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Entertainment Features 06.13.07

Leslie Escobar digs a little deeper into the island culture behind Spam Jam

When Jennifer McCleery was 12, her dad decided she should have more extracurricular activities in her life. But rather than take up a traditional sport such as soccer or softball, McCleery went for something different.

"Instead of sitting on my butt all day, I decided to dance hula," said McCleery, now 19 and a student at Monterey Peninsula College.

▼ADVERTISEMENT▼ She described the Hawaiian traditional dance as one that's similar to a ceremonial Native American dance. Traditional instruments such as gourds and bamboo sticks are often used, she said.

"It's one of those things where part of the job of it is to make it look easy," McCleery said. "We go through basics, learn simple moves. Our teachers are really good at making it look easy."

Zoom Photo



SCOTT MACDONALD | INK

Hula dancing and other Polynesian traditions will be showcased at this weekend's Monterey Bay "**Spam Jam**" Polynesian Extravaganza at Laguna Seca.

On the water

McCleery, whose parents grew up in Hawaii, also paddles in the **Ke Kai** O'Uhane Outrigger Club. The club's members paddle in Monterey and regularly race other groups in the boats, which look like shallower versions of canoes.

The canoes have a storied history in Polynesian culture, including being used as a mode of transportation for those who began emigrating from Tahiti to Hawaii in large numbers hundreds of years ago.

Outrigger canoes are fitted with lateral support floats, which give them more stability. Long-distance races can be anywhere from 3 to 20 miles long, McCleery said.

"I usually do the sprint races instead of doing miles," she said. "Usually I do between 250 and 1,000 meters. We have a course that's 250 meters long and most races you go down one way, turn around and come back. It's kind of like swimming; the pool is only one length, but you have to turn around and come back if you're going to go further."

While dancing hula and paddling have given her a lot of exercise, McCleery said the sports have become a deeper part of her life.

"The people I paddle and dance with are like a second family to me," she said. "A lot of people who are my elders who I respect I actually call auntie and uncle. It's like having a big family; everyone knows you."

A communal life

That close-knit mentality extends beyond the outrigger canoe and hula culture.

Robert Uncangco, a musician with local traditional Hawaiian band Ho'omana, said music also is a communal part of Polynesian life.

"We don't have much land for ourselves

Members of the **Ke Kai** O'Uhane outrigger canoe club gather Tuesday before practice on Monterey State Beach.

•the spot

Monterey Bay "**Spam Jam**" Polynesian Extravaganza

WHEN: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

WHERE: Laguna Seca

COST: Admission is \$15, \$10 if you bring a donation of Spam for the Monterey County Food Bank. Military officials, seniors and kids between the ages of 3 and 10 get in for \$5.

PARKING: \$5 for standard parking, \$10 for premium parking

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anymore but one thing we do keep is our language, music and culture," he said. "When you go back to the islands that's all you see. From 5:30 until 10 at night you see a bunch of people in their backyards playing music. Everyone just gets involved with it."

Ho'omana performs at **Spam Jam** on Sunday. The group's music incorporates instruments such the ukulele and slack-key guitar.

"Hawaiian music is really laid-back music," Uncangco, 43, said. "It's very, very relaxing. We've got upbeat tempos, but the music, from my knowledge of it, it talks a lot about the nature, the land of Hawaii. We barely have any songs that have anything to do with war, fighting."

Uncangco said he's noticed an increasing interest in traditional Hawaiian music from Californians. It's something he attributes to the 2002 Disney film "Lilo & Stitch," an animated move that takes place in Hawaii and has a popular soundtrack filled with traditional music.

"Ever since Lilo & Stitch' came out a lot of people have been having Hawaiian-style parties," he said. "They want the real stuff. There's a pretty large demand because there's not so many of us around."

Island feelings

Royce Redira, one of the co-founders of **Spam Jam**, said the festival is a good way for Monterey County's large Polynesian population to feel at home.

But he also aims to expose other nationalities — and those who simply can't get to Hawaii — to the culture.

"Some of these folks cannot afford to go to Hawaii and we're bringing it right to them," he said.

STORYCHAT 

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