

LOCAL NOISE

Interview with Te Kupu
12/10/07, UTS, Sydney.
Te Kupu & Tony Mitchell

Summary:

Te Kupu is a founding member and MC of the Maori hip-hop crew Upper Hutt Posse, who have been on the scene in Aotearoa since 1988. Upper Hutt Posse have recorded hip-hop tracks in Maori language, and are a strong political voice for Maori cultural, linguistic and historical autonomy in New Zealand. They have toured Australia a number of times, performing with Indigenous crews in solidarity. Their most recent trip was in October 2007, when they played a gig at UTS with Aboriginal hip-hop artists in support of Australian Indigenous communities affected by the Australian Federal Government's controversial intervention. We talked to Te Kupu before the gig, and he spoke about his rapumentary project, *Know Your Links*, in which he is filming hip-hop in twenty different countries, Maori language hip-hop, politics in Aotearoa and his wariness at the New Zealand 'Kiwi' identity.

“Fuck New Zealand ya call me a kiwi
Aotearoa the name of the country
Maori are we Tangata Whenua
People of the land, keepers of the fire Te Ahi Kaa
Indigenous people we are as you can see
Let's control our destiny
Shake a break the chains of fear and despair free
Realise it's we who live and breathe do you see
Rooted on earth like the mighty kauri tree
Etched in existence I am continually
Whakawhita te ora life shines the cause to be
Brother sister people rejoice that's you and me
Whakakotahi.”

Te Kupu.

About:

This text is licensed under a Creative Commons Attributed-Sharealike-Noncommercial license. For details on the terms of this license, please see <http://www.creativecommons.org/nc-sa-a2.0/>

Local Noise is an ARC-funded research project from the University of Technology, Sydney. Its focus is on Australian hip-hop, and the localisation of hip-hop in different cultural, societal and educational contexts.

TK: Te Kupu

TM: Tony Mitchell

TM: Welcome to UTS, Te Kupu, it's a pleasure to have you here. If I understand right, you've now been involved in hip-hop in Aotearoa for more than 20 years, and you first released the single, 'E Tu' in 1988. Can you tell us how that came about?

TK: My involvement with hip-hop really started with breakdancing in about 83. Breakdancing kind of died some little death in 85, and a lot of people decided, 'Well, are we gonna keep doing hip-hop?' Breakdancing was so... people just didn't want to do it no more. But I was staying with it, and I stayed with it in a music sense. But we formed a four-piece reggae band, that's what we formed as Upper Hutt Posse. Because we were thinking, you know, 'How are we gonna do a rap song?' Because the rap music that was in our head was all the electro-type stuff, you know, Planet Rock, Afrika Bambaataa, it was all sorts of stuff with drum machines and sort of technical stuff. But at the same time we were listening to reggae music, and we were saying, 'Well man, you can just grab... you know, you can just start playing a drum, play the bass, play the guitar, and we can make this music'. So started, we formed in 85 as a four-piece reggae band. By 86, 87, we did have some drum machines, back in 85 as well, but just getting more used to them. Meeting other people with other drum machines, the same drum machines that were used in Planet Rock – like the TR808 and the 909 which we'd seen Schoolly D use – and we were like, 'Now we've got this equipment that we can use to make rap music'. So we started performing it live as a reggae group, a four-piece reggae group, but by that time the group had grown to about seven members, and so we'd do a gig: we'd play a half-hour set of reggae, and then we'd do a half-hour set or so of rapping.

TM: Were you playing covers?

TK: No.

TM: All your own material?

TK: Yeah, no, we didn't... Oh, yeah, look, these guys were doing... The drummer, the DJ and the other MC, yeah, they did a cover. But I wouldn't allow myself to do that shit. But yeah, they were doing a KRS-One song.

TM: And at what point did you start doing vocals in Maori?

TK: In the first song, 'E Tu', 'cause it was called 'E Tu', "Stand proud, kia kaha, say it loud", that's the chorus. So yeah, it was right from the start. But I wasn't a fluent Maori speaker then. Now, I can get by, I can hold a conversation in Maori, but you still wouldn't say I'm totally fluent, you know. Sometimes I get, 'No, no, no, no... Say that again'.

TM: And what kind of responses did you get to the fact that you were using Maori in your MCing, to begin with?

