

**Manatū Taonga Ministry for Culture & Heritage –  
Public History Talk  
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Nick Bollinger

Myths, musicians and manifestos: What can popular music tell us about a country and its culture?

**Steve Waters:**

Kia ora tatou, ko Steve Waters taku ingoa. I'm Senior Historian at Manatū Tonga, the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. And I've been given the pleasure of introducing today's speaker and it's a topic I'm very excited to be listening and it gave me an excuse today, when I got up for work to put on one of my old kiwi band T shirts, which gave me an excuse to dress down for the day.

I'm especially grateful for the opportunity to introduce Nick Bollinger today, Nick will be familiar to many of you as a writer, musician, and broadcaster. He's been a columnist for the New Zealand Listener and presenter of RNZ National's music review programme, The Sampler. His books include *How to Listen to Pop Music*, *Gonville: A Memoir*, which won the Adam Foundation Prize in Creative Writing, and *Jumping Sundays: The Rise and Fall of the Counterculture in Aotearoa New Zealand*, which has been shortlisted for the 2023 Okham Book Awards. As the 2023 Lilburn Research Fellow, Nick is now looking at ways in which pop music in Aotearoa New Zealand has reflected, contradicted and contributed to our national stories.

As we kick off New Zealand Music Month Nick's talk today - entitled 'Musicians myths and manifestos' - asks us what popular music can tell us about a country and its culture.

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**Nick Bollinger**

In the prologue to *Mystery Train*, Greil Marcus's groundbreaking book of music criticism and cultural history, the writer speculates as to what might be revealed about America through a close examination of a selection of popular and semi-obscure music-makers, reaching back to the beginnings of what has come to be known as rock 'n' roll. 'Putting the pieces together', Marcus says, '...can give us an idea of how much room there is in this musical culture, and in American culture... Looking back into the corners, we might discover whose America we are living in at any moment, and where it came from...'

Marcus's book would be [to quote Marcus] 'rooted in the idea that these artists can illuminate those American questions... a sense of what it is to be American, what it means, what it's worth, what the stakes of life in America might be.'

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I was in my teens when I first read *Mystery Train*, not long after its publication in the mid-1970s, and I loved it even if I couldn't grasp all of its ideas or unpick its dense weave of literary, historical and cultural references, on that first, second or even third reading. But the fact that many of the artists Marcus focused on were already personal favourites of mine - like The Band, Randy Newman and Sly Stone - helped me through its more abstruse passages. Above all, the book validated my enthusiasm for pop music. It told me that this music was important and it was okay to take it seriously, whatever anyone said. (And most of the cultural gatekeepers at that time said it was rubbish.) Marcus showed that it had things to tell us, if we were prepared to listen.

Americans habitually think about their country in mythic terms, and it's not hard to see why. America is vast and variegated [*vari-a-gated*]. It holds the hopes and dreams, crimes and victims, of 500 years of colonists and immigrants. It is the heart of the modern capitalist world and for the past century or so has exerted more political and cultural influence over the rest of the planet than any other country. No wonder Americans feel compelled to look for meanings and explanations for the exceptionalism they seem to be inculcated with from birth. Such questions must surely feel more essential when your country has given the world Elvis Presley and the atomic bomb.

*Mystery Train* draws on some of America's founding myths: those of the pioneers, the Puritans, the quest for freedom. But what sort of tale would one tell about music in this country? A sense of what it is to be a New Zealander, what it means, what it's worth, what the stakes of life in Aotearoa might be...

Just saying these words seems to go against the grain of one of our own prevailing myths: that we are a pragmatic people who will simply get on with a job rather than waste time in contemplation of what the existential implications of the task might be.

But actually, New Zealanders do think about such things, especially, I find, if they have lived a life close to the arts - though they have sometimes been almost forced to apologise for it.

Those thoughts will, of course, be very different from the kind that people such as Greil Marcus have - living in, and writing about, America. New York City alone has nearly twice as many people as the whole of New Zealand.

And, as almost the last major landmass on earth to be settled by humans, with Māori arriving here around the 13th or 14th century, this is a young civilisation by any measure.

