

Remembering Helen Hill

A New Orleans community comes together after the murder of a friend and activist

John Clark

On February 24, I joined a large crowd to march in a jazz funeral celebrating the life of our friend, the filmmaker and community activist, Helen Hill. Helen was murdered at her home on January 4 by an intruder whose motives remain a mystery.

Hundreds of people gathered in the Mid-City neighborhood at the home that she once shared with her husband, Paul Gailiunas, a doctor, musician, and fellow community activist, and their small child, Francis Pop.

Their neighborhood and home were badly flooded after Hurricane Katrina. It's a modest, slightly funky-looking Victorian house, painted bright yellow, still bearing messages that the people and animals who lived there were safe, and thank-yous to concerned friends.

The iron fence is still decorated with some of the drowned stuffed animals that were placed there after the flood. Despite everything, this once-wonderful place still exudes some of the exuberance, joy and zany creativity that were so magically concentrated there.

The procession was led by a classic hearse that had belonged to local musical legend, Ernie K-Doe, and then by two of the world's great clowns and great human beings, Sheri Branch and Bergin Sund, who were very close friends of Helen and Paul. They were followed by the Panorama Jazz Band, and the Hot Eight Brass Band, whose drummer, Dinneral Shavers was tragically murdered just a week before Helen was killed.

Behind the bands followed a multitude of Helen's friends and admirers. One person was dressed in full chicken regalia. There were a good number of cupcake girls and cupcake boys distributing vegan treats reminiscent of Helen's famed tea parties. The throng's signs and t-shirts expressed an extraordinary mixture of fantasy, radical politics, remembrance and absurdism.

We marched through Helen and Paul's still largely devastated former neighborhood, along Bayou St.. John, and then down Orleans Avenue, past the relatively unscathed Lafitte Housing Development, with its doors and windows sealed with metal plates by the authorities to prevent residents from reclaiming their homes.

For some distance, the parade followed Jefferson Davis Parkway, named after the Confederate president-but as the flyer for the event noted, we would actually march down "Angela Davis Parkway." The procession ended at Ernie K-Doe's famed Mother-in-Law Lounge. As the crowd gathered around the band, it broke into a jubilant version of Paul and Helen's song "Emma Goldman."

She told me that the state is my enemy.

The lady on the left says that

"Property is theft."

They ran her out of town

Just to keep her mouth shut.





But J. Edgar Hoover couldn't move her from my heart

Many in the crowd joined in the chorus:

Emma, Emma, Emma Goldman.

Emma, Emma, Hey!

Helen and Paul met at Harvard and later lived for a number of years in Halifax, where Paul went to medical school and where both of them spread love, creativity and joy and became treasured members of the local community. Few couples could ever have been so well suited to one another and their love for each other was legendary. The story of their riding into their wedding on a bicycle built for two is often repeated. Their romance is memorialized by Paul in perhaps the only love song ever entitled "Atheist," with its wonderful falsetto chorus, "I don't believe in God, but I do believe in angels, ever since we fell in love, girl."

In Halifax, the couple worked with groups such as the Atlantic Filmmakers Co-operative, Food Not Bombs, and the North End Community Health Centre. Helen started "Ladies' Film Bees" there and made many of her best films, including "Mouseholes" (1999), a beautiful and moving tribute to her beloved grandfather, Pop, and a meditation on illness, old age, death, and, above all, love and affection.

Another film, which included many of their Halifax friends, was "The World's Smallest Fair" (1995), a gleefully zany work that might also be called "The World's Smallest Surrealist Film Masterpiece." It was also in Halifax that Paul organized his band Piggy and wrote some of his greatest songs, sometimes with the collaboration of Helen. Piggy recorded six albums between 1995 and 2001, including *Don't Stop the Calypso: Songs of love and Liberation*, which included the classic "Emma Goldman," and ending with *Love Letter to Halifax* as a farewell to a city and to friends that were and remained very much in their hearts.