TK: You know, we were just caught up in doing the gigs, and we were just so, like, 'Man, we've got this record out, we're doing a music video', to really care that much. I know that the feeling around was just people were like, 'Wow, we've got some rappers here'. And you know, it was probably just as much good as bad, you know, people were like, 'Who the hell do they think they are? They're not black Americans, you know, they wear shades and caps on backwards, you're not allowed to do that, you know'. So yeah, there was a lot of that criticism, but there were also other people who were like, 'Wow man, yeah, you fellas are rapping, man, yeah, sounding good, you know, you're rapping in Maori language as well, in places'. And just that we were the first ones out there really doing gigs, and

we established venues. There was other rappers out there who had been rapping in their garages, and just rapped over records, but we didn't want to do all that rapping-over-the-record thing. We said, 'No, we're musicians'.

TM: And with the video for 'E Tu', you sampled film clips of Maori struggles and things like that as well, didn't you? So the video actually had quite an impact, in that sense, it was almost as if you were representing aspects of Maori history?

TK: Yeah, well, the 'E Tu' music video, that's what launched us. It screened on Radio with Pictures which everyone seemed to watch on a Sunday night, and it played all sorts of music. But the day after that, we were nationally known. And it was like, 'That's Upper Hutt Posse, wow', you know. And the video was hot, you know, the people that were running Radio with Pictures, and I think they had some other music program on, running, producing and that... Yeah, I sat down with the director, and we sort of mapped out the music video, with the blue screen and all that sort of stuff, so you know, there were these ideas, and he says, 'We could use some footage from The Governor', which was like a historical sort of drama piece that had been done, they had access to that through TVNZ. So yeah, it was like, 'Yeah, we're gonna put that on the background, and you fellas will rap, and we're gonna have you doing this and that', and we were like, 'Yeah'. And so from then on, I was just like watching how this whole thing was going to be made. And we never actually filmed another music video in like a place that's got, you know, a big studio. And the video looked really good, and people, like, couldn't say it was some corny thing. So the quality was there, and we got a lot of respect for that, I guess.

TM: And were you influenced at all by things like Poi E which combined breakdancing with traditional Maori song?

TK: Yeah, well, Poi E was number one, and yeah, we were sort of more listening to other stuff: KRS-One as opposed to Poi E. But yeah, it was one of the tunes that was hot back then.

TM: There was a kind of Maori musical element involved right from the beginning, in Upper Hutt Posse.

TK: Yeah, well, evidently that's who we are, so yeah. We've just got that flavour, and the lyrics are political, we always wanted to say things about the situation.

TM: I think it was 1991 you came to Sydney and toured Australia, with, I think, the Bhundu Boys, is that right?

TK: Yeah. 1990, 91, yeah.

TM: What was your impression when you came here, in terms of Australian hip-hop and what you saw and heard when you were here then?

TK: I didn't really actually get to hear a lot. You know, because we were just doing our gigs and then... yeah, so, it seemed to be like it was just sort of starting, you know, just like how we were just starting. It was only two years prior to that that we brought out our single.

TM: Your first album did quite well here, didn't it?

TK: Yeah, we haven't sold a lot anywhere, but yeah, people heard about the group.

TM: In that tour with the Bhundu Boys it was like you were being projected almost as an example of World Music, in some ways, because they were from Zimbabwe and people were kind of coming along to hear them, and in a sense, associating you with that music.

TK: Yeah, well, it was a ten-day tour of Sydney and so we had ten gigs here, and yeah, different ones...

TM: But you didn't really hook up with anyone at that stage, in the hip-hop community here?

TK: Not really, just some people that might have come to gigs and that. But no, it wasn't really making a lot of really strong links there, no, aside from people we played with.

TM: What's your impression now, of Australian hip-hop?

TK: Oh, it's really strong. Yeah, that's my impression of it. It's totally unseen back home. You know, everyone just knows about US rappers, but the hip-hop's great, you know: Wire MC, Local Knowledge, and all that, you know, that's really strong, powerful. And it's political too, you know, it seems to be so much more political than the rap that comes out at home. So I like it, you know, that's what I'm in to, that sort of stuff.

TM: And so it's mainly the Indigenous hip-hop artists like Wire and Local Knowledge that you've had connections with?

TK: Yeah, but also Morganics. You know, I mean, Morganics is a white guy doing stuff in native communities and stuff like that, and he's not making any apology about it, he's just doing it. Whereas over at home, you know, people might hassle a pakeha guy that would go over to a Maori community, and say, 'Get out, we don't need you here, we're doing it ourselves'. But nah, who cares about that! Just being with Combat Wombat in Melbourne last night, it's excellent, all the stuff they do. You know, I love the political stuff. I don't care too much about rappers that may have a good voice or whatever... nah, if they ain't saying shit, I've got other things to listen to.

