

George Helm's soulful music helped solidify a movement

By Catherine Kekoa Enomoto
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TWENTY years ago, an extraordinary event occurred. George Jarrett Helm Jr. of Molokai, then 26 years old, recorded a raft of Hawaiian songs, the first of which praised his family's Hawaiian homestead at Kalama'ula, Molokai.

That 1976 recording session at the former Gold Coin night spot presents a freeze frame of contemporary Hawaiian music, history and culture.

Several months later, in March 1977, Helm disappeared while spearheading the occupation and eventual repatriation of Kahoolawe island to Hawaii and its people. Kahoolawe had been a U.S. Navy bombing target for 53 years until it was returned to the state in 1994 after a protracted struggle that Helm had started in the mid-1970s.

This week, when Helm would have celebrated his 46th birthday (March 23), Hana Ola Records is re-releasing his recordings in pristine compact disc form. Also, Los Angeles film producer Dana Gluckstein is developing a feature film on the Hawaiian activist's life.

Longtime Molokai activist Walter Ritte said Helm used his music to solidify the fledgling Hawaiian movement. "His musical talent was the key that opened the door to the Hawaiians he wanted to talk to, to the kupuna especially," Ritte said.

Ritte recalled when Helm, Emmett Aluli and he went to a church meeting in Keanae, Maui, in the 1970s. The assembled kupuna, or elders, spoke in Hawaiian and looked askance at the so-called activists, whom they viewed as trouble makers.

Helm took an ukulele and started playing and singing.

See "[Record Reviews](#)" for John Berger's review of Helm's new release.

"By the third song, we was all 'ohana," Ritte said. "They were saying, 'Ah wassamatta with the media? Why they call you activists? They don't know anyting.'"

"That was it -- music took away all the BS and brought us all as one, tore down all the roadblocks. That was his talent -- and it was just one of many, many examples of how his music got us through a lot of hard times."

Album producer Harry Soria said the CD features a sort of gypsy sound -- but very controlled and very passionate.

"Twenty years ago he was avant-garde, radical, off the wall," said Soria, a 17-year deejay with KCCN. "People were wondering, why's he singing like that -- not a true falsetto and with a flamenco guitar."

The album captures "one evening, one recording, a brief flicker of a musical career," Soria said. "Who knows what George Helm could've done if he had pursued that avenue in his life?"

Kahauanu Lake, 40-year entertainer and leader of the Kahauanu Lake Trio, was Helm's musical mentor for nine years. "His talent was extraordinary. I wished he had more time on earth than God had given him. Thank God we have something of him," Lake said of the album.

Helm studied under Lake with a St. Louis School classmate and basketball teammate who spoke of Helm's unique music. He declined to be identified because, "This is George's story, not my story," but described Helm's rare purity and soulfulness, like those of songbird Genoa Keawe and the late Gabby Pahinui.

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Adolph Helm
George's brother

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"He was probably one of the first guys to do old Hawaiian stuff in a new way, without losing any of its richness and purity, because that's what he was -- real pure," the classmate said.

"There's a certain purity of self that comes through because they're singing straight from the roots. He used that same kind of soulfulness, but in a newer, swing, be-bop environment. Kahauanu's whole style of teaching was on jazz thinking, with harmonies, chord changes and progressions. It was extremely sophisticated, but (with Helm) it was always real soulful."

Wayne Reis, who performed with Helm for nine years, spoke of the latter's uniquely high voice, charisma and genuine grass-roots aloha. "He sort of mesmerized the audience," Reis said in a telephone interview from St. George, Utah, where he now lives. "As you listened you got to appreciate a very, very special feeling when he sang."

Leimomi Apoliona, Helm's girlfriend at the time of his disappearance, said, "It was love at first sound" when she heard the full-bearded Helm at the Gold Coin. "He was able to be real masculine and sing with this angelic, beautiful voice," she said in an interview from Silver Springs, Md., where she teaches kindergarten.

"The Hawaiian rights movement at the time was just beginning; what he brought to it was this sense of honoring the kupuna," she said. "And Hawaiians never did massive civil disobedience, but he had a willingness to go get arrested. All of these things came out of George 20 years ago, when very few people were talking sovereignty; Hawaiian pride was just kind of nascent.

"I think what he brought was that sense of political activism with a real Hawaiian feel."

Helm also brought "energy and a passion -- a fire in the belly," said Puanani Medeiros Higgins, a retired Hawaiian studies resource teacher. "George had vision and fire -- vision for all, not just 'me.' "

Filmmaker Gluckstein said Helm's "life represents a profound era of American history. Most people on the mainland and internationally don't know anything about Hawaiian history, and I really hope the movie inspires people everywhere about the universal wisdom of the Hawaiian concepts of aloha and aloha aina," she said.

Helm's youngest brother, Adolph, is looking forward to the re-release. "I think the new generation of Hawaiian kids, like my sons Kanohowailuku (age 15) and Kekamaikaikamaikalani (20) and those who are into their culture, are going to really, really appreciate this new release of his CD, especially 20 years later, with the resurgence of the Hawaiian movement and sovereignty," Adolph Helm said by phone from Molokai.

"When you get somebody in the family like my brother George," he concluded, "we as a family encourage our kids to continue their education and see how they themselves -- Kekama is at the University of Hawaii-Hilo and hopefully in two or three years -- can give back to the community, especially to the Hawaiian people."

A generation has passed since Helm sang and occupied and disappeared, but his legacy endures in the return of Kahoolawe for Hawaiian cultural and spiritual activities in perpetuity.

And the 26-year-old stylist comes back via compact disc. As he sings in the CD's opener: "E ho'i kua ea, e noho i ka 'aina, au-we-he me ka nani o Kalama'ula" -- "Let us both return to live on this beautiful land, Kalama'ula."