It didn't take long after Helen and Paul came to New Orleans for them to become known widely among the activist and arts communities here for their music, their films, their vegan cuisine, their pot-bellied pig named Rosie, and for being the kindest, happiest, and most lovable people anyone had ever met. In this center of culinary and alcoholic excess, who but Helen and Paul could draw jubilant crowds to vegan tea parties. Strange but wonderfully

true. In addition, they became widely known for starting New Orleans Food Not Bombs and distributing healthy vegetarian food to anyone in need.

Paul organized a new band in New Orleans, The Troublemakers. They began spreading musical love and anarchy around the city, and recorded *Here Come the Troublemakers* in 2004. Proclaiming theme, "It's your duty as a citizen to troublemake," the album includes such classics as "International Flag Burning Day," and "Orleans Parish Prison" (which can be found at www.louisianamusicfactory.com/showoneprod.asp?ProductID=4022).

That year, Paul and a colleague started the "Little Doctors Clinic," a neighborhood health center that had a sliding scale and specialized in helping the poor, young people, the marginalized, and others who looked for caring, humane medical treatment and who were alienated from or excluded by a machine-like, profit-driven medical industry. My son and many of my friends were Paul's patients and they all mention their deep gratitude to Paul not only for his excellent medical care but also for the personal concern he showed.

Helen started a film co-op, the New Orleans Film Collective and did free film workshops for the community. In 2004 she received a \$35,000 Rockefeller Media Fellowship for what would become her last major film project, "The Florestine Collection." While shopping in a thrift store she discovered some extraordinary dresses made from a motley patchwork of fabrics. The dresses captured her imagination, so she bought them and then went looking for their creator. It turned out to be an elderly blind woman who was over 90 years old. Helen decided to do a film about the woman's life.

In late August of 2005, as Hurricane Katrina approached New Orleans, Helen and Paul evacuated to her home town of Columbia, S.C. They were unable to return to their devastated neighborhood and remained away for a year. During the entire period Helen yearned to return. She had almost unbounded love for the city, as symbolized by her email address, "neworleanshelen." As her stepfather Kevin Lewis was later to say, "she had New Orleans in her heart and imagination."

Paul hesitated to bring a small child back to the city, but Helen organized a covert campaign to bring them home. She asked all her friends to send postcards to her and Paul, telling them how much we all wanted them back. Helen's own postcards included a printed return address that reminded everyone that they were "temporarily in exile" there. Paul finally calmed his fears a bit and relented, so the family came back almost exactly a year after the disaster.

After returning to the city, Helen resumed her filmmaking activities. She salvaged some exposed film that had been damaged in the flooding, resulting in haunting images of their neighborhood before the disaster, with the marks of that disaster captured on film. New Orleans filmmaker Courtney Egan collaborated on a powerfully moving short film, "Cleveland Street Gap," in which Helen's damaged black and white images of her pre-Katrina neighborhood merge into color images of the same now-deserted and devastated post-Katrina landscape.

Paul returned to grassroots medical care with the Daughters of Charity Health Center in the Bywater neighborhood. In addition to singing lead for the Troublemakers, he also played solo or with a small group as "Ukulele Against the Machine." Just a few months ago he and his drummer performed as "Ukulele" for a dinner at my house for the participants in a conference here on the anarchist geographer and philosopher Elisee Reclus. He delighted the visiting anarchists and anarchologists with rousing renditions of "Emma Goldman" and other favorites.

On New Year's Day, a friend, who missed Helen and Paul during a short visit to N.O., gave me some gifts to pass on to them, and I was looking forward to seeing them in a few days. Paul had sent me a Paul Robeson postcard in December that I still hadn't thanked him for. In his message he said, "JOHN! Across town here in the Marigny the power just went out! It's actually kind of nice to be here with Helen and the sleeping toddler with only candlelight." Paul and Helen were big postcard senders and always focused on the important things in life.

Only a few days later, on January 4, the local newspaper reported the following: "In the sixth New Orleans murder in less than a day, a woman was killed and her husband shot in their home this morning at about 5:30 a.m., said New Orleans police, who found the bleeding husband kneeling at the door of the couple's home, holding their two-year-old son in his arms."