TM: Do you think you're able to teach people Maori through hip-hop? Or encourage people to speak more Maori through listening to your tracks?

TK: Well, I think it helps people love themselves, 'cause that's the whole point of a song like 'E TU', for Maori people, you know, that's saying 'E tu, stand proud, kia kaha, say it loud', be proud of yourself, you know, because of these ancestors who fought against the English back in the days. A lot of people, when I was writing the song in 87 and when it came out, it was still pretty strong amongst the people that I know in the communities... They would be like, 'Well, they just call us rebels and we're just seen in a negative light'. And I'd sort of say, 'Well, no, you should be proud of these people, for what they've done. But teaching the language? Yeah, to tell the truth, I've never really made that a focus, as other Maori – not necessarily rap – groups have. Moana and the Moahunters, they bring out a song 'AEIOU', you know, which is how you say the Maori vowels, you know, so... They've got definitely more of a focus than me in terms of teaching and speaking language. No, I want to bring out the strength, the fighting spirit of Maori people. That's the Upper Hutt Posse thing, you know: the struggle.

TM: You were talking before about Morganics and Combat Wombat and the type of work they do with Aboriginal communities here. Does that happen with Maori communities in Aotearoa?

TK: I don't think it happens to the level that it does over here. At all. I mean, I don't really get around doing workshops and stuff like that. But there are other people that do it, you know, I know there's things that go on. But hip-hop... people just don't even know what it is, nowadays. Hip-hop is just some dance that anyone can do, there's not even any breakdancing in it. There's no headspins or nothing, and people call that a hip-hop dance, and it's like, well that's not hip-hop, sorry. But that's how the word's been taken away from the culture. You know, we're losing that.

TM: What sort of responses do Maori elders have to hip-hop? Do they see it something that is a way of getting young kids into Maori Te Reo and Maori culture?

TK: Well, I've just had good responses from elders, you know. Although people have said that our [word missing] is detached from the youth or whatever, that's not what I've experienced at all. Through rap music, you know. But I think it's not quite the type of stuff that they listen to, you know, if they come to a gig, as long as there's not so much swearing going on, and they see the kids having a good time, they say, 'Well what's wrong with that? That's good'. You know, and I think, probably a group like us that's come out with the strong Maori lyrics and the songs and the message, they're like, 'Well, that's positive'. But I think there's a great lot of Maori, who are not quite elders, but maybe consider themselves, that just don't like it. They don't like the music and they think that we're just saying nothing, 'cause they can't understand it, or they don't wanna spend the time to actually listen to the lyrics. And the only lyrics that they hear is just all the gangsta, bling bling bullshit. So yeah, no wonder they got that [perception]. But we're like, 'Man, but that's not the rap we listen to, or make.

TM: And that raises another issue, that in Aotearoa, there are a lot of hip-hop artists who rap in American accents. What's your take on that, what's your response to that?

TK: I feel that you've got to have that sort of Americanisms in certain words, it just sounds better. Other people have made the comment on that, Cliff Richard, I even heard him say something one time, that he Americanised a word, and whatever. And who else? I heard some Welsh, perhaps they were Welsh rappers, just saying that, well, it just kind of sounds stank with that English accent from England. Yeah, there's a sort of style, that, you know, has come into rap music, and it's from the DJs that were back in the 50s, and all that sort of... the jive talk and whatever, and that language, the 'black speak'. The way black people speak in the US, if you hang around with black people and they're talking, it's not far off from when they get on the mic and rap, you know, so we know it's come from there, that tongue, that way of speaking, you know, the black and Hispanic communities. And so, it sounds good to the ear, you know, so we like that. But I've tried... Well, I haven't tried to sound American or not sound American, I've just sort of done what I do. But you sure as hell don't sound American... No, actually... I was about to say you don't sound American if you're rapping in Maori, but no, I have heard Maori rap songs that the guy sounds like 2Pac, but it's in Maori language.

TM: One example I heard recently, who've released their album here now, is 4 Corners. They've started to get a bit of a following here now, and in their album they actually acknowledge Upper Hutt Posse as being the pioneers of Maori hip-hop. Yet they seem to rap in a very strong American accent. I mean, they've got a track called 'Urban Maori' – which is all about being an urban Maori – and yet it's in a very strong US accent.

