

Ode to Helen Hill



You gave off such hope and inspiration, Helen Hill!
that something better can be done, and must
in a world of flood-crust, rust and shriveled trust

So many spoke of your nature, sweet as a Cajun cake
your sail-spreading enthusiasm
Let's do it! Let's have a picnic on a bayou'd lake
we'll shoot some Super 8 footage at the alligator brake!

"You don't know how? Here I'll show you!
Come to my house for a filmmaking bee
but first some vegan crumpets and a pot of Yogi Tea!"

On a warm late winter afternoon
your friend Mark Bingham pointed to a café on Piety Street
where you would surely have been talking with friends

but you weren't
It was as if the flowers had not been painted at Arles

That's how much they missed you

2.

Her marriage to Dr. Paul Gailiunas
perhaps the first doctor in the history of Civilization
to write a song about Emma Goldman

was also the subject of awe.

The life of such a couple is a 1,000-page Flow, you see
so we can only weave a simple lanyard
of flowers and Mnemosyne.

She was born on May 9, 1970—
 grew up in a liberal American household in South Carolina
 attended church and Sunday school
 and her eyes opened out, so many say, to the Wideness of Kindness
 at a very early age

In the fifth grade in S.C.
 she made her first short film
The House of Sweet Magic

It was the first of many for Helen.
 Short 8 mm works with the hand-fashioned glyphs of
 the *auteur* at home were to mark her life

It's a gem-maker's art
 you have to make your mark very quickly like a sonnet
 then flash with an apothegm in a final set of lines

The brilliance is in the sequencing
 the tracing of a story in a few thousand frames
 plus the Chance Operations
 that come from Cage and randomness

Through all her her life she urged all eyes and ears to celebrate
 their home-born films
 One friend called her a “visionary Luddite pixilator”

For part of her teenage years she lived in England
 graduated from high school back in Columbia, S.C.
 then headed off to Cambridge, Massachusetts and Harvard

Paul Gailiunas was born in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1971
 and was raised in Edmonton

He too went to Harvard
 where both of them lived in the same dorm



so that their paths began slowly twining into one

Helen graduated with a degree in English in 1992
 then came to New Orleans with a boyfriend

The boyfriend's roommate, Paul Gailiunas
joined them

3

Not long thereafter Paul became the one
and he and Helen spent a year of fun in the Crescent

during which time she submitted a film to the N.O. Film Festival

Then Paul went to Halifax to study medicine at Dalhousie University
and Helen to the California Institute of the Arts
where she picked up a degree in experimental animation in '95

then joined him in Canada

3.

Halifax

They pedaled to the church in a bicycle built for two
when they married in South Carolina in 1996

Paul sang his troth to the chords of his guitar
all of which gave the wedding a legendary quality
and even more tears of joy than usual
when bright youth join up for eternity

The couple then lived in Nova Scotia till 2001
where both were active in Food Not Bombs



**Helen in Halifax in '99
Pleasure Without Profit**

an organization that feeds the meal-needy and the homeless

They kept a pot-bellied pig named Rosie
in their apartment

Helen experimented with hand-drawn animations
like Harry Smith
captured on Super 8 film

One of her films was the animated *Mouseholes*,
 which celebrated her grandfather, A. K. Wingard, known as Pop
 after he had passed way

A judge at a National Film Board competition in Canada later wrote
 of taking *Mouseholes* into the competition:
 “It wasn’t the most technically polished film,
 but it was one of the most down to earth, moving and humane
 animation films I’ve come across. Like Helen, it was absolutely genuine.

.....It remains one of my favorite Canadian animation films
 (she made it in Halifax) and one of the few animation films
 that makes me cry (in a good way).

She filmed puppets cut out of paper
 puppets of cloth puppets of clay
 hand drawn animation
 and the stop motion technique of pixilation

She was not afraid to let her art Form
 fasten itself on the rafty, scatterry-smattery quotidian hour—

“I set out now
 in a box upon the sea”
 wrote the bard Charles Olson
 who, much like Helen Hill
 wanted other writers to thrive:

*Dare to show your craft
 on Olson’s raft*

Piggy

Paul led a band called Piggy during med school—
 sometimes it was listed as a “calypso orchestra”

and featured not only guitar, but flute, sax, trombone
 violin, keyboards, bass and drums.