Their friends and neighbors reacted with utter horror and disbelief on finding that the victims had been Helen and Paul. Helen had been shot in the neck when she opened the door, as, according to one report, she was shouting, "Please don't hurt my baby!" Paul retreated into the bathroom with Francis Pop. The intruder broke into the bathroom and shot Paul three times as he shielded the child behind him.

Helen's death immediately delivered a profound shock to the surrounding Marigny and Bywater neighborhoods, a shock that soon reverberated throughout the city. Helen and Paul's apartment quickly became a shrine in their honor, with many bouquets of flowers and remembrances placed in front of it by friends and neighbors. A large crowd gathered at the Sound Cafe in the Marigny and the idea emerged of a citywide march against the rampant violence and killing in the community.

On January 11, five thousand people marched to City Hall to express their concern, grief, and outrage over the killing of Helen and others in the rash of murders that marked the beginning of the year. Other events in honor of Helen soon followed. A Helen Hill film festival was held at Cafe Brasil in the Marigny. Later, hundreds gathered at Zeitgeist Multidisciplinary Arts Center to view Helen's films and celebrate her life in the first of a series of "Tea Parties for Helen Hill." Helen's death seemed to move people in New Orleans as have few other events in recent history.

There has been much talk in New Orleans, especially after the large march to City Hall, about "demanding change" in a city that is far from recovering from the Katrina disaster and is now plagued by rampant crime and violence. If this "demanding" meant organizing massive resistance—say closing down the oil industry until the federal government paid restitution for the unnecessary disaster caused by its defective levees, or until that noxious and ruinous industry itself paid restitution for its destruction of the wetlands that would have also protected the city—then the talk might be truly encouraging.

If this "demanding" meant that the community is ready to forsake the passivity of commodity consumption and ritualistic voting and instead appropriate for itself the power to create, directly and actively, a just and humane community, then the talk might be encouraging. However, it almost inevitably amounts to asking some morally bankrupt and mentally clueless politicians like city Mayor Ray Nagin or Louisiana Governor Kathleen Blanco to do some poorly defined "something" about our rampant crime, our still devastated neighborhoods, our deplorable educational system, and our woefully inadequate health care system.

Is another way possible? Could we be inspired by Helen's life to follow her example? Could we, rather than making hopeless demands to the hopelessly corrupt, demand more of ourselves? It goes back to a basic question that was presented starkly to us here by the vast devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Would a crisis that demolished our habitual feelings of everydayness and posed brutally the question of the meaning of our lives lead to a spiritual and moral breakthrough, or would it merely cause us to retreat even further into the deadening narrowness of what our society refers to through the euphemisms of "normalcy" and "survival?" Helen's life and death pose a similar dilemma. The meaning that we find there will help determine the meaning that we find in our own lives and our own futures.

In late January, Paul wrote a column for the local newspaper. He entitled it, "For my poor, sweet wife, fix New Orleans." Paul describes Helen as "the most interesting, original, beautiful, funny person I have ever known" and "the best, most loving wife anyone could imagine... she devoted the last two years to raising our little son Francis with the greatest of love, care and creativity."

Paul urges the community to look for the roots of violence, rather than being further brutalized when it occurs. He says that "[Helen's] murder, like so many others, is a symptom of a sickness, a terrible sickness caused by grinding poverty, hopelessness, bad parenting, a lack of respect for human life, pre- and post-hurricane neglect and persistent racism against African-American people."

Finally, he concludes, "I am begging you to find a way to get people out of those hellish trailer parks, which are cauldrons for the kind of violence that destroyed our happiness. The people living there need decent, well-maintained, affordable housing and it needs to happen now. No one is going to fix New Orleans for you. You need to do it yourselves. Please do these things now, for yourselves and for my poor, sweet wife. I know this is what she would want."

That sums up very well the message that I was searching for. The answer is direct action. Helen and Paul's whole approach to life was, "Do it yourselves!" or to phrase it as they might have when they were part of our community, "Let's do it ourselves!" Let's live life directly. Let's create our own reality, rather than buying a prefabricated substitute from some corporation or accepting one that's imposed on us by the state.

