

## CHAPTER TWO

### “KIWI” MUSIC AND NEW ZEALAND NATIONAL IDENTITY

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As Graeme Downes noted in his abstract for the conference from which this book is derived, it is important to “render notions of national identity problematic or discomforting” in the interests of avoiding the homogenization of diverse expressions of place and identity, and inappropriate expressions of jingoistic patriotism. The term “Kiwi music” is an example of a term often used to denote New Zealand national identity in music, and one which needs problematizing. It is also an indicator of what Downes calls “prescribed and comfortable notions of national identity” which are usually fixed and stereotypically exclusive, rather than accommodating important aspects of indigeneity and changing patterns of migration.

In 2007, I was asked to contribute an entry on “Kiwi rock” to the *Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*. I agreed on the condition that I could re-title it “New Zealand rock.” It seems a small distinction, but the term “Kiwi” has become something of an easy, lazy marker of New Zealandness that has a predominantly Pākehā cast, and which not only does not usually acknowledge Māori identities, but excludes the numerous other hyphenated identities which exist in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The NZ On Air series *Kiwi Hit Discs*, a monthly selection of tracks for radio play featuring popular New Zealand musicians, is arguably an example of this rather jingoistic use of the term applied to music. Granted, the series also includes occasional instalments of Māori music called “Iwi Hit Discs,” which looks suspiciously as if “iwi” is being subsumed into “Kiwi”—just because it rhymes doesn’t make it any more palatable. The radio station Kiwi FM prides itself on playing only New Zealand music, but DJs rarely back-announce or identify what they play, a frustrating omission which almost seems to defeat the station’s purpose. The distinction between nationally-defined forms of music and radically self-determining expressions

of music produced in “outsider” New Zealand music (such as Coco Solid’s “half caste” hip hop, to use just one of numerous examples), which have a much more artistic and incisive connection to New Zealand topographies, finds resonances in the militant Māori hip hop of Te Kupu, who has used film as well as music to explore extensively his alliances with indigenous and minority hip hop communities throughout the world. In an interview I did with him in Sydney in 2007, he addressed the issue of Kiwi-ism:

Why are we called Kiwis? Why are you so proud of being a Kiwi? Can’t you be Māori? Unless they’re not all Māori, but just Kiwi things, just those ideologies, philosophical things that I see being pushed around. I’m so wary of this Kiwism . . . that national identity that everyone’s 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’ . . . What is that? We’re gonna be Māori, man, we’re not no Kiwis. But the majority of Māori people call themselves Kiwis. They’ve been brainwashed into this Kiwi mentality, which is the mainstream mentality.<sup>1</sup>

This complacent concept of a mainstream Kiwism also resonates with a statement made on the New Zealand Experimental Poetry website by Lyttleton-based noise musician Bruce Russell, a long-time member of the Dead C, an experimental music group with arguably more of an international profile than a national one:

There’s this thing called ‘kiwi’ music and it’s not the same as New Zealand music. The kind of music that’s being sold to New Zealand as a cultural expression [is what’s] acceptable to commercial radio programmers. That baldly is how it works. I’m not saying that’s wrong and ought never to be done, but somebody’s got to be prepared to put a bit of money towards people who are prepared to do things for artistic reasons.<sup>2</sup>

This reading of “Kiwi music” as narrowly commercial further resonates with a highly reductive 1994 article by Roy Shuker and Michael Pickering entitled “Kiwi Rock: Popular Music and Cultural Identity in New Zealand”—a title already indicative of a homogenization of the diversity of New Zealand music into one amorphous, synthetic genre, “Kiwi rock.” Here the authors dismiss most New Zealand music before the 1990s as

<sup>1</sup> Te Kupu, interview by author, October 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Russell, “Biography,” *NZ Electronic Poetry Centre Website*, <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz>.

“local versions of overseas genres and idioms,”<sup>3</sup> and endorse the cultural imperialist argument of Geoff Lealand who, in a 1988 book entitled *A Foreign Egg in Our Nest?*, claims that “all New Zealand music . . . is derivative. It borrows from abroad, expanding on imported influences, denying them, and then re-embracing them. Styles, themes and sounds are all borrowed.”<sup>4</sup>

