

A new aloha: Hawaiian duo Hapa re-invents itself for this century

By **WALLACE BAINÉ**

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It's been 25 years now since a young guitarist from New Jersey moved to Hawaii and plunged headlong into all-day study of Hawaiian poetry to grasp the nuance and power of the Hawaiian language. That guy, Barry Flanagan, went on to form one of Hawaii's most enduring musical exports, the super-talented duo Hapa.

In putting together the group's most recent recording — its first since 1999 — Flanagan went back to those days of intensive language acquisition. This time the subject was Tahiti.

The new album is called "Maui," but don't let that fool you. Flanagan and his new Hapa partner Nathan Aweau are doing nothing less than embracing the wider cultures of the pan-Polynesian South Pacific. Or as the album's grandiloquent statement of purpose puts it, the new work is "a soundtrack for 21st-century Polynesia where native art, music and history are pulled together by the powerful force of Maui."

The key to understanding what that means is found in the double meaning of the word "Maui." It is, of course, the gorgeous and popular island in the Hawaiian archipelago, the spiritual home to Hapa and the physical home of the great volcano Haleakala. But "Maui" is also the name of a mythological Hawaiian demi-god who is said to have pulled the Hawaiian Islands, as well as the Marquesas, Samoa, French Polynesia and Tahiti, out of the ocean with his magical fishhook.

"We went as far to the extreme of quality as we could go on this project," said Flanagan, who will perform with Hapa March 2 at the Rio in Santa Cruz. "That not only applies to the concept and the recording of the music, but in the packaging as well."

Flanagan refers to a painting included in the CD package by Hawaiian artist Solomon Enos of Maui, the demigod, in the act of pulling the islands from the Pacific. Tahiti and Tahitian culture, then, play a prominent part on the new album, which will be officially released at the Santa Cruz show. In that spirit, Flanagan enlisted Patrick Ari'ihere Brault, a native Tahitian living on Maui, to be his teacher and collaborator.

Central to the Tahitian tilt of the album is the distinctive native instrument known as the Tahitian banjo or Tahitian ukulele, tuned the same as a tenor ukulele, only an octave higher giving it a distinctive sound that informs most Tahitian music.

"Tahitian music immediately changes your mood," said Flanagan. "It's party music that has a real carnival feel to it."

"Maui" features two songs sung in the Tahitian language, a ballad that closes the disc, and an ambitious "Lion King-sounding" anthem (as Flanagan calls it) that describes how Tahiti got its name. The words of the song were written by Brault, and the 22-voice chorus is filled out with members of the Tahitian's family. Another stirring highlight of the "Maui" project is a cover of Bob Marley's beloved "Redemption Song," powered by a chant from Hapa's long-time chanter Charles Ka'upu, who will also perform at the Santa Cruz concert.

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Much like the group did with 1997's inspiring cover of U2's "In the Name of Love," the well-known song and the Hawaiian chant work as a united force in the spirit of the song. Marley's famously hopeful lines — "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery" — dovetails into a chant that, Flanagan says, was inspired by imprisoned Queen Liliuokalani's call of resistance and hope to her the children that can "exist alone on the stones of Hawaii."

"I consider it a patriotic piece," said Flanagan. "I also think of Bob Marley's 'Redemption Song' a patriotic piece. I was sitting in traffic in Honolulu wondering if I should put the two pieces together when I looked over and saw a bumper sticker that said, 'Listen to Bob Marley.' That kind of sealed it."

The "Maui" album also contains much of the lilting, gorgeously sung Hawaiian melodies for which Hapa has become immensely popular in the Islands over the last decade. Of particular note are a cover of the thrilling "Papa'e," a song by the Polynesian group Te Vaka and the original ballad "Haleakala," an upbeat but haunting melody that sounds like something out of the California sound of the 1960s.

The difference between Hapa then and Hapa now is, of course, a key personnel change. For its first five albums, including its landmark debut album which won a half-dozen Na Hoku Hanohano awards (the Hawaiian Grammy equivalent), Hapa consisted of Flanagan and singer and guitarist Keli'i Kaneali'i. When Kaneali'i tired of the music business and stepped away, Flanagan pursued solo work but eventually brought in Aweau to re-instate the duo format. Hapa, which means "half" or "mixed race," was re-born.

"Nathan is the most talented person I have ever worked with," said Flanagan. "It's like having Jaco Pastorius on a Hapa record."

Aweau brings a funk and jazz sensibility to the group, absent in Hapa's earlier recordings. He is also accomplished in the Hawaiian art of *ha'i*, male falsetto singing considered distinctively Hawaiian.

Clearly, "Maui" is a turning point in Hapa's evolution. Flanagan said that the album's ambitious vision is partly a function of the crippling slide of the regional music industry in Hawaii. CD sales at a big outlet in Honolulu, he said, typically might sell 700 to 800 copies of a Hawaiian disc in its first week of release. In recent months, said Flanagan, that number is more like 30 to 40.

Bridging Hawaiian culture with its larger Polynesian heritage is, Hapa's founding member believes, the way to re-invigorate Hawaiian music.

Hapa is now in the midst of an 18-date mainland tour. The decision to release the "Maui" disc during the Santa Cruz show, said Flanagan, is a tribute to the group's long-time business manager, Santa Cruzan Tim Brattan.

"We really wouldn't have the careers we have on the mainland if it weren't for Tim. So, we're really doing it for him. Also, Santa Cruz has been so great for us over the years. It's like Maui away from Hawaii."

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