He had a gift for writing lyrics to catchy tunes
 which made people want to sing along
 such as his anthem for the great Emma Goldman

Piggy played many benefits and festivals
and Helen designed costumes and stage props for some of Piggy's shows

Piggy made six albums 'tween '95 and 2001
including *Don't Stop the Calypso Songs of Love and Liberation*
(with "Emma Goldman")

Meanwhile, *Mouseholes* won the Louisiana Video Shorts award in 2000
and it was shown at the New Orleans Film Festival

Recipe for Disaster in 2001

At the 4th Annual Splice This! Film Festival in Toronto,
Helen premiered her widely distributed publication,
Recipes for Disaster: A Handcrafted Film Cookbooklet,
for experimental animators

featuring tips and ideas for making films
on the string of a better world

She had plenty of energy to send her films
to festivals all over the place

and to reach out to the film scenes
which grow in almost every region of
the U.S. and Canada

4.

Back to the Crescent in 2001

Paul and Helen returned to New Orleans in 2001
and not long later he and a partner
opened the Little Doctors Neighborhood Clinic
in the Treme district of N.O
one of America's oldest black neighborhoods

The clinic had a fee schedule based on income
as Dr. Gailiunas worked not only
to cure pain, seal wounds with buffering
but to help forge a national system

of equal care for the suffering

As a doctor he could have raked in the cash
and embarked on a life where he lived on
the interest on his interest

but he didn't

and Helen, with her bright personality and pizzazz
could have worked for Spielberg or Dreamworks
or done a Hollywood animation on Big Easy jazz

They chose a house on Cleveland Street
in the Mid-City area



where they quickly befriended the nabe
taking Rosie the pig out on leashed strolls

—they threw a fifth birthday party for her
featuring a cotton candy machine

Helen's Charisma

Charisma's a very personal thing
but she had it

and shone it forth in the film & alternative
culture of the Crescent

She founded the New Orleans Film Collective
and conducted free filmmaking workshops
held "filmmaking bees"

to help people make their own home-crafted shorts

She was "irrepressibly cheerful," said a friend.

In 2004 Helen won a \$35,000
 Rockefeller Foundation Media Arts fellowship
 to support the making of a film, *The Florestine Collection*,
 inspired by hand-stitched dresses of multivariate patchings
 she'd found in a thrift store

She searched for the dresses's creator who turned out to be a
 blind woman over 90 years old
 and started documenting her life

Meanwhile, Helen and Paul had a child
 named Francis Pop Gailiunas
 born on October 17 of 2004

5.

Katrina

The fury of wind and water that late summer
 sent a few feet of Pontchartrain muck-brine through their bright-hued house
 ruining and smirching many of her 16 and 8 mm reels of film!

They went to her home town, Columbia, S.C.
 for almost a year
 before returning to the Crescent

Helen dealt with the effluvia of the Pontchartrain on her footage
 and began to start cleaning the films
 in their South Carolina basement

She sought help from experts for "restorative optical printing

Meanwhile she was jumping up and down to come back to New Orleans
 Her husband, more tuned to the actual facts of stab wounds
 and the glazed eyes of bullets

not to mention the million miles of mold and decay
 bad air violence gunwielders on bicycles

was not so sure

Paul sent a friend a postcard
 that they were thinking of heading back to the Easy
 “Are we crazy?” he asked

For her part Helen sent blank postcards to friends
 urging them to write messages to Paul
 for them to return

6.

Back in August

They arrived back in the Crescent in late August of '06
 It was the day before Katrina's first anniversary parade

for which Helen tied a sign on baby Francis's back:
 “New Orleans Native. I Got Back Yesterday!

Hi, New Orleans! I'm here to make films
 and prove Blake was absolutely right:
 that Energy *really is* Eternal Delight

Paul later wrote how he “lived in fear of the violence
 and unpredictability
 that has become a daily fact of life.”

