Aotearoa Songlines

Tony Mitchell, 2007.

Summary:

Aotearoa Songlines was written as an introduction to a special issue of the Pacific Music journal Perfect Beat about New Zealand music which appeared in 2007. It describes the various articles that appeared in the journal.

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As I write, Amplifier.co.nz, my main source of information about the current New Zealand music scene, has just informed me that Fat Freddy's Drop's album *Based on a True Story* is about to break the record set by Bic Runga's album *Beautiful Collision* of 101 consecutive weeks in the Kiwi charts. A beautiful collision indeed, and I love Bic Runga's music as much as I love Fat Freddy's Drop, but it is surely a landmark moment for homegrown independent music in New Zealand. Fat Freddy's Drop embody the do-it-yourself-and-damn-the-consequences-and-stuff-the-obstacles spirit that has always been a major factor in the survival of popular music in New Zealand ever since Johnny Cooper, the 'Maori Cowboy', was prevailed upon to record his version of 'Rock Around the Clock' in 1955. Meanwhile Bic Runga's manager, Campbell Smith, who is also the CEO of the New Zealand Recording Industry Association, has been complaining that eight of his eleven 'high profile' artists, who include Christchurch rapper Scribe and dub-rock duo Breaks Co-op, have had to take on day jobs as it has become impossible to make a full-time living out of music in Aotearoa. Smith blames this on the 'theft' of MP3 downloads and the fact that CD sales have dropped by 22% in New Zealand in the past year. I'm not so sure that downloading has had such a deleterious effect on an industry which has itself historically been based on theft from musicians, and I doubt whether the hard-working members of Fat Freddy's Drop have ever been able to seriously consider giving up their day jobs, despite their high international profile.My relation to Aotearoa's music industry has been odd and contradictory to say the least, and largely a case of remote access. I grew up in Auckland in the 1960s, and saw most of the British Invasion package tours which came through, including the Rolling Stones at the Auckland Town Hall in January 1965 and the legendary Pretty Things–Sandie Shaw-Eden Kane fiasco of August 1965, which has been recorded so vividly and affectionately in John Baker, Andy Neill and Mike Stax's recent book *Don't Bring Me Down Under* (2006). I wasn't much interested in the local music scene in those days, despite the presence of 'world class' Stones and Pretty Things-influenced garage rock bands like the Underdogs, the Pleazers, the Human Instinct and the La De Das – like many of my peers at the time, I was warped by the cultural cringe. I preferred the 'real thing', and couldn't wait to get to the U.K. to see the Who, Ten Years After, the Soft Machine and the plethora of British jazz rock, blues rock and prog rock groups of the 1970s.

I 'split Enz' at the end of 1972, around the time that Split Enz were getting into gear, and one of my friends at the time was Miles Golding, a prodigious violinist who jammed with the Enz in the early days, and by the time I saw him again in London he was already a member of the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. I avoided Split Enz like the plague when they were in London – their art school costumes and hokey cabaret antics always embarrassed me – and I've never been a fan, although Crowded House is a different matter. I remember being moved to tears at a conference in Bologna in the early 1990s after hearing Roman singer-songwriter Antonello Venditti's re-setting of 'Don't Dream It's Over', 'Alta Marea' (High Tide). The Italian lyrics are about driving down a coastal highway, smoking endless cigarettes, watching the sun rise and feeling your woman inside you like a high tide as you drive to see her (well, I could certainly relate to that!). No relation at all to Neil Finn's original lyrics, but it was a wondrous moment to hear a Kiwi musician's song transformed so poignantly into the European musical mainstream.

Another NZ epiphany occurred when I was visiting my old home in a remote part of Southern Italy in the mid 1990s – not far from Locorotondo in Apulia, where Fat Freddy's Drop recorded the 'Italian Reprise' version of their 2005 single 'Wandering Eye' - and heard OMC's 'How Bizarre' on the radio. I excitedly pointed out to my local friends that this guy was a Polynesian, from my home country, and this was the biggest global hit we'd ever had. So somewhere between London in 1973 and Italy in the early 1990s my attitude to New Zealand music underwent a drastic reversal, and it has never relented since. I have never lived in Aotearoa again since 1972, but I have a huge collection of NZ music on vinyl and CD, including scores of rare Flying Nun releases, and somewhere around 1992, largely at Perfect Beat's bidding, I think, I began writing about New Zealand music, focusing in particular on its relation to place. I've become a staunch musical patriot, which goes to prove that you don't have to be born (although I was) or live in Aotearoa to appreciate its music, as most of the writers in this volume exemplify. One of the distinctive features about