TK: That's always been the most popular sound in a rap song, rap voices, in our country. The more American you sound, the better the rapper you are, you know, the more people think, 'Yeah man, that dude's hot, yeah yeah yeah. Sounds like Biggie Smalls', or something. I think that's just corny, you know, because you've got to have your own identity. And we're not getting that when we're trying to sound so American. But I think that because everyone loves the American rappers so much, that they listen to them and just want to sound like them. But we're not getting to our unique way. Like, if someone wants to sound American, I say, 'Fine, sound American'. They can sound Japanese if they want, you know, it doesn't matter. But be a unique... have a unique US rap voice. Don't sound like, 'Oh, you sound a bit like Method Man there, next minute you're sounding like 2Pac, next time you're sounding like...' I don't know, whoever the new rapper is. So I don't think we've got to that point where we stand out. Because you realise that MCs in the US – they do sound different from one another. But our rappers here still sound imitative. But I ain't dissing 'em for that. That's just how it is.

TM: They do get dissed here, quite a bit, in the hip-hop scene in Australia, because their perception of a lot of hip-hop in New Zealand is people like Scribe, and a lot of them write them off, saying, 'Look, they're just wack, wannabe Americans'.

TK: Yeah, well, I don't listen to a lot of Scribe stuff. But yeah, he's had platinum-selling albums and all this sorts of stuff, and I know from the get-go, he sounds American. That's gonna help him sell some records, there's no doubt about that. But I don't write them off or whatever, they're doing what they're doing. But I'm not into them. I'm not saying that I don't like the guy, or anything, you know, I just don't like the music, 'cause it ain't telling me, man, what the struggle situation is, or whatever, you know. It's not confrontational to this white capitalist system, shall we say. They don't step down and do that. Scribe won't step down and do that, so his shit is soft to me. But that's what I think about his music. Personally, him and any other rappers, while I may say anything about them, is just... nah. There don't seem to be beefs, really, I guess there are, but I've never really had them, because it's like, 'Who cares, man'. We do our shit as political... Well, perhaps we think we're at this level [lifts hand at head level], you know. Because our shit, it's to confront the powers that be, that run all this crap on this planet, this capitalist slave society. We wanna confront that. And if they don't want to confront it, we think their shit is soft. But a lot of these cats, also... and I've met people who've said, 'Well, you're doing that, you fellas are doing that hardcore shit, so we don't need to'. 'Cause everyone's of course got their own places as well, you know. But I think, 'Oh, nah', just to grow, to be an MC, a voice, you should be able to comment about the political situation.

TM: I heard a radio interview with you a while ago, where you said if you weren't doing hip-hop you'd probably be crashing planes into New Zealand Parliament House. I gather that sort of stirred up a bit of controversy.

TK: Oh, I say that. But I don't think people want to give me the space to have a lot of controversy going on in the media. I think I can say the craziest things on national radio at home and no one's gonna come after me, you know, and say, 'Oh, how can he say this?' Although I can get exposure in the media, I don't think they want to go on too much about it. 'Cause I'm ready to argue with them forever, on and on. But yeah, that's true, that's how it's been for me man, I mean, if I didn't have music I'd feel like I'd be some kind of crazy guy, you know, I can express my dissatisfactions with the society through rapping. And if I didn't have rapping, or music, to do that, yeah, I think I could be like that. Some suicide bomber or something. I'd want to kill a pig or something like that. The police brutality is just so disgusting. I've just had it, I'm sick of it. Just sick of it everywhere. And the continual, sort of like... we're being pushed, as Maori, you know, you need to do these land settlements. But no one's confronting the whole situation. We can do these land settlements and get some money out of it, but the money goes back into the capitalist society. I think it's got a lot to do with Maori people as well, they're just not thinking straight. What are these sort of reparation-type things? Because that's not the answer, the answer is just a total overhaul of the system. And another thing that a lot of people are commenting on at the moment – activists, I would say, probably not a lot – is the fact that as Maori people get the language, get more competent in speaking Maori language, young people that go to university and then can speak Maori language and they think, 'Hey man, I know my culture, I can speak Maori language', they're the exact people that are like, 'Yeah, but I want this car and I want this house and I want this fancy job and I want do this and I want to do that. And the more they get the Maori language the more they want to partake in the – as I said before – this racist, white society, which we're all forced under. So that's a funny thing.

TM: Why do you think that's happening? It seems they would identify more with Maori culture?