'Strictly speaking New Zealand doesn't exist yet', the poet and essayist Allen Curnow wrote in 1945, 'though some possible New Zealands glimmer in some poems and on some canvases. It remains to be created - should I say invented - by writers, musicians, artists,

architects, publishers; even a politician might help - and how many generations does that take?’

Douglas Lilburn was a composer, and friend of Curnow’s, who gave a lot of thought to how music might contribute to this process of invention. In 1946 he delivered to the Cambridge Summer School of Music what he later referred to as ‘a heartfelt sort of manifesto’ in which ...he suggested that while ‘music is being written here, it is only the most tentative beginning towards solving the discovery of our own identity’.

Others have suggested that the invention of New Zealand may have been more advanced than Lilburn or Curnow believed at that time. The dancer and historian Marianne Schultz, in her thesis ‘A Harmony of Frenzy’, writes about the role that the performing arts - including song - played in (what she calls) ‘the imagining of modern New Zealand’.

Schultz’s study begins in 1862, by which time colonisation was well underway, but the imagining began much earlier than that. Ever since the arrival of Māori there had been pūrākau: the traditional form of storytelling which was used not just for transmitting ideas but for creating shared meaning and identity.

Later came the colonial stories, sometimes referred to as myths: the pragmatic do-it-yourselfer, able to fix anything with a bit of number 8 wire, being just one of them. There are the myths about the land, our relationship and responsibilities to it, and the unresolved differences between Māori and Pakeha understandings of what those responsibilities might be. There is the great egalitarian myth of New Zealand as a ‘classless society’ where, in contrast to Britain where most Pakeha settlers originated, ‘Jack is as good as his master’.

And there’s the myth of the great voyager, embodied in the figure of Captain Cook, whose daring journeys were frequently recounted without mention that those same seas had already been navigated long before by the indigenous people of the Pacific.

These are stories New Zealanders have told, to each other and to the world, to explain who we think we are, why we are the way we are, or who we would like to be, as a people and as a nation.

What might the music tell us about such stories? What part has it played in creating, perpetuating or challenging those myths? And how might our songs and singers put these tales to the test?

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These are questions I’ve been thinking about this year as the Lilburn Research Fellow, a biennial fellowship that supports research on some aspect of New Zealand music, using,

among other things, the resources available in this building - notably those of the National Library, the Archive of New Zealand Music and the Alexander Turnbull Library.

My proposal is to write a collection of essays, exploring connections between New Zealand music and some of those myths or stories. The focus will be on a small number of artists, groups and recordings. This is not intended as a comprehensive or definitive selection. I'm not proposing any sort of hierarchy or canon. Some of the artists will be little known, others may be global superstars. But each of them has fired my imagination, for one reason or another. Sometimes it is the artist's journey that intrigues me. How did they get from here to there, creatively, professionally, even geographically? Sometimes it has simply been a song or a recording that I haven't been able to get out of my head until I have sung along with it on the page.

My perspective is not just one of a pop fan but also, unavoidably, that of a Pākehā male, who acknowledges that Pākehā men have dominated the 'national' historical narratives. Among other things, I hope to interrogate those narratives by listening to what a whole lot of different music has to say about them.

More than anything, I hope these pieces inspire wonder at what music can do; how it can travel to, and report from, places that don't seem reachable by any conventional roads. And I hope to express my appreciation of the people who make that music, often at a real personal cost.

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In many ways it feels premature to be talking about this project, as it really only exists at this point as an unruly collection of, anecdotes, interviews, recordings, songs, YouTube clips, reviews, notes and pictures... and I honestly can't say yet what final form all this will take.

But I thought I could at least give you a sense of how I've been thinking about these things, and some of the connections that have been forming in my mind, by sharing a few stories.

I'll tell you about some heroic voyagers.

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I used to see him in bars around Wellington in the early 90s when I was a working bass player. He reminded me of the Ancient Mariner in the Coleridge poem, the way he would walk into a busy pub and stop, stock-still, in the centre of the room, staring at the musicians on the stage, his eyes glittering, as though he was about to regale us with the story of a voyage he had made long ago. He was Māori, middle-aged, and though he didn't have the long grey beard of the Coleridge character, his hair was silver and hung down over the back of his collar, and his trouser-cuffs dragged slightly over the heels of his shoes. He would stand impassively for maybe half a song, intently watching us, then turn

decisively and head back out into the night, making it clear with his body language that whatever it was he wanted to hear, we weren't providing it.

