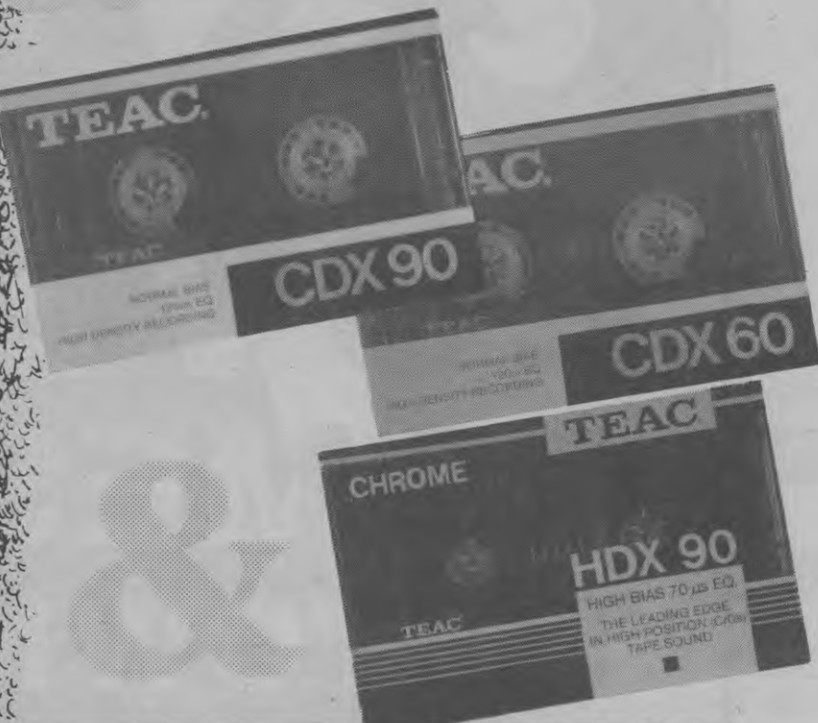


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PHOTO BY GIL HANLY

Colin Hogg and Sam Hunt.

Memorable Language Sam Hunt on the Road

Sam Hunt says: "It was midnight where I was staying and I went out into this room where there was one of these digital clocks and I said to this friend of mine, that is the end of September, that is the end of winter, it is now October, it's spring. I can feel it in my bones. The next morning I woke up, somebody rang from Hong Kong about the naming of a ship after me, then somebody rang from somewhere else to say I'd just won a trip to Wales with the All-Blacks. All on October the first — so it feels good to be back on the road."

Sam Hunt tucks into his beer. He's lunching with Colin Hogg, the author of *Angel Gear*, a new book chronicling Sam on the road. Hogg's book combines biography, narrative, interviews and of course poems by Sam. Sam has a cold today and the two men quibble over whether he should go to the doctor. I suggest at least one antibiotic, we all order some lunch, I give Sam a book and he pays for the meal, which is superb.

So, Sam, they're actually naming a ship after you? The *SS Hunt*?
"Yeah, the *Shunt*! No, it'll be the *Sam Hunt*, so you'll be able to read all about it in the shipping news!"
People can have strikes on you.
"Don't worry, I'm waiting for when she sinks and the headlines that say 'Sam Hunt Goes Down'. It's a big ship, it'll be good. My mother said, 'I suppose they'll be peddling marijuana on it,' she said, ha! Cocaine from Columbia. It's not a drift-netter, I checked that. It's an oil and ore ship, and it goes from Hong Kong to Britain."

What made them decide to slap your moniker on the hull of a freighter?

"I said to the broker, you realise of course that the *Mikhail Lermontov* is named after a great Russian poet, and look what happened there."

"This shipping firm decided to name their ships after Australian poets, and it didn't take them long to run out. So they must be on to the Kiwis. Can you imagine the *Carl Stead*?"

Hunt and Hogg burst into laughter, the new bottle of Pescovino arrives, Sam struggles with the ice bucket.

Do you think you've become a writing institution in New Zealand, Sam?

"Certainly the last thing I'd be an

institution of would be writing, because writing's the last thing I ever think of doing. I'm not really a writer. I come from a different part of the village. I'm not one of the scribes.

"Actually someone said something to me the other day about my 'image'. I thought, what the fuck are you talking about? 'Image'? If you wanted to concentrate on that you could make anyone look tame."

Yet people have a strong conception of Sam Hunt as a person, don't they?