Paul and Helen expressed what the great anarchist philosopher Elisee Reclus saw as the foremost hope for the future. He said that we should "found little republics within ourselves and around ourselves," so that "gradually

these isolated groups will come together like scattered crystals and form the great Republic.” He concluded that “it is step by step, through small, loving, and intelligent associations, that the great fraternal society will be formed.”

Paul and Helen created a small world around them that prefigured and will help bring about that new world to come. It was a world of joy, creativity, compassion, kindness, gentleness, love, and friendship. And it is up to us to carry on the work of creating and caring for that world.

In a society that tries so hard to convince us that “There is No Alternative,” Helen always restored and inspired hope for the possibility of creative social transformation, for the everyday miracles that our real lives depend on. In one of her most memorable quotes about her work, she said that “with animation you can create a different world.” Animation is the word for Helen’s art, but it’s also the word for giving motion to what is static, for giving vitality to what is lifeless, and for giving soul to what is soulless. In all these senses, Helen and Paul have both been animators par excellence—those who bring things to life, who set them in motion, who bring out the anima, the soul of things, of people, and of the community.

This is a sadly neglected dimension of social transformation. Most thinking about social change today has a one-sided focus on questions of ideology and institutions. Other crucial areas tend to be overlooked: the realm of creativity, of imagination, of the generation of meaning; the realm of ethos, of our lived experience, of the small but most momentous details of life; the realm of the gift, of spontaneous generosity, of delight in sharing what is good.

Our oppositional movements tend to be too one-sidedly oppositional and reactive, rather than creatively active; too much preoccupied with “resistance” and “struggle,” while social creativity and collective enjoyment are relegated to the background.

For Helen and Paul, creativity and celebration have always been at the core of everything. A t-shirt at the jazz funeral had a big starburst with “Helen” in the center and a variation of Emma Goldman’s famous quote, “If I can’t dance, it’s not a revolution.” Helen and Paul’s revolution is one that includes not only dancing, but also singing, eating (preferably dishes like vegan jambalaya), drinking (herb tea if at all possible), laughing, playing with young children and animals, and enjoying life and one another to the fullest.

This joyful spirit is expressed well in Paul’s great anthem, “International Flag Burning Day”:

On the Fourth of July we declare our independence

Independence from the greatest evil around

That is the evil of nationalism

It separates us and crushes us down

Flag Burning Day/ Flag Burning Day

Burning those hateful borders away

Flag Burning Day, Flag Burning Day

Happy International Flag Burning Day

What’s amazing about International Flag Burning Day celebrations is that they are, like the song, completely positive and joyful. The old stereotyped image of “flag-burning” has a decidedly negative side — it can be a rather angry and reactive gesture, and there’s possibly an exhibitionist side to it all, a desire to shock others. But the spirit of International Flag Burning Day is exactly the opposite of this.

The event is a joyous celebration of our solidarity as human beings and of our freedom from all the nasty nationalistic nonsense that always sets people against one another and often leads them to destroy one another. The title should be taken quite literally: Happy International Flag Burning Day. If you can’t be happy, if you can’t burn with joy, you’re not at Helen and Paul’s International Flag Burning Day celebration!

As one commentator described Helen's films, they are full of "cotton candy, teapots, chickens, flowers, cartoon ladies with beehive hairdos, couples falling in love, people sprouting angel wings and creatures dying."

One of the most striking things in them is the way objects and even people always seem to be floating. Helen's films are pervaded by the irrepressible lightness of being that she expressed in her own life. She defied gravity. She knew how to "fly on the wind" as the ancient sage Zhuangzi phrased it. And, if we're lucky maybe she can still teach us how to do it. One of her most memorable short films was "Scratch and Crow," which has been described as "a revelation of the secret life cycle of chickens, from hatching to their noisy ascent into heaven."

Near the end, Helen tells us, "If I knew, I would assure you we are all finally good chickens and will rise together, a noisy flock of round, dusty angels." May we all somehow find the ability to soar to those heights, if only on the power of imagination, with our risen angel, Helen.

Note: More information on Helen Hill's life and work can be found on the website <http://www.helenhill.org> which includes many articles, audio and video material, and moving tributes from her friends.

See also: the Wikipedia article at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Hill

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