New Zealand music that is most powerful for me is how it has always been rooted in the songlines and mystiques of Aotearoa landscape and countryside, from Crowded House's Kare Kare to OMC's Otara to the Upper Hutt Posse, to the Pacific dub 'Wellington sound' of Trinity Roots, Fat Freddy's Drop, the Black Seeds, Fly My Pretties and Little Bushman, from David Lloyd and Dark Tower and the Bats' Canterbury Plains, the Clean and the Chills' evocations of Otago, and Chris Knox's slewed renditions of Invercargill. Don McGlashan and the Muttonbirds have specialised most outstandingly in eerie divinings of the terrestrial spirits of the North Island in songs like 'White Valiant', 'Dominion Road', 'Envy of Angels', 'Miracle Sun' and 'Passenger No.26'. It's a pity that Matthew Bannister's analysis in a previous Perfect Beat of some of the songs of McGlashan– surely the most important New Zealand singer-songwriter after Neil Finn – couldn't have found a place in this volume.

One of the major disappointments of the recent volume *Gothic NZ*, a collection of essays from an Auckland conference in 2002 dealing with 'The Darker Side of Kiwi Culture', is that there is nothing about music in it (Kavka et al. 2006). Here are analyses of the films of Peter Jackson, Vincent Ward, Jane Campion and Alison McLean, examples of gothic poetry by Bill Manhire, Jack Ross and Olivia Macassay, the prose of Ronald Hugh Morrieson, Ian Wedde and Martin Edmond, and numerous accounts of evocative visual art from abandoned houses and 'corrugated iron gothic' to TV advertising, Saskia Leek's ghost paintings, Misery's graffiti art and Otis Frizzell's tattoos. But apart from Frizzell's long-standing connections to the Aotearoa hip hop scene, which aren't mentioned, I can't find a single reference to NZ music, in which surely gothic sensibilities have always run rampant. Where are the accounts of expressions of NZ gothic in Douglas Lilburn, Gillian Whitehead, Jack Body, not to mention Max Merritt, the Avengers, the La De Das, the Underdogs, Split Enz, Dragon, Blam Blam Blam, the Mockers, Dave Dobbyn, The Windy City Strugglers, The Chills, Bailter Space, Headless Chickens, Trasch, the Bats, MaryRose Crook and the Renderers, and innumerable others? Enough to fill an entire volume, surely.

And a pity, too, that there is still so little accessible academic writing about the importance of *waiata* and Maori music in Aotearoa. Mervyn McLean's weighty 400 page tome *Maori Music* (1996), which I picked up a few years ago for a song at a sale in Cambridge, UK, remains a relatively lonely exception. The importance of the work of the late and lamented Hirini Melbourne and his pakeha cohort Richard Nunns in reconstructing and rediscovering the *Taongo Pûoro*, the pre-European musical instruments of the Maori (see Flintoff 2004) is still under-acknowledged, not least for its impact on a wide range of Maori popular music from Moana to the Upper Hutt Posse. The recent remix album *Te Whaiao*, reconstructed from Melbourne and Nunns' 1994 album *Te Ku Te Whe* by prominent NZ 'dance' musicians such as Epsilon Blue, Warren Maxwell, Salmonella Dub, SJD and Sola Rosa, was one of the most thrilling albums from anywhere in the world that I heard in 2006, along with *Tuwhare*, the compilation of songs from Maori poet Hone Tuwhare by Strawpeople, Te Kupu, Whirimako Black and others, Don McGlashan's solo album *Warm Hand* and Little Bushman's eponymous debut. Surely this is the music that most defines Aotearoa now – where is the writing about it?

This issue of Perfect Beat is the first to be dedicated to music in Aotearoa/New Zealand since the volume *North Meets South* appeared in 1994. Only one of the writers from that issue, Roy Shuker, appears here, which is a positive sign that a new generation of academic music writers have been representing the country's music under new transnational paradigms. This is immediately apparent in Nabeel Zuberi's piece 'Sounds Like Us', which takes to task those of us who have tended to over-emphasise the importance of national identity in NZ music. From a South Asian background, and having spent considerable periods of time in the UK and the USA, Zuberi embodies a form of transcultural music writing which is emerging with considerable force, and his book on transnational British music, *Sounds English* (2001), is a landmark in recent popular music writing. His astute breakdown of nationalist marketing rhetoric in NZ music is followed by an equally astute account of the sometimes uncritical championing of local music by both music journalists and academics. As Zuberi points out in relation to production and consumption practices in the Auckland music industry, the local is often displaced by the translocal. Zuberi is himself a radio DJ at the

Auckland independent station BASE FM 107.3, which is owned by prominent Polynesian hip hop DJ and producer Manuel Bundy, where 'New Zealanders and residents from a wide array of national and ethnic origins are involved in both playing records on the station and DJing at central Auckland clubs and bars'.

