The book highlights the festival's influence on Hawaiian arts beyond hula, including music and costume design. It also reflects on the festival's global reach and its role in promoting aloha spirit.

8. *Hawaiian Renaissance and the Merrie Monarch Festival*

This book situates the Merrie Monarch Festival within the broader Hawaiian Renaissance movement of the 20th century. It explores how the festival emerged as a symbol of cultural pride and resistance. Through historical context and personal narratives, the author illustrates the festival's transformative impact on Hawaiian society.

9. *The Legacy of Laka: The Merrie Monarch Festival and the Goddess of Hula*

Focusing on the spiritual aspects of the Merrie Monarch Festival, this book delves into the mythology of Laka, the goddess of hula, and her influence on the festival's rituals. It explores how the festival honors Hawaiian spirituality through dance and ceremony. The narrative connects ancient traditions

with contemporary expressions of Hawaiian culture.

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