One evening I was playing bass for John Grennell, the great New Zealand country singer, who was not so much an ancient mariner as a troubadour on horseback.

In the mid-60s, when he went by the name John Hore, he had been this country's best-selling artist. For a while his records even outstripped local sales of the Beatles. He had had a local hit with 'I've Been Everywhere' (written by Australian Geoff Mack, and an American number one for Hank Snow) and though it was true that John had played from Nashville to Cape Town, the places named in his version of the song were all in New Zealand: "Ruatoki, Matahura, Taupiri, Maketu, Kyeburn, Sowburn, Wedderburn, Mossburn Washdyke, Arawhata, Paparoa, Kaponga..." and on and on.

More recently his career had been revived with his recording of 'Welcome To Our World', which had been widely broadcast in a television commercial for Toyota.

As I discovered, John never used a set list, nor did he believe in taking breaks, unless someone in his band - who were always called the Saddle Blasters, though the line-up changed from gig to gig - pleaded for bladder relief. He would always open with 'Welcome To Our World', after which the show could go anywhere, and would last until whenever the bar manager indicated it was time to finish. He'd take requests or else draw songs, both well-known and obscure, from his seemingly bottomless store of remembered material.

On this occasion, after we'd been playing for perhaps an hour and a half, I spied the Mariner occupying his usual position, eyes fixed on the stage. But when we came to the end of whatever song we were playing - I think it was 'Home On the Range' - I noticed he was still there, and had taken a few steps closer to the stage. Then, to my complete surprise, I saw John unclip his microphone from its stand and offer it to the Mariner, who turned to the band and announced: "Green Green Grass of Home" In G'.

We struck up the opening chords and the Mariner, now facing the crowd, began to sing in a rich velvet voice:

"The old home town looks the same..."

When the song had ended, John took back the microphone and thanked our guest. 'Hector Epae, ladies and gentlemen. Hector Epae!' There was applause, but by this time the Mariner was already on his way out the door.

Hector Epae. The name rang a bell. I had once interviewed the singer Maria Dallas, who as a teenager in 1966 had had a national hit with a song called 'Tumblin' Down'.

The song, she said, had been written especially for her by a very talented guy named Epae; Jay Epae. She was half way through recording her first album when he had turned up one day at the studio. Producer Ron Dalton asked him whether he might have any material for Maria to sing and he went away and wrote the song on the spot. Jay, whose actual name was Nicholas, was the eldest of a large Ngati Ruahine family from Taranaki. He had lived overseas, mostly in the United States, since the late 1950s, and had had a number one hit in Sweden with a song he called 'Putti Putti', and which many people in this country would have recognised as 'Putiputi Kanehana', written by the great Ngāti Porou songwriter Tuini Ngawai, and first recorded in 1940 by Reinforcements of the Māori Battalion.

Maria mentioned that he had another brother, Hector, who she thought now lived in Wellington. While Jay was making his name in Scandinavia, Hector and yet another brother, Wes, had been touring the world in some of the original Māori showbands.

Wes travelled throughout the 60s with the Māori Hi Five, as they took their combination of comedy and classy musicianship through Australia, Europe, North America and Asia. Wes was renowned for his dancing, which was on a par with that of the great African American entertainers. 'He danced like James Brown', Frankie Stevens recalled in awe. He went on to say: 'He was Michael Jackson before Michael Jackson was thought of.'

In London, he had been an extra in the Walt Disney film *In Search of the Castaways*, starring Hayley Mills. At post-shoot party Walt Disney shook his hand. In Hong Kong the Hi Five opened for The Beatles, who were en route to New Zealand in June 1964 on their only South Pacific tour. The Beatles shook his hand too.

Hector had started out in Auckland with the Quin-Tikis.

After that had roamed the globe with other showbands: the Sydney-based Māori Troubadours, led by the larger-than-life Prince Tui Teka; then through Asia, Europe and North America with The Māori Volcanics.

He played guitar, saxophone, piano, did comic skits, and sang. 'Hector Epae: Man of a Thousand Voices' the posters proclaimed. Even if he had sung only in the one voice I heard that night in Wellington it would have been spectacular. But from many accounts his greatest characteristic was his humour, on stage and off.