His wife seemed satisfied only in the Crescent
 among the shotgun houses of her neighborhood
 the Spanish moss, the flowers, the magnolias

They moved into half of a “double shotgun” house
 on North Rampart in the Faubourg Marigny district

Not far away was the renovated St. Cecilia's church
 in the section called Bywater
 where he began work again
 to help the poor to heal
 at the Daughters of Charity Health Center

An Inspiration to the Young

Part of her desire to get back to the Crescent
may have been to make it family friendly

There are lots of women tuned to its life
who sport the cafés and living rooms of the Faubourg Marigny

and its mix of Good times. Film. Poetry. Music
Dancing. Editing. Scripts. Novels
and good old American avoidance of the void

—nomenclature to keep the Crescent
and its pastel colors gleaming with peace-sun

Halloween '06

When some of the neighborhood kids trick-or-treated
their house on North Rampart Street
they couldn't afford costumes
so Helen and Paul gave out halloween masks as well as treats

One friend recalled Paul asking on child who wore no costume,
“And what are you, young man?”
The kid replied that he was just a boy.
Paul handed him a mask and said,
“Well, now you're Super Just-A-Boy!”

They may have consciously lived on danger street
but they had a gate and a locked front door



She was teaching a class in “cameraless animation”
out of the house

She'd kept trying to restore her films
 so smirched from the 4 feet of water
 that wrecked their house
 during Katrina

November 2006 they showed her film *Bohemian Town*
 at the Atlantic Filmmaker's Co-op's 30th Anniversary
 in Victoria, B.C.

She took part in meetings and rallies
 to demand an all-inclusive rebuilding of the Polis

On New Year's day
 they were seen outside their house
 shooting a film on a Super 8

Paul, Helen, Francis, and Rosie
 walking in the nabe

7.

January 4, 2007

They were asleep not long before dawn
 in their house on North Rampart at Spain Street

Paul was in one room with Francis, now 2
 Helen in another

The front door was locked and there
 was a locked gate in front of the door
 but there was a back door leading to a courtyard

She may have awakened in the pre-dawn silence
 to take out the potbellied Rosie into the back

Sometimes either one of them
 would take her out very early to go to the bathroom

Just down the street from Helen and Paul's house
 was a bed-and-breakfast where
 a couple from Texas were staying for the night.

A few minutes before the shooting
someone knocked on the couple's door
One of them answered
An invader with a gun tried to push his way in
but they shoved the door shut
and called the police while the invader fled

It's possible the gunman
ran out back and over into Helen's courtyard

He may have been lurking out there
when she opened the door with Rosie

Paul awakened to hear Helen's upset voice—
At first he thought she might be having a frightening dream

He came into the room
and saw her struggling with the invader
who then shot her in the neck

Paul ran with Francis into the bathroom
with the invader chasing after them

He protected the baby beneath him or maybe behind him
in the shower stall
bam bam bam three times, maybe four, he was shot

The next group of seconds
are shrouded in the terror of sudden violence

Meanwhile at the nearby bed-and-breakfast
the police had arrived and were speaking
with the anxious couple in the kitchen
who heard the crackle of the police radio
and the wail of Paul Gailiunas

The couple ran outside

Paul was kneeling on the front steps
holding baby Francis

Helen lay dead nearby

8.

The Bell

“Send not to know for whom the bell tolls,”
John Donne once wrote, “It tolls for thee.”

but this bell in the Crescent dawn was shriek-toned

Throughout the day weeping families with strollers
stunned colleagues friends from the struggle
those who had taken animation classes with her
studied her films or cherished her tea parties

came to the gated doorsteps in the Faubourg Marigny
to clutch one another, lay flowers,
write notes
and weep at the utter evil

Helen Hill was buried on January 10
in her home town of Columbia, South Carolina
after a service in the overflowing church
where once she prayed as a child

January 11

How fiercely I hate murderers!
In my career I have traced them aplenty
I hate their every emblem
yet I would not wrap rope to speed their night
nor would Dr. Gailiunas, however much he has the right

Helen’s friends put together a march of thousands
which made national headlines
when it brought its anger to N.O. City Hall
to demand protection from its *laissez-faire* conservative mayor
and a system of genuine safety from its police

Some were gauging the substance of the City
and how many marchers had to wonder:
Was the soul of the Polis
done in by one of its death-eyed “scourings”?