This misguidedly literal search for reflections of aspects of national cultural identity in New Zealand popular music excludes any Māori or Pacific Island music, due to Shuker’s and Pickering’s lack of knowledge or cultural credentials, and mostly reflects their sketchy knowledge of other New Zealand music. The authors first target the New Zealand music of the 1950s, when, of course, cover versions of US rock’n’roll songs predominated; then the 1960s, which they dismiss as merely following the British beat era—something I’m sure Rim D. Paul would have something to say about, given the proliferation of Māori and Pacific Island music in that era, especially as featured in John O’Shea’s film *Don’t Let It Get You*,<sup>5</sup> which is overdue for rehabilitation. Shot in Rotorua in 1966 with Howard Morrison, Herma Keil, the Quin Tikis, Rim D. Paul, Lew Pryme, and Australian singer Normie Rowe, it was crammed full of indigenous performers, including, most notably, Kiri Te Kanawa singing a Rossini aria inside a Māori meeting house. In his recent book on New Zealand cinema, which includes an analysis of O’Shea’s film, Bruce Babington suggests that the local music scene of the mid-1960s was “dominated by Māori and Polynesian performers, whose talent the film showcases.”<sup>6</sup>

Shuker and Pickering go on to reduce the culturally distinctive Flying Nun bands of the 1980s to clones of The Velvet Underground and The Smiths (a group only formed in 1982). For Shuker and Pickering, New Zealand rock music up to the 1990s, at least, presents a case of “imitation stifling the development of a distinctively local sound,” and they attempt to illustrate this thesis by demonstrating that there is little evidence of national indicators in band names, song lyrics, the use of New Zealand accents or distinctive stylistic musical idioms.<sup>7</sup> Leaving aside the widespread use of Māori *waiata* and other musical elements, and the

<sup>3</sup> Roy Shuker and Michael Pickering, “Kiwi Rock; Popular Music and Cultural Identity in New Zealand,” *Popular Music* 13, no. 3 (1994): 270–71, 281.

<sup>4</sup> Geoff Lealand, *A Foreign Egg in Our Nest?* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1988), 75.

<sup>5</sup> *Don’t Let It Get You*, Film, John O’Shea (Wellington: Pacific Films, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> Bruce Babington, *A History of the New Zealand Fiction Feature Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 104.

<sup>7</sup> Shuker and Pickering, “Kiwi Rock,” 273.

“pacific strum” in much New Zealand music, apart from emphasizing that the relationship between music, place, and identity is far more than simply one of literal place name reference (rather an imaginative and relational inscription of place through networks and milieus of music production, venues, infrastructures and local music practices, scenes and communities as well as social, political, and cultural perspective), it is also important to distinguish between imitation and influence.<sup>8</sup>

Local bands of the 1960s may have begun playing the repertoires of “British Invasion” groups as covers (as did Chants R’n’B in Christchurch, Grim Ltd. in Palmerston North, The Third Chapter in Dunedin, and The Unknown Blues in Invercargill), but most developed their own musical direction subsequently or else faded from view, leaving their distinctive mark on local music histories in the process. Strong indicators of a local, and especially regional, identity in New Zealand music—whether the compositions are original or not—have always been evident in the performance of the music, in the interstices between the texts and musical and lyrical idioms of songs and their reception by audiences, as well in the music’s extra-musical contexts such as dress, environment, visual styles, and imagery, as well as social rituals. They are also present in the nature of the music itself—individual ways of playing, performing, and singing that go far beyond simply imitating overseas influences and relate to creating affective relationships with listeners and audiences. The La De Das’ 1966 song “How Is the Air Up There?” (which Shuker and Pickering reduce to a Blues Magoos cover by a band sounding like The Rolling Stones), in actual fact had significant purchase among local audiences in Auckland and elsewhere as a locally-produced “alternative” hit song, and even became the title of a later K-Tel compilation of 1960s New Zealand songs, as well as a catchphrase applied generally to 1960s rock music in New Zealand.<sup>9</sup>

While Shuker and Pickering attempt to “cut down to size” any potential for original, geomorphic, or locally distinctive music in New Zealand, their emphasis on national rather than local or regional identity

<sup>8</sup> See John Street, “(Dis)located? Rhetoric, Politics, Meaning and the Locality,” in *Popular Music: Style and Identity*, ed. Will Straw et al. (Montreal: Centre for Research on Canadian Cultural Industries and Institutions, 1995), 255–63.

