



The Creative People of Moloka'i Offer Heartland Authenticity

In 1997, Moloka'i's first recording studio, a start-up operation called Monkeypod, took a big risk. It released a CD of songs by a 15-year-old boy raised in a remote "backside" valley. Today, Darrell Labrado, the "Kid from Moloka'i," is a household name in Hawai'i, whose later albums set new sales records and garnered praise from national music critics.

Another young musical genius from Moloka'i is Raiatea Mokihana Maile Helm. Her sophomore CD "Sweet and Lovely" earned her an unprecedented Grammy nomination for solo female vocalist.

Hawai'i pays attention to Moloka'i.

In the 50th state, Moloka'i is the native heartland. It's the only island with a majority population of native Hawaiians. While tourism flourished, Moloka'i defied commercialization. Residents, regardless of their ancestry, feel first and foremost that they are Molokaian.

In Hawai'i, people know that anything coming from Moloka'i will be unusual, strong, and done well.

The high quality of Moloka'i's creative people is evident in the fine products of the island's artists, carvers, weavers, quilters and more.

Some of the most incredible wood workers come from Moloka'i. Jack Ewing takes full advantage of the density and color of Hawaiian hardwoods to create bowls so thin that they glow when held up to the sunlight. Victor Lopez sculpts stunning marine art from pieces of rough wood. He learned the art of wood working from his late father-in-law, Bill Kapuni, who was revered for his deep-toned pahu drums made from 80-year-old coconut trunks and lidded wooden urns called 'umeke.

Some artists practice skills so rare you won't find them elsewhere. For example, Lola Spencer used a state foundation grant to learn the endangered craft of weaving lau hala, the leaves of a Polynesian coastal tree related to the yucca. Her hats are masterpieces – tight weave, lovely shapes, and a highly disciplined control of color and pattern.

Molokaian like these are true originals.

So is homeboy Rik Cooke, whose credits include *National Geographic* and a fascinating coffee-table book of island portraits. In 1989, he and his wife Bronwyn created a retreat center called Hui Ho'olana, a gathering place for "creativity, healing and the arts." Set in

the cool uplands of Kala'e, the Hui offers a schedule of live-in courses on subjects such as Rekindling the Creative Spirit, Quieting the Mind and Waking Up in Paradise.

Perhaps the most colorful of Moloka'i's creative souls are Jonathan and Daphne Socher. They stumbled on this outpost island nearly 30 years ago and decided to open a business that it certainly didn't have – a design shop for making kites. Today, the Big Wind Kite Factory and its Plantation Gallery Gift Shop still inhabit the same building it originally established in the tiny town of Maunaloa. The Sochers continue to design and craft their colorful flying concepts, and travel abroad to kite festivals every year, bringing back new ideas, huge dragon and eagle-shaped kites from Bali, and plenty of interesting merchandise for their gift shop, which stocks sarongs, souvenirs, jewelry, beach supplies, exotic tribal art and the largest selection of books and CDs on the island.

For three decades the Sochers have made good on their belief that Moloka'i visitors eventually, inevitably discover the essence of the island, which has something to do with the wind and more to do with play. Says Jonathan, who is as big-bearded as Saint Nicholas: "Moloka'i is for people who don't need anybody to tell them how to relax."

In short, keep your eye on the creative people of Moloka'i. The island has great power and many teachings. People who know Hawai'i are watching Moloka'i because this island has something peculiar and genuine to offer. Its residents are independent, honest folk, proud of their island home. They create in the spirit of its wild isolation.