TK: Oh, these people definitely identify as Maori, and they identify with Maori culture. But I think that they feel that Maori culture can be in this society, but it's not confrontational with the so-called mainstream society. I think they feel that they can just be in there. Because over the years, just that whole Kiwi thing has been so pushed, that national identity that everyone's a Kiwi. Which I just find so racist, that you've got to be a Kiwi: everyone should be a Kiwi. People that come from overseas, from Iraq perhaps, or Afghanistan, if they come to the country, 'If you're gonna live here, you gotta be a

Kiwi', you know. What is that? We're gonna be Maori, man, we're not no Kiwis. But the majority of Maori people call themselves Kiwis. They go, 'Oh, yeah, I'm a Kiwi'. So they've been brainwashed into this Kiwi mentality, which is the mainstream mentality. And I think that that's got a lot to do with Maori thinking, 'Well, we need to succeed in this white man society, and the way to succeed is to have money, so we gotta get this money'. But they're just, like, turning into believers in that system. That this is the way the world is, you know. Some Maori may have a land claim, maybe the people get behind it, maybe they don't, you know, but it's definitely not a whole big collective of all the Maori people saying 'This is wrong, we should have the land back', or things like that, you know... yeah, just struggle.

TM: Whereas arguably that's not happening so much with Aboriginal Australians. What are the connections that you make between what you're doing and what some of the Indigenous brothers here are doing? Are you basically involved in the same struggle?

TK: Yes. Ngatahi: Know the Links, the rapumentary series that I'm making, you know. I mean, just being able to talk to Wire MC and that about police brutality, it's just the same, you know. Police brutality is just a major problem, and people who don't think it is are just ridiculous. Actually, when we were coming back from the airport just now, some cop got attacked or something, and someone redneck sort of commentator was talking about how that's so terrible or something, and it's like, 'Shit. How many people get their heads busted by cops everyday?' But those journalists ain't gonna be making an issue of that. So we deal with this, it's a reality, you know, Maori people deal with it back home, Aboriginal people deal with it here. These struggles, for us to be able to communicate in that way, yeah, that's solid. But the land rights thing, Aboriginal people here are fighting for land, you know, fighting for the land, they wanna stop uranium mining and all these sorts of things, you know.

TM: You obviously believe very strongly in the political purpose of hip-hop, can you see an educational purpose in hip-hop as well? In terms of enlightening young people about the situation?

TK: Oh yeah, definitely. Hip-hop is educational, you know, political, that's everything anyway, you know. So yeah. I mean, kids are learning things through rap songs. I mean, if you want to look at it from the other end, how it's used to, let's say, de-educate people, or whatever, that's why there's the over-preponderance of pushing gangsta rap down everyone's throats, which is just saying nothing, kind of like fantasy shit, so who cares about it, young kids are believing it, 'Yeah, I gotta be a gangsta now'. My daughter's 13, she's a 'gangsta'; all her mates are 'gangstas'. What is that? That's come out of hip-hop, and that's been pushed on them, and that's a negative way for them to think. So, you know, MCs like us, we don't get the same media exposure, not at home, and not in the US. Not here, I guess, as well. So we see very clearly there, that it is an educational force when we've got our kids calling themselves 'gangstas'. So if the media stops pushing that and starts pushing what we wanna call, you know, 'soldiers', 'warriors'.

TM: So do you think it's possible to get your kids to stop thinking they're 'gangstas', and to identify with more positive role models?

TK: Oh yeah, they will, but it's just at that age, too, a lot of them are just saying it 'cause it's just a thing that everyone says at school, you know. And if someone has a certain look, they go, 'Nah'. You know, for me, personally, my daughter's friends would say, 'Oh, man, your dad's a gangsta, look, he's a gangsta', you know, 'cause I wear a beanie or baggy clothes. But I just tell them, 'Forget this gangsta business'.

TM: Your last album, Legacy, was released in English language and Maori language versions. Was that partly to get to two separate audiences, or was it also making a political point about Maori language?

TK: Oh look, doing these Maori language albums... Here's a thing: you can get \$40 000 from Te Mangai Paho which is a Maori broadcasting agency, to record a Maori language album, ten songs. So we're like, 'Damn. Let's write us an album in Te Reo Maori'. Without that, I think we would have done an album in Maori language, but it would have taken a lot longer. 'Cause the first song that we wrote in Te Reo Maori... we didn't know about no funding from Te Mangai Paho. But they definitely helped, you know, and that's sort of how I'm living, you know, if I can get some money from those cats, set up my own home studio, then I'm getting paid from that.

TM: That's an interesting point. So the funding situation in New Zealand, for Maori musicians is relatively healthy, is it?

