

The Value of Mele

Kainani Kahaunaele

How much is mele or music a part of your daily life? Has your attention to mele increased to get you through your day, especially in uncertain COVID times? Have you been watching local and worldwide live stream concerts or social media posts of friends and family making music? It's ironic how musicians, who seemed to be the first profession to go under, are now playing an essential role in nurturing our communities' wellbeing through mele, as we navigate our new normal.

Like most colleagues in Hawai'i's music industry, we went from full calendars of gigs for this year to zero in about two weeks. Because I was recording my newest album on another island, the travel ban also stopped my production dead in its tracks. As a kumu of mele research and Hawaiian music performance at Ka Haka 'Ula O Ke'elikōlani College of Hawaiian Language and Literature at UH Hilo, I had to deal with drastically altered class meetings and participation by moving to online learning, losing much of the social connecting force that making music provides. As the boss of mele in my household, however, we have never played so much music together.

Mele—Hawaiian songs and chants—are our primary sources, literature, and vehicles to celebrate, revere, grieve, recount, love, and request. The carefully woven lyrics are primary, holding Hawaiian language knowledge and worldview, pearls of wisdom from our ancestors, and experiences of the haku mele, or composer. An understanding of mele language, a working knowledge of a variety of mele, 'ōlelo Hawai'i proficiency, continuous practice, and collaborating with experts bring the mele to life. In our schools, community life, and families, mele is more than background music. It is the soundtrack of our lives, and an integral link to our past, merging with current events and our visions of the futures.

No Ka Haku Mele

For the first time, we're witnessing Hawai'i with no visitor industry, our main economic engine. This is mind-blowing for all—and a wish come true for some. Musicians, hula dancers, sound techs, and others serving tourists and locals are having to get creative. Many musicians are still playing as a matter of practice and healing. But no paycheck. The crisis has however given us time to refine, rejuvenate, talk shop with colleagues, share music, and refine again. And haku mele is an option many are exploring.

Haku mele is the careful selection, weaving, and crafting of words and ideas through the Hawaiian worldview, based on a foundation of older mele. It requires Hawaiian language proficiency and delivering mele through chant or singing. As in many cultures, mele composition is highly regarded for its poetry, power of language, and appeal to our emotions, spirituality, environment, and fellow man.

Two stars guide my haku mele practice. “I ka ‘ōlelo nō ke ola, i ka ‘ōlelo nō ka make,” there is life and death in words, and “O ‘oe ka luaahi o kāu mele,” you, the composer, are the victim of your mele. These ‘ōlelo no‘eau show us how important it is to watch your words, lest you suffer the consequence. They also affirm the powerful benefit of mele that are “pili,” or put together well. The lyrics are primary; the music helps lift the message, intention, and vibe. The vocal delivery—pronunciation and phrasing—can make or break your mele, which is primarily about the ‘ōlelo. Luckily, you can make every delivery better—but only if you are aware.

This excerpt from “Waipunalei,” my recently composed mele, reminds me of the healing power of our natural environment, and particularly our forests, in these COVID times.

Ua ano ka nahele	<i>The forest is silent</i>
‘A’ohe lele manu o kula	<i>For no birds dwell in the plains as preparation</i>
Ia uka wehiwehi	<i>In this verdant forest</i>
‘Elua kāua i ke kilikili ua	<i>Here we are in the fine rain</i>
I kolu i ke ‘ala anuheha	<i>Where the cool fragrance of the forest joins us</i>
Lihau mai nei ke oho palai	<i>The palai ferns are fresh and moist</i>
Ua la‘i i ka lau lā‘au	<i>Contentment is found</i>

When our forest thrives, the kai thrives, and kánaka thrive too. Experiencing our ‘āina, paying attention to the nuances, and seeing the world through mele language is exhilarating. Whether in the forest, at the beach, or at home, mele can be the vessel to transport you between space and time.

The Life of Mele in Our Community

The Hawaiian entertainment industry deserves lots of credit for our unbroken tradition of Hawaiian music, carrying mele and cultural knowledge that could have been lost and forgotten. Beaten out of many of our kūpuna, our language was on the brink of extinction, but music and mele provided safe spaces for it to continue and thrive, even if it meant singing mostly to visitors. Through mele, ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i was still relatable and practical, and mele was also maintained in the Hawaiian churches, hālau hula, and ‘ohana.

As our education system evolves in these COVID times, this is an opportune moment to imagine how we can amplify the role of mele in our schools. In Hawaiian education-based schools, mele are important throughout the daily school

curriculum—from chanting genealogies, ceremonies, and formal speech making, to collecting and analyzing scientific data. The chosen mele are functional, enjoyable, and nurturing for the student’s identity and skill sets. With more training and grounding in mele language and Hawaiian language arts, I hope to see even more use of mele as empowering tools, and avenues for expressing and connecting student ideas. More online learning platforms may grant schools more access to mele, musical, and hula experts of Hawai‘i to plant seeds of inspiration, and to nurture the spirit and creativity of students. Hiring mele practitioners as more than guest speakers, and especially working musicians now unemployed due to the pandemic, would benefit all.

I was recently part of a Zoom gathering of wāhine from across Hawai‘i sponsored by Ka Waiwai Collective. We discussed how we are doing, what we were noticing as we kilo our natural environment, and how we are dealing with it all. One of my roles was to wrap the gathering up with mele. I decided to sing an island medley, and to get the ladies to sing along and hula when their island song was sung—to make themselves known. The mele totally lifted up the scene. Seeing all the ladies having fun in a collective setting and connecting to mele and place wrapped us in rejuvenation and gratitude. Even during social distancing, when our communities claim their spaces and storied areas with mele wahi pana, we all holomua. When we sing these songs *together* and feel the connecting force of mele, the lifting is lighter. This is not only for good singers. When we sing together with intention, aloha, and pride, we fortify the community and spirit. Valuing the mele of all your areas—in residence, in ahupua‘a, in district, or on the highest peak—sets these select mele or pōhaku into the foundation, the house structure, that lives within.

I envision more time for our keiki and ‘ohana to work in mālama ‘āina and connect with the mana of the land, equipped with mele to reinforce their foundation. I envision more appreciation for Hawaiian music in the home, with multigenerational gatherings, with storytelling and kanikapila. I envision Hawaiian education laden with functional, practical, and well-made mele to stir the hearts and minds of our kānaka, elevating the value of mele, of our world, and of ourselves.

Start at Home

As we get used to quarantining, or staying in our ‘ohana bubble, making music is one of the most heartwarming activities we can do. Start with the mele that take you back to your favorite places or people. Perhaps your children have never heard of your connection to a particular mele. Go over the words and get those stories going. Record the storytelling. If you don’t have instruments to play, pull up the song on your playlist and sing along. Create an ‘ohana playlist of favorite mele. A little ‘ohana competition can go a long way to foster mastery and confidence.

The kuleana and practice of mele in my household is essential. It's a training in mele language, 'ōlelo Hawai'i, perspective, creation, mo'olelo, and delivery. I'm not training my three young children to be performers or entertainers. They're being trained in Hawaiian literature as houses of knowledge via mele. Learning the instrumentation and the musical influences and playing styles of the older generations, and being around many musicians and hula people, have enriched our mele education at home. Only with this solid foundation can we further innovate Hawaiian music with the tools of today. Ola!

Kainani Kahaunaele is a mele enthusiast, singer-songwriter, and kumu 'ōlelo Hawai'i at Ka Haka 'Ula O Ke'elikōlani, University of Hawai'i at Hilo. She has produced two award-winning solo albums focusing on haku mele. Her third is due for release in the winter of 2020.