Situated a few metres along Ponsonby Road from Conch Records, which is run by a Brazilian-New Zealander who provides music and newsletters for the local Auckland Brazilian community, BASE FM is part of a multicultural music network that crosses between Maori and Pasifikan participants (such as Maori DJ Manoia Toa) and musicians and consumers of Asian, European and Latin American origin. In the studio with Nabeel a couple of years ago, I remember being struck by a block of writing on the wall in Japanese, signed by a young woman who referred to herself as 'da Jap bitch'. Specialising in funk, reggae, soul, R'n'B and hip hop, BASE FM represents a niche market which overlaps and interacts with numerous other trans-local music scenes in Aotearoa. Last time I did a guest spot there at the end of 2006, Nabeel was playing wall-to-wall James Brown records, mostly on vinyl, in commemoration of the death of the Godfather of Soul. Conch Records had a cinema-style billboard which read 'RIP James Brown: Thanks for the Music'. I didn't see or hear any more heartfelt or moving JB mementos anywhere else in my travels. Living proof of Zuberi's point that the 'audiotopias' of music stretch to all corners of the world and displace national constructions of the local.

Following on from Zuberi's observation that 'New Zealand hip hop culture continues to be deeply enmeshed in contemporary American and other hip hop cultures', Kirsten Zemke-White prefaces '"This Is My Life": Biography, Identity and Narrative in New Zealand Rap Songs' with a quotation from Tupac Shakur. 'Life story' MCing has always been a prominent feature in global hip hop, and Aotearoa hip hop's strong connections with traditional Maori and Pacific Island forms of oral history and story telling make it no exception. One of the tracks I played on Nabeel's radio show was by Maori group Four Corners – a group who has since performed in Laos and whose debut album *The Foundations* has been released on new Sydney-based label Grindin'. The track was entitled 'Urban Maori', an autobiographical account of the displacement of young Maori in Auckland who are trying to keep in touch with their native roots while being immersed in the US-dominated street culture of NZ's largest city. One of the curiously paradoxical features of this track is that the MCs rap in assumed US accents. While to most US listeners – who regrettably will probably never get the opportunity to hear this group – their Polynesian-Kiwi inflections would be uppermost, to Australasian listeners they sound as if they are fake wannabe Americans; as Samoan-NZ MC Mareko put it in one of his tracks, addressed to local listeners: 'You probably aren't even listening to me because of my fake American accent'. Zemke-White addresses this issue briefly in her piece, pointing out that it is

> a continual challenge for New Zealand rappers who especially find themselves accused of this by Australian rap artists. As many of the New Zealand rap artists are of Pacific or Maori descent, and many archetypal rap words and phrases are American, it is difficult to prove this allegation, which ultimately is an attack on artists' authenticity.

There is always the argument, which Zuberi refers to, that plenty of local artists in other musical genres assume American accents, but it remains a contentious issue, especially when *pakeha* hip hop artists like Dark Tower, who use emphatic Kiwi accents, find themselves getting appreciated more in the Sydney hip hop scene than Dawn Raid artists like the Deceptikons, who were booed at a gig I saw them play at in Sydney (but then so was Kool Keith, so maybe they saw themselves as being in good company). Zemke-White's article contains some valuable quotations from the life stories of a wide range of MCs who are interestingly mainly of Samoan and Tongan extraction, which suggests a strong engagement with traditional Pacific Island culture, a subject which has been explored in depth by two other important women writers on Aotearoa hip hop, Sarina Pearson (2004) and April Henderson (2006). Zemke-White's essay does beg the question of how a ludicrously derivative gangsta rap fantasy like Mareko's 'Freestyle' can be linked to Decker's attempts to argue that African-American MCs can be seen as 'organic cultural intellectuals' in

Gramsci's sense of the term, simply by dint of being involved with 'the everyday struggles of black folks'. This also invokes the intellectually threadbare argument that gangsta, 'bling' and misogynist MCs are merely engaging in a form of ironic, parodic role play. But there is enough genuine testimony of the struggles of Polynesian youth and the importance of hip hop in providing a voice for marginalised and disadvantaged youth in the examples provided here from PNC, Frontline, Cyphanetic, The Usual Suspects and even Scribe to make a strong case for Aotearoa hip hop's distinctive representation of local biographies, identities and narratives.