Mahora Peters, who was a member of the Volcanics through their entire career, wrote a wonderful memoir a few years ago in which she shared some vivid recollections. During a residency in Bermuda, Hector had fallen in love and married a Bermudan woman named Beth. One day he went out to buy some milk and bread and returned ten hours later. By

the time he came back Beth was furious and asked where he had been. Hector looked apologetic and explained that he had had to go to the movies. 'Ten hours to see a movie?' she asked. 'Well', he said calmly, 'I went to see two movies'.

There were literally dozens of Māori show bands criss-crossing the planet in the 60s and 70s. Playing from Okinawa to Waikiki, in upscale hotels, nightclubs and cabarets, their shows were shaped partly by their own eclectic tastes, partly by the audience demand for novelty: jazz standards, pop songs, comedy skits, dance routines, instrumental virtuosity and - their most distinct point of difference - kapa haka.

As Louise Kewene-Doig put it, in her 2015 thesis on showbands and iPad apps: "Māori showbands were able to weave Māori stories and deliver them to audiences from many nationalities in a way which not only expressed being Māori, but also being from New Zealand, in a way no other form of New Zealand entertainment had been able to do."

The showbands were far better known overseas than in New Zealand. Bruce Morley was a drummer, Pakeha, originally from Hastings, who played professionally in New Zealand and Australia from the early 60s up until his death in 2012. At the launch in 1994 of *Nga Matua*, a compilation of recordings from the show band era, he recalled:

'When I went to Sydney in 1964, I discovered something quite extraordinary and unexpected. All over Sydney and Australia in general and in the East and Vietnam and probably Papua New Guinea and other places, there were more Māori performers than I had ever seen at home, working as solo performers or in groups of all shapes and sizes. There were groups with names like the Māori Hi Five, the Māori Troubadours, the Māori Hi-Liners, the Quin Tikis, the Māori Volcanics, the Sheratons, the Māori Premiers, Te Pois, Te Kiwis, the Māori Minors, Māori Hakas, the Milford Sounds and many more...'

Bruce went on to say: 'When I returned to New Zealand some years later I discovered that very few of the general public knew much about the performers I've just mentioned, apart from the most prominent ones. It was as if it had happened somewhere else, in a dream.'

The life of a musical mariner could be a dream, or a nightmare. The Volcanics were one of several Māori show bands to tour Vietnam at the height of the American war, to entertain American and New Zealand troops. In Saigon in 1968 their vehicle was shot at by 'white mice' - nickname for the South Vietnamese police, on account of their white uniforms - who suspected them of weapons-smuggling. At an outdoor show at a base near Da Nang, fighting broke out nearby and the band wound up in a foxhole, still wearing their sequins and satin suits.

By this time, Māori musicians had already been crossing the world for a hundred years, but no tour could have been more grim than the very first one. In 1863 William Jenkins, a Wesleyan lay preacher and 'native interpreter' took a party to London to perform Māori

songs and dances as part of a series of illustrated lectures. During the 100-day voyage, the Māori performers travelled steerage and were given dry, worm-infested biscuits to eat which they threw overboard in disgust, while Jenkins sailed first-class. One member of the party went mad during the journey and was committed to an asylum. In Britain, Jenkins struck financial trouble and the party wound up staying far longer than intended, performing without pay and depending on charity for their accommodation. On the return trip two members died, along with a baby born during the journey.

There was perhaps one bright moment in what was otherwise surely the tour from hell. At a royal presentation on the Isle of Wight, Queen Victoria had noticed that one of the performers, Hariata Pomare, was pregnant, and expressed a wish to be the child's godmother. The child, Albert Victor Pomare, was born in England - the first Māori known to have been born there - and baptised at St Paul's Cathedral, after which he was returned to New Zealand with his parents who this time travelled first class, the Queen paying their fares.

If the party that accompanied Jenkins seems exceptionally brave or naively trusting, it is worth remembering that Māori had always been seafarers and adventurers. Traditional waiata often refer to the waka journeys of their ancestors. Even after their arrival in New Zealand they had continued to travel the open seas, sailing as far as the Kermadecs and Chatams.