TK: Yeah. Well, it's there, there's money for that there. And that's that whole push on the language as well, which I'm just so suspect about a government that doesn't want Maori to be Maori, wants us to be Kiwis, but they want to give us funding to put out Maori language stuff. I think it's just fake.

TM: So there's a certain degree of cynicism in your take on the funding and making these albums?

TK: Oh well, look, we're just happy to get the money, and it's only stank money. I don't really care about it. And someone could say, 'You shouldn't take that money out of the government'. Well, all their wealth they've got from stolen land, you know, so yeah, I don't have any conflicts with that sort of money situation. But no, we're putting out our music, and these are songs that we want to write, you know, in Maori, and it's good to be able to actually get some money from the government that we disagree with. And the Maori broadcasting agency that's doing it, they don't actually... The requirements to get funding isn't actually what you're saying in the song, it's if it's in Maori language. Well, up until this point. Actually, I didn't get funding the last round, so maybe it's getting tougher.

TM: So it's sort of on the same level as singing 'God Defend New Zealand' in Maori, in a sense. Trying to incorporate Maori identity into a broader Kiwi national identity.

TK: Oh, you mean, what's going on with the funding?

TM: Yeah.

TK: Yeah, well. There's the funding but it's Maori that have fought for that funding, to be able to have our schools and all that sort of stuff, and our own television station, that's been a long, hard fight, you know. It's still there.

TM: These days, do most Maori young people have a knowledge of Maori language?

TK: Yeah, I guess most do.

TM: Surely that's a really good thing. And the concepts that go with it. Because the thing that strikes me about the Maori language is that it's a language that's incredibly dense and economical and is full of really strong concepts, like kaupapa and whakapapa, and things like that. Which are basically philosophies.

TK: Well, you know, the Maori language preschools, kohanga reo, and things like this, and for older people, universities. That's just injected so much back into Maori communities, and the whole pride of being Maori and actually learning your whakapapa and learning all these concepts and seeing what's going on, learning the history of Maori people in the country. So yeah, there's a lot of good about it, amongst the Maori community, there always has been, but we haven't had... For example, we've only had the kohanga reo preschools since about the early 80s, and the universities have only happened since the late 80s, somewhere around there.

TM: Has hip-hop had much of a role in these Maori education projects?

TK: Oh, it's in there somewhere.

TM: But you haven't personally kind of done many educational projects or worked in schools or worked in community centres with young people?

TK: No, I haven't. I haven't really done that workshopping thing.

TM: Is that because there hasn't been the opportunity?

TK: Yeah, well people haven't asked me. But I have done a couple of workshops in places, you know. Actually, a friend just asked me the other day about doing some workshops. What I'd want to do in a workshop would be to teach some political stuff, about Maori leaders, and why I think they are either propped up or pushed down or whatever, and just things that are going on with the language, and why are we called Kiwis? Why are you so proud of being a Kiwi? Can't you be Maori? Unless they're not all Maori, but you know, just Kiwi things, just those ideologies, philosophical things that I see sort of being pushed around. I'm so wary of this Kiwism.

TM: Do you also think there's a spirituality in Maori culture that you're kind of embodying, in a way, expressing through hip-hop?

TK: Oh yes, definitely, I feel that we are carrying on the work of our ancestors, our tupuna, that's continuing to fight for our land, that's it. We see our land; it's a simple thing. Someone's poisoning the stream, you know, and we did the video to that, and we're kaitaki, the caretakers of the land, we gotta deal with that. So if we're having that concern and doing what we can about it, well, that's what we're doing, mahi nga tupuna, it's the works of our ancestors. So yeah, definitely, without restraint or whatever, yeah, for Maori, it's like ancestors are here, with us, you know. So it's not like... Although that might sound airy fairy or whatever, you know, that's just how it is.

TM: One of the things that I think some Aboriginal rappers envy you about is that there's only one Maori language, whereas you come here and there are, like, over two hundred different Aboriginal languages, so the chances of spreading an Aboriginal language here are much more remote, because it's not a kind of unified language. I remember hearing about a hui between you and Local Knowledge and a couple of other Indigenous MCs in Wellington a couple of years ago where you got together and did some work together.

TK: Those guys, they did do a workshop, they sort of went to a school, but we didn't, we did the gig together with them, and it was called Solid Territory. And this [the gig that night at UTS with Indigenous Australian hip-hop crews] is like the gig back over here now, it's like the return, return trip.

TM: Oh, I didn't realise that this was the return for that.

