

# WHO CALLS THE TUNE?

## Why there isn't more Maori music on record – and what to do about it

What is the state of Maori music today? What we hear on the marae bears little relation to what is available on records. So who calls the tune – the recording companies? In our last issue, Kuini Wano argued that the commercialism of record companies effectively discourages groups and clubs from going beyond the “monotonous and boring” bounds of haka boogie. Little traditional music exists on record, and little attempt seems to have been made to develop new forms or themes. But, according to one of New Zealand's leading record producers, times are changing . . .

Tony Vercoe is managing director and producer of Kiwi-Pacific Records Ltd, based in Wellington. He knows a lot about music – and though it may not be apparent from the Kiwi-Pacific catalogue, that includes traditional Maori music. Of “haka boogie”, he says:

“Groups are happy to record it and to see their records bought by tourists. We are in no position to discourage that, though we as publishers have a responsibility to ensure that the group's performance and our recording quality are up to

scratch, and that the notes which accompany the record are accurate.”

But there are problems with recording traditional music. “One is that people always want it to be of the best possible standard and done at the ideal time – but this is rarely practicable, and getting the stuff is the difficult part.”

Certainly, our best exponents are unlikely to feel at home in the awesome confines of a recording studio, singing ancient waiata into a microphone while Pakeha technicians in headphones press buttons and manipulate switches. And equally certainly, a recording team cannot turn up at a moment's notice to a tangihanga with all their gear – not that they would be welcome if they tried. These are, obviously, extreme cases, but they illustrate the gulf which can separate

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**“It begins to look like the revival will extend to music recording, and I would welcome it. I don't delude myself that there's commercial potential in it, but I feel it's important to have such records available”**

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Maori traditional preferences and Pakeha technological ones. Although more and more marae are used to TV cameras, tape recorders and microphones in evidence at hui, this gulf can still result in suspicion, shyness, or a blunt refusal to perform. Sometimes too deference to Maori feeling by Pakeha will prevent a commercial recording, as Tony Vercoe relates:

“Several times I tried to arrange the release of tapes from the archives of Auckland University so that records could be issued to coincide with Mervyn McLean and Margaret Orbell's *Traditional Songs of the Maori*. But it was felt that these recordings were held in trust with the artists, mostly Tuhoë, and to make a commercial recording would be in breach of that trust.”

Nevertheless, the traditional field has not been ignored entirely. “We did a set of three seven-inch discs back in the

“. . . more and more marae are used to TV cameras, tape recorders and microphones in evidence at hui . . .” Full-scale media exposure at the John Waititi opening deterred no one from singing. Here are Emma Rogers, Ada Haig and Ngoingoi Pewhairangi



KEN GEORGE