"Oh yeah. But that's because they might get an image of a pine tree against the mist — an image which people remember because it touches them in some way. A pine tree in the mist may remind them of sometime when somebody died. You hit people in different ways."

"You're telling a story, and with a poem ... it's not like a singer who goes out on stage and does an act. What I'm doing is living my life. It's concentrated into a concert, but it's not a hell a lot different from the life I'm living anyway. It's just part of the same story. Talking on radio or TV is just part of it. You make the word flesh in whatever you do."

Sam Hunt most recently appeared on our TV screens on a film entitled *Catching The Tide*, a one-off TV documentary on Cook Strait and the people and places resident on its shores. Written and presented by Hunt, it captured him at his best: a garrulous talker, convivial and enchanted, at ease with people, combing the beaches for memory's hair-triggers, calling up stories and anecdotes. "Incantatory" is how I'd describe Sam Hunt's poetry, but that's a word you trip over after the second bottle of Pescovino. More of that later, we're still drinking the first:

"I worked with a director on *Catching The Tide*, Costa Botes, my Turkish Delight - ha ha! He doesn't like being called that."

"When I saw a film a few years ago called *Lamb Of God*, I thought if I ever made a film, I'd like the person who made that to direct my film. And when I saw Vincent Ward's *In Spring One Plants Alone*, if I ever made a film about Cook Strait, I'd like to use that camera-man, and so on. So when it came time to make *Catching The Tide*, I said to the producer, I want this person and this person, and so on. It's not like writing a poem,

where you don't need someone to hold the pencil — unless you're really pissed.

"It was working in a landscape that I loved. A barbaric sort of landscape, nothing safe about it, Cook Strait. Just the other day another plane disappeared there. Strange things happen over there — there are some big people dreaming there, big people buried there. It's a powerful place, powerful place."

"The New Zealanders there interest me, and they're what I've always written about, I suppose. The people that attract me, you find them in places like that. Some boat-builder like Harold Saunders ... In the film I refer to people like that who have done something so well — like Prime Minister Norman Kirk, who actually built a house, and Henry Moore, the greatest sculptor, who when asked why he put holes in the statues said, 'I was one day cutting so deep into the heart of the stone that I discovered the sky on the other side' — that was Harold Saunderson's boatbuilding technique revealed to me, by a sculptor. It was good to stand back and realise who the real artists are."

"In my case, I don't regard myself in the writing tradition so much as other things. I realise the tradition which most people are from."

Why do you write, then?

"I write to right myself. And so I won't forget it. It's not the ultimate performance of the word, writing it. I've just written a poem here, and writing it down is important because that's the version that you want, that you're going for. The way it shapes out, you know. It's like writing a letter to somebody, you put it off and put it off and suddenly you write the best letter that you ever could have done because *the time is right*. That's the letter."

Sam Shepherd said that he can write 30 openings to the same play, but they're not 30 different versions, they're 30 *different plays* — and the job is to decide which of the 30 is the *right play*.

"And the sense too that you may write it 30 times, and all you're doing is going hack, hack — cutting back to the initial inspiration. There's the dead wood to cut out. Some people say that I should get a fucking chainsaw out and be done with it! But I like to pick away more carefully than that. It's part of the birth process, part of the idea that the poem was written anyway before Sam Hunt was around, it was just that no-one had heard it."

"Then you get the other times, when the refining and distilling process has taken place and you've got the finished article. Whack, that's it."

"I've been reading a lot of Yeats, and you can get books on his manuscripts, and talk about 30 versions — he did more like three hundred. But all of them have got the voice, got the chant, and that's what I'm looking for — is there a voice?"

"When I come to poems I always read them aloud, you want to have a listen to it. It is something to be listened to, its sound is everything. The printed word is just to get it from the *Listener* office in Wellington to me, you know? And once I've got it, I've got to know to lift it off the page, give it the colours that it needs to work — give the sounds a chance to work on me."

So for you, what's the difference between prose and poetry?

"I always liked that story Dennis Glover told about Christ when his parents lost him in the temple and he went off and talked to the priests, and the priests asked, 'What do you prefer Jesus, poetry or prose?' And Christ said, 'Poetry, man, because it's shorter!'"

"In poetry you're using the length of the line, the stresses, to make sounds. Of course, I love the poetry of prose. I don't worry about those definitions. When I read a great book like Barry Crump's *Wild Pork And Watercress* or Maurice Shadbolt's *Season Of The Jew*, sure that's prose, but I like the poetry of it. The old