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Pakeha had their own view of the sea. In their mythology, crossing oceans was associated with conquest. It is a mythology that is drawn on in some significant songs. Split Enz 1982 hit 'Six Months In A Leaky Boat' takes its central image from the long sea voyages Pakeha settlers made, coming from Britain to New Zealand. 'The tyranny of distance didn't stop the cavalier, so why should it stop me?' asks Tim Finn, defiantly. The lyric is dotted with cliches of the colonial hero: the 'rugged individual', the 'pioneer' who 'will acknowledge no frontier'.

Some of the same imagery was used in the 60s when the Beatles became Britain's most successful ever cultural export. It was repeatedly boasted that the Liverpool pop group had 'conquered the world'. They certainly conquered the imaginations of musicians in Britain's farthest-flung colony, particularly Pakeha. In 1968, while The Māori Volcanics were dodging bullets in Vietnam, The Fourmyula were doing their best to become New Zealand's Beatles.

They were a group of Upper Hutt teenagers who had started out playing top ten covers at youth club dances, but were more interested in writing their own songs. Like Lennon and McCartney, they had a built-in songwriting team, Alistair Richardson and Wayne Mason.



When they eventually secured a recording contract with HMV they fought a successful battle to have their originals released as singles, something almost unheard of in local pop, where the local hits were usually international covers. By the year's end the Fourmyula were the country's best-known group with a string of appealingly Beatle-lite hits - 'Come With Me', 'Alice Is There', 'I Know Why'. Could they repeat their conquest on the world stage?

In late '68 they took up the prize they had won earlier that year as victors in the Battle of the Sounds competition at Lower Hutt's Horticultural Hall: a trip to Britain aboard the MV Fairisky. They only began to suspect they might, in effect, be paying for their own prize when they were told they would be expected to perform nightly for passengers on the ship, for no fee. There would be theme nights, in which they were required to dress as pirates, dance the can-can and - most inappropriately - perform a haka.

Still they were going where they wanted to be: Britain, home of the Liverpoolian pop sound they loved.

Earlier that year John Rowles, a young Māori singer from a showband background, had scored a huge British hit with his English-language version of a big French ballad, 'If I Only Had Time'. Before long he would be headed for Las Vegas in the footsteps of Tom Jones and Englebert Humperdinck, his stylistic peers.

London was not so welcoming to the Hutt Valley hitmakers. The variety of tuneful, whimsical pop that had brought the Fourmyula success at home had already reached saturation point in Britain and the new bands there were working in a heavier, more ostentatious style. Led Zeppelin had recently formed. Members of the Fourmyula went to see another new group, Yes, playing at the Lyceum Ballroom and were so overwhelmed by their virtuosity they thought about giving up.

Their time in London was not without its rewards. Through their relationship with HMV, they were granted a session in the Abbey Road studios of HMV's parent company EMI, where they found themselves recording in the room next door to the Beatles themselves. Songwriter Wayne Mason even had an exchange with John Lennon. As he recalled to me, it went something like: 'Hi, I'm Wayne Mason from New Zealand'. 'Ah, the land of butter...'

But by July 1969 the New Zealanders were sailing home, Britain unconquered. The Fourmyula had been a fragile craft on the vast sea of the international music industry. Back on board the Fairisky, their drummer Chris Parry was searching for a language to convey the strangeness of their experience. Years later he told me: "It was full moon and we were out on the Indian Ocean and that was the moment Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. They broadcast it on the ship's Tannoy system, and just as they were doing that we passed this little island in the middle of nowhere and you could imagine you were there with them really, in this wilderness".

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The Epae brothers had kept moving. After writing 'Tumblin' Down' Jay made a few more records in New Zealand, the standout being 'The Creep', a slinky R&B tune promoting a dance craze of his own invention, but before the decade was over he had set sail again, this time for Australia's Gold Coast.

Brother Wes, with the Hi-Fives, played residencies in Las Vegas and the Bahamas, until the group split in the 70s, after which he launched a solo career that took him through the lounge bars of the Midwest and cruise ships of the Caribbean, eventually setting him down in Florida where there was a perennial market for an impersonator who could do Ray Charles and Pavarotti with equal ease. Hector continued to perform with the Volcanics, from Paris to Puerto Rico, Berlin to Bermuda.