It's a long stretch from South Auckland, NZ hip hop capital and the setting of Lee Tamahori's contentious 1994 film about Maori domestic violence and redemption, *Once Were Warriors*, to Gore, the country music capital of New Zealand on the southernmost tip of the country's South Island. Nonetheless it's important that the marginal 'micromusic' of New Zealand country music, pioneered in the 1930s and 1940s by Tex Morton and the Tumbleweeds, is at last being represented in academic writing. And perhaps not so much a stretch, given Dan Bendrups and Henry Johnson's reference to 'a young hip hop duo called "Aotearoa Village' who beat-boxed their way into second place in the unplugged competition' at the 2006 Gore Country Music Festival. While reading this piece, I was listening to the visceral, haunting Southern Gothic alt-country sounds of Maryrose Crook and the Renderers' chilling rendition of 'Storm from the East', which contains samples of a 'rainy night and strange birds … downtown Invercargill, Burlington House', not far away from Gore. It's a curious location for NZ country music, a sister city to Tamworth in Australia, in a spooky and desolate area of Aotearoa countryside made famous by the brooding writings of Janet Frame, and by the 1990 Aramoana massacre, when David Gray killed thirteen of his neighbours in a small town on the tip of the Otago Peninsula. The subject of Robert Sarkies' controversial 2006 film Out of the Blue, this event has also been referred to in a number of NZ popular songs. No wonder, then, perhaps, given its gothic setting, that the Gore Country Music Club was destroyed in a string of fires lit throughout the town by a local arsonist, Paul Black, in May 2004, but as Bendrups and Johnson point out, this important NZ country music festival has been running for 33 years 'despite the tyranny of distance and the ravages of fire'. Nearby the recent NZ films *In My Father's Den* (Brad McGann 2004) and *The World's Fastest Indian* (Roger Donaldson 2005) were made, both of which explored the gothic aspects of this cold, dark bleak region on the edge of the world.

In December 1988 John Dix's epic study of more than three decades of New Zealand popular music, *Stranded in Paradise*, was launched to an audience of music industry insiders and musicians at the late and lamented Gluepot, a music venue in Ponsonby, Auckland. For the occasion Chris Knox sang his diatribe against the NZ music industry, 'Statement of Intent', and prefaced it with a comment aimed at the industry reps present: 'You people will never get your act together'. The second and third verses of the song go like this:

> The New Zealand Music Industry's just Watties seeking songs If they've got exclusive rights they don't care about the wrongs A shot of coke in L.A. with the parent company Makes a little boy quite happy in the music industry … The New Zealand Music Industry gets its products overseas 'Cos it can't believe in quality till it gets a U.S. release And its well trained radio stations pump out what it wants to hear The musical equivalent of epidemic diarrhoea …

But as Dix is quick to point out in the 2005 reissue of *Stranded in Paradise*, '[Knox] was wrong, but it took a while' (2005:9). In 1988 an ongoing battle to get a quota for NZ music on radio began, and in 1989 the NZ On Air funding scheme was initiated for NZ musicians to make videos and recordings and get radio airplay. When Helen Clark's Labour Government came to power in the late 1990s, they gave the local music industry a considerable financial boost in the form of recording and export incentives and showcase events. By 2005, without a compulsory quota, it was estimated that NZ radio was playing twenty percent local content, nearly 60 local singles had topped the charts, local music television had increased to a 24 hour service, Maori and Polynesian music had increased tenfold, and numerous books had appeared about

different aspects of New Zealand popular music. The degree of government support for NZ music has been the envy of Australia and most other countries in the world. Roy Shuker's article 'That Was Then, This Is Now', surveys the past two decades of NZ music from an industrial perspective, providing statistics and surveying the country's music media and government policies, concluding that 'the interaction and synergy of various contextual players, policies, and influences … have enabled local music to flourish'. While Campbell Smith may not agree with this diagnosis, it is undeniable that there is a lot of 'world class' music issuing forth to the world from the songlines of Aotearoa, and there is always going to be far more of it than academics can poke a stick at.

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