Most seemed determined to row ahead, each in their boat
hailing each other across the uncrossable void
as if Katrina had never poured its magnolia-murdering brine
to force Helen Hill off of Cleveland Street

A few walled it off as a toss of dice in a city
that has a flavor of Brecht's *Mahagonny*
—plenty of party, but not much pity

but nothing looked good in the days after the Crescent lost
what one mourner called a “peaceful angel of optimism”

9.

Cry from the Husband

In late January Paul sent a *cri de coeur*
to the *Times-Picayune* with the title:
For my poor, sweet wife, fix New Orleans

He wanted people to help catch the killer—

“Please, if you have any knowledge of the person
who killed my wife, please come forward and speak.
Please be brave and tell the police or Crimestoppers
what you know.

“Help bring this villain to justice....
He must not be allowed to hurt more people
and destroy more lives. Please be brave and speak”

(in a city where they wear Don't Snitch tees)

His *cri de coeur*
also reaffirmed his vision of a better time:

“I am begging you to reach out to your neighbors,
across the borders of race and class,
and help them when they need you.
Don't stand by while people hurt each other.”

and this:

“Please do not stop until things improve.
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.”

Meanwhile, Paul was working with filmmaker Alex MacKenzie,
on a Steenbeck editing system, to finish Helen’s film
The Florestine Collection

Find Helen’s killer. Take him away

10.

Poems for New Orleans

Miriam and I flew to New Orleans around Mardi Gras time
to record a CD called “Poems for New Orleans”
which I had been writing for a number of months.

I’d read the account of the killing in *The New York Times*
but as I spoke with Helen’s friends while recording
with Mark Bingham at the Piety Street Studios,
and toured the flooded neighborhoods
with Mark, Dave Brinks and John Clark
plus conversations with Shawn Hall, the manager of
Piety Street, and others

I became acutely aware of the profound and troubled love
so many of Helen’s friends kept alive
in the quietude of the kitchen, the fun of cafés
and the agony of midnight anguish

It was as if someone had scraped the irises from Vincent Van Gogh
while the blood of their own generation
was welling unstanched from the abraded cloth

A Jazz March the Saturday after Mardi Gras

The day we flew back home from the Crescent City
they held a Second Line/Jazz Funeral for her
with two brass bands, and what the release called
“a vegan cupcake wagon parade and Ernie K-Doe’s hearse”

The parade ended at the Mother-in-Law Lounge
for a “tea party celebrating Helen’s life.”

My friend the brilliant writer John Clark,
who had worked with Paul and Helen
in Food Not Bombs, send us an e-mail a few hours later—

It was both fun, and “very sad,” he wrote
“and especially moving when at the end
at the Mother-in-Law Lounge
the Panorama Jazz Band did a rousing rendition
of Paul and Helen’s great song ‘Emma Goldman’”

He also wrote of the many costumes in the march and
“quite a few vegan cupcake girls and boys serving the crowd.”

“Death stay thy phantoms,”
cried the bard Allen Ginsberg in his poem *Kaddish*

Right now Helen Hill would likely have been working
to finish *The Florestine Collection*

“Helen chose to be good”
said Jenny Davidson
at her New York memorial

How many times can you say
a person was good?

As many as tears can flow
or votive candles blow
rose-buds grow
seeds sow
oh

—Edward Sanders

This poem was inspired by, and made possible by, a number of sources, including things I saw and heard while recently in New Orleans; other information came from helenhill.org, from newspaper accounts, from articles here and there, from writings and images created by Helen Hill, and from conversations with Mark Bingham, Shawn Hall, Dave Brinks, and others, including the excellent writing of Helen's friend John Clark. My gratitude.

Here's are some of Helen Hill's films:

Bohemian Town (2004)
Madame Winger Makes A Film: A Survival Guide
for the 21st Century (2001)
Mouseholes (1999)
Fast Fax for CBC's StreetCents (1997-1998)
Your New Pig Is Down the Road (1999)
The World's Smallest Fair (1995)
Scratch and Crow (1995)

Some CDs featuring the songs and performances of Paul Gailiunas:

Don't Stop the Calypso: Songs of Love and Liberation 2001
Here Come the Troublemakers 2004