The Fourmyula had one more crack at Britain, returning there at the end of 1969. For another year they subsisted on mince, made multiple journeys up and down the M1 to play second-tier gigs in workingmen's clubs, and recorded an album that would contain their finest work, but they were dropped from their record label, and the album would remain unreleased for the next forty years. In their absence they achieved their greatest New Zealand hit with 'Nature', a song of Wayne Mason's that finds solace in the voices of trees, birds and wind - the same sounds that inspired the pre-colonial makers of taonga puoro. The song would have a long life, revived in the 90s by the Mutton Birds and voted New Zealand's greatest song in a 2001 APRA songwriters poll. But as a product the Fourmyula had passed its expiry date, and all but one of the members would individually make their way back home.

Tim Finn would find a metaphor for his own experiences in 'Six Months In A Leaky Boat', but his song might speak for the Fourmyula, or any one of a number of New Zealand bands who set out with conquering dreams. The bravado at the beginning of the song masks an underlying insecurity. Before long the boat springs a leak, tempers flare, shipwreck looms. And though by the last verse he is boasting that he now has the wind back in his sails - and the jaunty hornpipe that forms the song's instrumental centrepiece seems to chime in agreement - there is still a strong suggestion that the whole adventure has been a delusion and a folly.

That is even more clearly the case in The Chills' 'Ocean Ocean' (1992), written by Martin Phillipps. In Phillipps' song the ship is the global music industry, as he recounts the band's mortally bruising experiences on board.

'We drifted as we fought with the sails  
Some lives were lost - there are so many tales...  
Time is still when you're out here  
Seperate lives leading nowhere  
And all together getting pretty tired of this ocean

Out in the open  
But don't rock the boat - don't cause a commotion'

And these are just two of a notable number of songs by New Zealanders that use the metaphor of the sea voyage to describe the vagaries of the musician's life. Perhaps only the Irish have written as many songs about boats. (Anchor Me, Gutter Black, Haul Away, Fish Tails, Blue Smoke ...)

It's been universally remarked that the job of a touring musician is incompatible with most people's idea of a normal existence. There are the extreme highs and cruel lows: the adrenalin that drives you through a performance and the dopamine rush of the applause, followed by the monotonous hours of travel and long nights in strange towns and cities.

Though you are constantly meeting new people, you are also forever saying goodbye, moving on to the next gig. It is an insular world. The only people you see consistently are the other members of your own touring party. And unless your fellow musicians also happen to be your partner and children, a family life is hardly possible.

Dave Dobbyn captured that ambivalence in his song 'Whaling'. Once again, it's the musician as mariner; in this case a whaler, the occupation that brought some of the first Pakeha to New Zealand, and he's longing to be back on shore, back in his sweet baby's arms.

In the meantime, all he has to sustain him is his own swagger, though as he sings in the song, 'I know it's just bravado'.

And when you finally return to shore, who understands the things you have done and seen? Who shares your points of reference? Like soldiers back from the war, touring musicians encountered in their hometowns can give the impression of suffering from a form of shell shock.

I thought of the way Chris Parry of the Fourmyula had described standing on the deck of the Fairsky at night, out in the Indian Ocean as men walked on the moon, and identifying with their cosmic isolation. As it turned out, he was the one member of the group who stayed on in England after their second visit, and ultimately did very well there, producing British bands like the Jam and the Cure.

Perhaps it wasn't the journey away from New Zealand, but re-entry to New Zealand's atmosphere that was the problem.

As for the show bands, occasionally a genius entertainer from that world like Billy T. James or Prince Tui Teka or Dalvanus Prime would return to New Zealand, break through the heavy barriers of television and radio programming, and become a national star, yet most of their peers remained little known to the general public.

In her 1994 thesis on Māori show bands, Suzanne Ormsby wrote that ‘People in Aotearoa are mostly unfamiliar with the way Māori entertainers have acted as unacknowledged ambassadors for this country in various parts of the world for more than one hundred years’. Where, she asked, was the Māori Music Hall of Fame?

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It was some time after my encounter with the Mariner, Hector Epae, that an item in the Evening Post caught my eye. It was an obituary to Jay Epae, Hector’s eldest brother (the one who wrote ‘Tumblin’ Down’ and danced ‘The Creep’. He had spent most of the 1970s paying the Australian club circuit, the article said, but had eventually dropped out of sight. Hearing he was in Brisbane and in bad shape, another brother, Roy, had gone to find him. Roy brought him back to Wellington, where he died on 25 July, age 61.