TK: Yeah. Which was in 2003. It was just bringing those guys over so we could do a gig, you know. So it was like Upper Hutt Posse and a few other groups and those guys, Local Knowledge. And a few other guys too. And it was just like a solidarity gig, 2003. So we did a gig, one in Wellington and then Auckland. And now us being back here is like the return trip. And it all came about because of what's going on in the Northern Territory [the Commonwealth government intervention]. And the guys just said, 'We should organise a gig, now is the time to organise it'. And it's the return sort of thing, yeah.

TM: So when it happened in Wellington, was there a spread of awareness there about the spread of Aboriginal culture, do you think?

TK: Oh, it's just sort of embarrassing, you know. People are just that slack, even in Wellington. In the hip-hop community, they just don't care about it man. They don't care Aboriginal rappers from here, man. Only motherfuckers they care about is an American MC coming over. They'll all be at

the show. Most of the younger cats in hip-hop: they don't wanna go and see Upper Hutt Posse. 'Oh, yeah, we heard about them', or whatever. I don't know, people are just that soft in the hip-hop community, where everyone's celebrating it and we've got number ones that ain't saying shit, you know, that's how it is, if you're saying something, your audience at home in the hip-hop scene is minimal. If you're an MC that's got nothing to say, well you get a big crowd. It's always been like that. So it's a shame, really, shame on all the people back home in the hip-hop community, they need to be dissed for that, cause they need to be showing up at these types of events, these type of gigs, you know. We did a gig for Malcolm X's birthday, May 19th. And I met some young cat from Christchurch, and says to me, 'Man, where's all the hip-hop community? They should be here. Everyone knows Upper Hutt Posse but where are these guys?' I'm like, 'Well, you know'... I think we've got this name and this rep and everything, but it doesn't mean... it doesn't translate into record sales and shit like that, or big crowds at a gig. 'Cause I think, you know, we make a lot of people uneasy. It might just be me personally making them uneasy, but whatever, you know, if we're just going to say things... Here's a situation: I swear in songs. Not all of them, but in a lot of the songs, I'm swearing. Kids come out of school, they've been told by their parents, 'Oh, Upper Hutt Posse, they swear, no'. Weird shit, you know. 'Cause they're meant to be hardcore gangstas or whatever, you know, what's wrong with a bit of swearing?

TM: Most people in American groups swear as well.

TK: Oh, but they're allowed to! They're allowed to swear, you know, because they ain't swearing about anything. I'm saying 'Fuck the CIA, the FBI, fuck the Klu Klux Klan', you know, I'm saying shit like that. But they just say 'Hey, motherfucker' to any random person. So their swearing doesn't lead to anything confrontational, so people can accept it, 'Oh yeah, OK, who cares'.

TM: I remember I tried to play your track, 'Whakakotahi' on Radio New Zealand, and because the first words "Fuck New Zealand", they wouldn't let me play it, so instead I played 'Tangata Whenua', because of course, it's all in Maori, so there's no identifiable swearwords, which I thought was quite funny.

TK: Yeah, well, I just don't care about the whole... With language, I'm just gonna use the whole breadth of it, you know, I want to incorporate other words, you know – African words, Swahili words – into songs, and things like this. So I feel as if I'm just a young cat in the hip-hop scene, although now I'm seen as some old cats, or something. But that's what travelling has done for me, to hear French rap, you know, and going to Brazil and all these sorts of stuff, I'm like, 'Man, I need to kick some Portuguese rhyme' or whatever in there, or get the native language and start using those, incorporating those sorts of words in there. Because there's other guys that rap in a few languages, you know, who you would know about probably more than me! But yeah, so I'm thinking the same thing for us, so we can work on that. But I gotta start with Maori and English, of course, you know.

TM: So your film [Know the Links] is an ongoing project?

TK: No, it's got to be 20 countries. It was 20 countries, and I did four parts. The four parts has done 14 countries, so it's a six-part now. But I've just got to stop it, because I'm just gonna be doing it forever. And someone at the screening last night said, 'Man, you should just keep doing this, just keep going to other places', and I'm like, 'Well that's all I'll be doing'. And it's not like I'm making a lot of money or anything out of it... Although I do, the only place I manage to sell DVDs is when I have screenings. So I've got to get to five more countries. But at this moment, I don't have any money to get anywhere, so it'll happen when it happens.

TM: You did a track on that Hone Tuwhare album, which was basically a collection of recordings of his poems by different artists, do you find you've got things in common with Maori poets such as Hone

Tuwhare and others?

