

Tribute to Bruddah Waltah Parker Gambino - May 7, 2025

Walter Aipolani, known as Bruddah Waltah, was a legendary Hawaiian musician, dubbed the "Father of Hawaiian Reggae". He was born on the "Big Island" of Hawaii, but his family moved to Oahu when he was young, and that's where he spent his early formative years. Music was an important element in Walter's family life, much as it is essentially second-nature amongst many of the native islanders. Informal backyard music sessions (known as *kanikapila*) with friends and family would call on a mix of influences, including healthy doses of American pop music, done in a style rich in guitars and ukuleles, maybe a bass.

Walter was initially somewhat indifferent to traditional Hawaiian music. In 1979 he attended a Bob Marley concert in Honolulu, an inflection point that redirected the course of his musical career. His sister, a dancer, was responsible for turning Walter on to reggae. Not only did that music get people dancing, it delivered upfront attention to the injustices of colonialist repression, a theme familiar to Native Hawaiians and shared with Native Americans and Caribbean islanders (and much of the rest of the world!). Reggae conventions fused easily with Walter's individualistic musical esthetic and interest in incorporating novel influences.

Around that time (the late 1970's) he formed the band *Aku Palu* with his brothers. That translates to "bloody fish-guts" (*aku* is the Hawaiian name for the intensely-flavored skipjack tuna). The band had steady gigs in Honolulu. In 1980 they recorded an album, and were preparing for its release when their manager was murdered in front of them! Who knows what unseemly doings might have precipitated this? Regardless, the band was spooked and the path to greater fame was derailed. Walter and his brothers joined up instead with their uncle's band *Na Mele Kane* (The Music Men). Walter stuck with this band for about 10 years, then struck out on his own with the reggae-heavy band *Bruddah Waltah and Island Afternoon*.

In 1990 the group released *Hawaiian Reggae*, which became a massive hit in Hawaii. The tracks were nearly all covers; among the melange of sources were Bob Marley, the Beatles, and the BeeGees. Also given the reggae treatment were a few chestnuts of "hapa-haole" ilk, that is, Hawaiian songs with lyrics in English played in a touristy style. Think *Don Ho*, especially since one song (*Tiny Bubbles*) was a hit of his. *Sweet Lady of Waiāhole* is also in this category; it has become (to me) the ultimate karaoke tune of this genre. The album's sole original is the iconic *Hawaiian Lands*, an explicit call for Hawaiian sovereignty that has provided the slogan for the movement: "Keep Hawaiian lands in Hawaiian hands".

Eventually Walter and his family moved back to Hilo on Big Island, partly to escape some of the more sordid aspects of the music industry that had invaded his life in Oahu. His star continued to rise; in addition to regular gigs at local clubs he became an in-demand performer at festivals and such held at sizeable venues throughout the islands, and also had stints of touring with more widely known headliner groups. He evolved into a respected elder who remained open to other influences and refused to rest on his laurels.

A by-product of Walter's burgeoning activist political leanings was a revived appreciation of the traditional music, and culture in general, that flowered during the First Hawaiian Renaissance of the late 19th century, resistance efforts overseen by King David Kalakaua. Walter's grandchildren attend Hawaiian-language immersion school.

In 2021 Walter was stricken with liver cancer. He continued performing as long as he could, saying "I tell everybody, 'I'm going 'til the wheels fall off. Then, on my gravestone, it's going to say, 'The wheels fell off.'" In the course of researching this tribute I learned that Walter Aipolani passed away in 2023. Mahalo Bruddah Waltah!

“Ua mau ke ea o ka ‘āina i ka pono (the life of the Land is perpetuated in righteousness)”
Chorus from *Hawaiian Lands*

My years of living in Hawaii were well before my sketching "career" began in earnest, and I had nose to the grindstone. With few exceptions I could not focus on appreciation of local music while Bruddah Waltah was zooming up, although *Sweet Lady of Waiāhole* eventually found its way onto my set list. I remained in the dark until returning for a visit in 2013, when I "discovered" him at the fortuitously-timed Big Island Hawai'ian Music Festival. Bruddah Waltah performed as a solo act, and I sensed that he warranted breaking out the paints (an escalation from the graphite treatment assigned to most of the other performers); lucky dat.

The background of this month's poster is from a painting made during that same visit to Big Island in 2013, of the Kapoho Tide Pools, a spectacular snorkeling locale, of which I was likewise unaware during our period of residence. Once I knew of its existence it became a cherished focus of repeated visits whenever we returned to Hawaii. Alas, like Bruddah Waltah, this amazing coastal feature is no longer with us, having been covered over by lava flows from the Kilauea eruption of 2018. *Sic transit gloria!*

LINKS

[Profile in Keola Magazine](#)

[Wikipedia: Walter Aipolani](#)

[Report on 2022 Benefit Concert in Hilo](#)

[Link to my post \(and sketches\): 2013 Big Island Hawaiian Music Festival](#)

MUSIC LINKS

[Church in an Old Hawaiian Town](#)

[Sweet Lady of Waiahole](#)

[Hawaiian Lands](#)

[You Never Know](#)

VERY DEEP DIVE!

Thorough interview-based treatment of Bruddah Waltah in a doctoral dissertation; you will need to navigate to the PDF on your own (see pages 142-176), starting with this link:

[Dissertation of Sunaina Keonaona Kale](#)