

FREE RADICALS

I have seen the face of the future, and it looks like a 700-pound Hawaiian singer named Israel Kamakawiwo'ole.

In November 1999, my family and I had just returned from the Honolulu ECS meeting, followed by a week's vacation on the Big Island. Everywhere we went that second week, the car radio was tuned to Hawaiian music. We drenched ourselves in mellow, gentle music that was mostly happy, sometimes wistfully sad. We hated to leave it behind.

Enter Iz, as he's known to his fans. Back at home, with sweet Aloha memories still in the back of my mind, I opened the Style section of the Washington Post one day to see an enormous, impassive Hawaiian staring back at me. It was Iz, surrounded by an essay by Elizabeth Chang, recounting her discovery of Iz's music in a discount bin at Border's Book and Record and her family's enchantment with his medley of "It's a Wonderful World" and "Over the Rainbow." The medley became the family's "happy song." Having thought of Iz as their own discovery, they were surprised to learn that others were in on the secret. The medley appeared in the movie, "Meet Joe Black," on the television show, "Party of Five," and on public radio. Iz was getting around.

I was intrigued. The Post has a telephone number that you can call to hear samples of reviewed music. On an impulse, I picked up the telephone and punched in code 8156, and there was Iz. Even through the tinny acoustics of the telephone, the simple charm and emotional power of Iz's singing and ukulele grabbed me right away. A few days later, Iz's voice called me, purer this time, from a television commercial for eToys. I looked up from the magazine I was reading and felt goose bumps puckering all over. This was music I had to have.

For the next few weeks, whenever we passed a music store, we'd pop in and riffle through the Hawaiian music, but Iz was never there. Probably never in

large supply, his CDs had apparently been gobbled up by others who had read the same essay I had. By now, Iz's compact disc, "Facing Future" had become my personal quest, and the place to turn was the Internet. I hit paydirt right away at Amazon.com, and eToys had it, too. On Amazon's website, the power of mass communication was graphically illustrated. Out of over

communication are integrated in truly seamless fashion. As a consumer, I'm eager to see it happen. My awareness and my options will grow, and my ability to zero in on what really interests me will increase. The already well-established concept of "try before you buy" could be extended to every item of every medium. No more coming home, tearing off the shrink wrap, and

realizing I've bought something I don't want. In fact, I may not "buy" anything in the traditional sense — it will all be out there somewhere, waiting for me to download.

A lot of people in the business world are trying to predict and cope with the changes; the stakes are very high. The music industry's blunt encounters with *napster.com* and similar outfits are just one symptom. While the music companies may take a temporary beating before figuring out how to make money using the new technology, many musicians, especially those who lack the promotional muscle of major recording companies behind them, may benefit from more exposure. Some say this has already happened. If I were an independent, local retailer, I'd be thinking about how to float

on the rising tide of the information revolution as a matter of survival.

Sadly, Iz missed out on all of this excitement. The pure-voiced giant died in 1997 at the age of 38, his huge body and equally huge talent succumbing to respiratory failure. Ironically, the music of the man who sang passionately about the threat to his native culture from the encroachment of the modern world, touched the hearts of people around the globe, winging to them on a stream of bits, presaging an electronic connectedness that will change our lives. What a wonderful world. ■



by Dale Hall

a hundred thousand recordings in their index, "Facing Future" was ranked 387 in sales, quite astonishing for a niche recording. Even more revealing: the recording was number one in Fairfax, Virginia, which is in the Washington, DC area, and number three in the entire state of Virginia. Chang's essay had sparked a minor Iz boom.

The movies, radio, and television exposed Iz to a national, even international, audience. So did the Internet, thanks to glowing reviews and sound bites on the Amazon website. The newspaper, which is both a print and electronic enterprise now, created a local surge of interest, fueled by telephone sound bites. The music itself is sold on compact disc. Imagine the possibilities when all of these forms of