TK: Yeah, yeah. Well, 'cause it's all poetry. I've always considered myself a poet, but my poetry is just that sort of confrontational... You don't have to sort of visualise and come to an understanding of what the poet was saying later on, a lot of poets sort of do that, so people are sort of like, 'I wasn't sure what he said, but OK, I'll figure it out later', or something. No, 'cause I'm just very direct. And, well, that's just how it is.

TM: I presume that you chose the poem that did on the album, which was about a brother who was going war, it was a really strong criticism about him. That was a deliberate choice?

TK: Yes, 'Speak to me brother'. Yeah, he well, of course, he wrote the poem back in the... it was around Vietnam. So it was talking about Vietnam, so I just went through, they said 'Just find a poem and put some music to it', and that's it. So I found a poem, got some music together and did it, yeah.

TM: It was quite an angry, direct kind of poem.

TK: Oh, I don't know. I've never been angry! No, I don't know – historic, though. And it's just about, you know – for me – it's just a guy meeting another guy on the street and saying, 'Oh, so you're going to war now, what are you doing that for? You don't know'. So it was just a good opportunity to actually speak out about wars, you know.

TM: So Te Kupu is still proceeding as well as Upper Hutt Posse? Two separate entities?

TK: Yeah, yeah. That's just me as a solo artist. But I ain't too bothered about it. It's my MC name, Te Kupu D-Word, you know, gotta have that. That's part of the hip-hop culture, to have an MC name, you know. Although a lot of cats come out now calling themselves Joe Bloggs, I don't know, whatever their name is, you know. Sounds a bit corny, I thought. It's good to come up with a name, you know, shit, the Beatles did it, they're allowed to have a fuckin' name, you know, so what's wrong with MCs? I'll tell you, people don't quite like calling me Te Kupu, I think it freaks them out a bit. They want to keep calling me D-Word. Whereas other people want to say Dean Hapeta, my name. And I noticed just with other MCs, like Scribe or whatever, or King Kapisi, no one fuckin' writes their birth name. I've got to remind people, 'Hey man, Te Kupu's the name there!' And shit, if I was rapping before these guys, what's that about?

TM: Wasn't one of the first freestyle battles in New Zealand between you and Kas?

TK: Nah, that's all fuckin' bullshit. Picasso [Kas] has been saying that, Feelstyle [his other name]. He's been saying this shit, I haven't seen him, I'm like, 'Ah, fuck, what are you saying?' It was the first rap competition at Taita, that's where we met George Hubbard who became our manager. So it was a rap competition – no one was having battles then, no one. There wasn't no battles. And Reed Speed [sp.] was organising it, along with a few other people, and he said, 'Come along', and we said, 'Man, we're musicians, we're not gonna get up there and rap over records. We're gonna come along and play'. So we did, we went along and played, played the bass line and drum machines, we did that to say 'We're rappers, but we're not like none of y'all out there, 'cause we do our own music in this way'. So the rap competition, which we weren't involved in – we weren't there to sort of be in the competition – well, the guy who won it, who's Picasso [aka Kas, aka Feelstyle], he sort of made up some fantasy that it was a battle, you know, but it wasn't no battle. No, people were up there rapping over records, then someone else got up and rapped over another record, then someone else. Not like a battle, that was so misleading, I thought, when I read that in some paper. I thought, 'What a load of bullshit that is'. Because people didn't battle like that then.

TM: It's become the stuff of legend.

TK: Yeah yeah, so he's saying that he was the guy who wasn't known, and then he went on, and everyone knew Upper Hutt Posse and no one knew him, but now he's back out and... I'm like, 'Oh, well fuck'. I don't really care too much about it, actually. But if someone asks me, [I say] 'This is the fucking truth'.

TM: Would you like to do a freestyle now?

TK: Yeah, I'll say a little something:

**Kia ora koto, this is Te Kupu
from UHP, that's Upper Hutt Posse
you know it, Aotearoa, that's us man.**

**Fuck New Zealand ya call me a kiwi
Aotearoa the name of the country
Maori are we Tangata Whenua
People of the land, keepers of the fire Te Ahi Kaa
Indigenous people we are as you can see
Let's control our destiny
Shake a break the chains of fear and despair free
Realise it's we who live and breathe do you see
Rooted on earth like the mighty kauri tree
Etched in existence I am continually
Whakawhita te ora life shines the cause to be
Brother sister people rejoice that's you and me
Whakakotahi.**