I wondered about Hector, who I hadn’t seen since that night with John Grennell, but it was a long time before it occurred to me that maybe he would tell me his story.

When I finally went looking he wasn’t hard to find: his name was in the phone book and he answered first time I rang. I introduced myself and bumbled something about his fascinating career, his extraordinary musical family. I mentioned Jay.

His reply sounded dreamy and distant. “Ah yes. Jay. That beautiful voice...”

I told him *he* was a great singer too, and that I would like to interview him sometime. He said he didn’t know why anyone would want to do that. I wanted to hear about his journeys, I said. The places he had played, the people he had met.

“Well Nick, that might be tricky. You see, I’ve got this job to do, cleaning at the hospital at night.”

It seemed all wrong that a fabulous musician who had devoted his life to perfecting his craft and must now have been in his sixties was working as a cleaner. I persevered. What about some time during the day then? “Well I usually sleep during the day.”

In the end he agreed that there might be an afternoon when I could visit and talk to him, though he still couldn’t see why I would want to. A couple of days later I called again, but there was no reply. I tried a few more times over the next few weeks but no one ever picked up the phone.

Out in the world he had been a star, had been treated like one, and lived like one. But all that had happened somewhere else. As if in a dream.

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I didn't really intend to leave this talk on a mournful note, but those are all my stories for today. As I say, this is just a glimpse of a work in progress and at this point I know I've got more questions than answers.

For one thing, a good couple of decades have passed since those encounters I described, and much longer since most of the music I referred to was made. And one obvious question is how have things changed since then?

Are our musical expeditionaries better recognised today? Have public attitudes to the musical arts changed? Or is music still regarded as a 'nice to have' rather than an essential part of who we are?

In today's digitally hyper-connected world, does the 'tyranny of distance' Tim Finn sang about still exist? Does it still encumber us?

One thing I will note is we don't seem to have stopped singing about sea voyages yet. One of the songs from this year that caught my attention is by Unknown Mortal Orchestra, the band of New Zealand musician Ruban Nielson, who has Hawaiian and Maori ancestry and whose father was a member of John Rowles' band. The song puts a fresh perspective on the voyager myth. It's called 'I Killed Captain Cook'.

Anyway, at this point, I'd be happy to take questions but I'd be equally happy to hear any answers to any of my questions.

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**Steve Waters:**

One of the things that really resonated for me was growing up in the late 60s, early 70s how all those music shows we used to have on Sunday nights, we loved those talent quests. The greatest compliment you could pay a band was when they were doing their covers was, 'gosh, they sound just like the real thing'. You know, everything was measured by how we compare it with those those particular international acts. So hearing those stories about the show bands, just the sheer volume of musicians out there plying their trade, and passing that on is a really overlooked part of that, that sort of narrative. So I really, really appreciate that that insight. And the others,

**Question 1**

I have a question, if nobody else wants to jump up. You mentioned partway through you were talking about songs that you couldn't get out of your head and research that they've inspired. Can you give us an example of that?

**Nick Bollinger**

Well, actually, any of the songs I've written about here, once I started thinking about this theme, they just kept playing in my head. And, you know, I hadn't chosen those songs before I started thinking about this Voyager myth. The songs were sort of conjured up by the myth, and then I just had to write about them.

### **Question 2**

Kia ora, Nick, thank you for that. I found it quite emotional hearing about the Māori bands, the musicians and just how popular they were overseas and being able to make a living. And I think it's really interesting the idea of the mariner, and even the different types of transport. Because then, you know, like you were saying, now with the internet, we can just get online and connect like that. But even thinking about the group from England, where you said, they were on a boat, hearing about someone landing on the moon. And then also, of course, with planes, and that kind of that sort of travel as well. It sounds really interesting, what you're doing. And it also reminded me of Che Fu and 'Waka' as well, you know, obviously - I don't know if you've covered his stuff here as well. But thank you. It sounds really fascinating.

### **Nick Bollinger**

Thank you. I'm glad that you made it made sense.

### **Steve Watters**

If there are no further questions, I think now's a great opportunity to put your hands together and thank Nick for his presentation.