<sup>9</sup> See Michael Flint, “What the Air Was Like Up There: Overseas Music and Local Reception in the 1960s,” in *North Meets South: Popular Music in Aotearoa/New Zealand*, ed. Philip Hayward, Tony Mitchell and Roy Shuker (Sydney: Perfect Beat Publications, 1994), 1–15; Nina Herriman, “The Air Down Here: Global and Local Interpretations of New Zealand Popular Music, 1955–1977” (M.A. diss., University of Auckland, 2004).

has implications which are dealt with in John Street's comments about local and national music:

While the business of being recognised entails becoming linked to the national scene, this does not mean that the local becomes completely submerged. Indeed, it is central to the process that a sense of difference be retained. What is to be recognised is what makes the locality different. Indeed, the local is defined against the national. Or, to put it another way, the national is being cut down to size.<sup>10</sup>

Neil Finn's controversial attempt in May 2007 to "cut down to size" national definitions of New Zealand music,<sup>11</sup> and the often virulently exclusionist and nationalistic debate which followed, are a case in point. Criticizing Helen Clark for comparing New Zealand Music Month to Anzac Day and Waitangi Day, and for taking undue credit for the achievements of New Zealand music, as well as NZ on Air's financing of New Zealand music as generating unrealistic expectations of overseas success, Finn was arguably also criticizing the nationalistic jingoism surrounding much of the government support and promotion of Kiwi music. Finn himself has a strong affective connection to Auckland and the North Island of New Zealand, and his song "Kare Kare" celebrates a psychogeographic attachment to the eponymous beach on the west coast of Auckland, which houses a recording studio where Crowded House's album *Together Alone* was recorded.<sup>12</sup>

Nonetheless, his is arguably a local and transnational alliance rather than an expression of any national or "Kiwi" identity. He may have worn a badge of a kiwi on his shirt during Crowded House's "Farewell to the World" concert at the Sydney Opera House in 1996, but this could be read as an example of "strategic essentialism"; distinguishing himself from the Australian members of the band and the audience, and appealing to New Zealand expatriates in Sydney. Indeed, Crowded House has always been something of a transnational band, and now, with two US members, one Australian, and Neil Finn, they have few remnants of New Zealand identity beyond Finn's distinctive presence as their main singer-songwriter.

<sup>10</sup> Street, "(Dis)located? Rhetoric, Politics, Meaning and the Locality," 260.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Crowded House, *Together Alone*, Capitol Records 7243 8 27048 2 2, 1993. Tony Mitchell, "The Sounds of Nowhere? Bicultural Music in Aotearoa/New Zealand," in *Popular Music and Local Identity: Rock, Pop and Rap in Europe and Oceania*, ed. Tony Mitchell (London: Leicester University Press, 1996), 222.

Like Crowded House, much of the music produced in Aotearoa is transnational and translocal, as opposed to derivative and borrowed in its representations of place and locality, insofar as it expresses what Doreen Massey has called "articulated movements in networks of social relations and understandings."<sup>13</sup> Massey defines four aspects of a dynamic and progressive sense of place: as interactions and processes rather than fixed entities; as linkages to the outside rather than confined by boundaries, enclosures and divisions; as containing internal conflicts and multiple identities rather than single identities; and as reproducing a specificity that is not bound by an internalized history. As a result, we can entertain "a sense of place which is extroverted, which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world, which integrates in a positive way the global and the local."<sup>14</sup> As a transnational musician with an Australasian and global identity, Neil Finn embodies this expansive sense of situatedness between places which expresses multiple identities rather than narrow, fixed confinements of the national. On a more superficial level, Kiwi FM advertises itself as "New Zealand's global radio station—now available in Cape Reinga" (the northernmost point of the country), despite its very small listenership; while Saatchi and Saatchi has marketed the slogan "world famous in New Zealand" in relation to Lemon & Paeroa, the "local" soft drink now owned by Coca Cola/Schweppes. The Saatchi and Saatchi slogan has also been adopted as the title of a number of compilations of New Zealand popular music. There is a sense of irony contained in what Keam refers to as "the self contradiction embedded in the advertizing slogan, which teases us in our determination to be noticed."<sup>15</sup>

Keam critiques the national jingoism in much of the publicity for music emanating from New Zealand, linking it to the myths of "Kiwi" national identity which circulate in New Zealand of a "clean and green" country, down-to-earth, egalitarian and anti-intellectual in its orientation, ingenious (as in references to number eight wire being used to repair and construct almost everything), and jealously guarding its international achievements. There is little place in these myths for Māori notions of the

<sup>13</sup> Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 239.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 239–40.

<sup>15</sup> Glenda Keam, "Myths and Legends: Tales of Kiwi Musical Distinctiveness," in *Music on the Edge: Selected Papers from the 2007 IASPM Australia/New Zealand Conference*, ed. Dan Bendrups (Dunedin: International Association for the Study of Popular Music, Australia & New Zealand Chapter, 2008), 97.

land or identity, which film-maker Gaylene Preston articulates in Pākehā terms in relation to the extensive use of landscape in New Zealand cinema:

Te whenua he whaea e kore e mate (The land is a mother that never dies). This Māori whatkatauaki (proverb) sums up an attitude many Māori and pākehā hold for the land. It is deeply embedded in our culture in a general sense and infuses New Zealand filmmaking with a spirit that permeates through the drama . . .

There's a 'vibe'. You can feel it. Often dark, sometimes simple, I have never felt it anywhere else. It flows from the secrets the land holds. Tribal histories passed on by oral storytelling to the selected few; European settlers, recent arrivals without the language to express this place. Māori mythology as enduring as Homer is overlaid here with Celtic and European storytelling. . . . This expressive myth-making flows from the strength, the blood, the fire and the life of the land itself. Fresh ground for a new local artform.<sup>16</sup>

While many film critics have commented on the importance of landscape and place in New Zealand cinema by both Māori and Pākehā film makers,<sup>17</sup> there has been far less attention given to the importance of place and landscape in New Zealand music.<sup>18</sup>

### Music and Place in Aotearoa

As Keam has noted there is a long tradition of expressing the contours and resonances of landscape in the music of Aotearoa/New Zealand, as there is in its visual arts, dance, poetry, and literature.<sup>19</sup> This could be defined as a situated poetics, and related to *waiata* (song) and Māori creation myths, where the gods sang the world into existence, and the Sky Father (*Ranganui*) and Earth Mother (*Papatūānuku*) spawned other gods. Pre-European Māori sonic instruments, the *taonga puoro*, were largely

<sup>16</sup> Gaylene Preston, cited in Ian Brodie, *A Journey through New Zealand Film* (Auckland: HarperCollins, 2006), 8–9.

<sup>17</sup> Babington, *A History of the New Zealand Fiction Feature Film*; Martin Blythe, *Naming the Other: Images of the Māori in New Zealand Film and Television* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1994); Ercan Le Héron, "Placing Geographical Imagination in Film: New Zealand Filmmakers' Use of Landscape," *New Zealand Geographer* 60, no. 1 (2004): 60–66.

<sup>18</sup> Keam being a notable exception: Glenda Keam, "Exploring Notions of National Style: New Zealand Orchestral Music in the Late Twentieth Century" (Ph.D. diss., University of Auckland, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

built from artefacts taken from the land—shells, bones, flax, stone, *pounamu* (greenstone), wood, swamp reeds, snails, leaves, and feathers, among other materials.

Hirini Melbourne and Richard Nunns have demonstrated extensively the huge range of *taonga puoro*, as well as how sounds can be made directly from native flora and sound-making plants in Aotearoa.<sup>20</sup> Mervyn McLean has categorized pre-European Māori musical instruments into idiophones, or percussive instruments, such as the *pahu* (wooden gong), *tookere* (bone clappers), *pakuru* (mouth bow), and *rooria* (jew's harp); and aerophones such as the *purerehua* (bullroarer), *koororohuu* (whizzers), and numerous types of trumpets and flutes.<sup>21</sup> Many of these are now used in contemporary Māori music since their reconstruction has become increasingly widespread, following on from the work of Melbourne and Nunns. A relatively contemporary musical example, which demonstrates the relation of Māori music to land, is Hone Tuwhare's poem "Papa-tū-ā-nuku" (Earth Mother), which was set to music and sung by Hone Hurihanganui on the 2005 compilation *Tuwhare*:

We are stroking, caressing the spine  
of the land.  
We are massaging the ricked  
back of the land  
with our sore but ever-loving feet:  
hell, she loves it!  
Squirming, the land wriggles  
in delight.  
We love her.<sup>22</sup>

Here the Earth Mother is personified as a lover responding physically and erotically to the caresses and footsteps of the people walking over her. The poem, one of many of Tuwhare's works set to music by New Zealand composers, also has a political dimension, being one of a number Tuwhare wrote commemorating the 1975 New Zealand Land March on Wellington, which covered 700 miles in 30 days and involved 40,000 people.<sup>23</sup> Such musical commemorations of land and place in Aotearoa/New Zealand exemplify explicitly the situatedness of so much music here, not in a

<sup>20</sup> See Mitchell, "The Sounds of Nowhere?" 222.

<sup>21</sup> Mervyn McLean, *Māori Music* (Auckland University Press, 1996), 166–200.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in Janet Hunt, *Hone Tuwhare: A Biography* (Auckland: Godwit, 1998), 131.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 131–35.

national context, but in terms of the importance of the particularities of where we come from and where we are, in the process of defining who we are.

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