

AS EASY AS 1,2...

Moana and the Moahunters

“I went up to TV New Zealand — there’s a make-up lady there who said she’d slap a face on for me before the concert — and I banged into [Clarke] up there. She said, ‘Hi, how are you Moana?’ and I said, ‘I had a stink soundcheck but I heard you had a rotten day.’ I never knew anything about it, so she was explaining to me her point of view. I said to her that she was the meat in the sandwich, that the elders would never invite Georgina Te Heihei or Tariana Turia up to speak, Maori women who are politicians, and that I didn’t think she should speak. There are a lot of issues involved, it has to change, Maori women have to be able to get up and speak on the marae. But Maori women and men need to sort that out, and it’s not helped by Pakeha women getting up, they only get in the way whether they want to or not. Helen Clarke said she supported the point that Titiwhai was making, she was just upset that it was made to her, not Jenny Shipley, and that whoever had invited her to get up and speak, well they certainly let her down when it came to her time to get up. It’s a hot issue at the moment, Maori women speaking on the marae, and it needs to change, we’re sick of listening to a whole bunch of goofballs get up there. Maori women need to be heard.”

It’s been five years since we last had and heard an album from Moana and the Moahunters, but there’s been no shortage of noise in between. Singer Moana Maniapoto-Jackson juggles many roles outside of music. She acts as the National Maori Smokefree Co-ordinator, hosts a weekly show on Iwi radio entitled *Tribal Beats*, and over the past few years, she’s appeared on TV3’s *Ralston Group* and TVNZ’s *Shortland Street*.

Moana remains most recognised and revered as a musician. The Moahunters’ 1993 debut album *Tabi* went Gold (7,500 sales) within a year of its release, and received international acclaim in Hawaii, India, and Malaysia. The band have sporadically released several singles since *Tabi*, but nothing substantial until now.

Seated in the boardroom of the Moahunters’ distribution company, BMG, Moana reveals the delays encountered in completing *Rua* were both frustrating and beneficial.

“At some stages I thought, ‘Bloody hell! We’re never gonna finish this damn thing.’ But the five year gap was useful for me because we did lots of travelling overseas, and that was reaffirming, it gave me confidence to progress as a songwriter and to be more experimental, recording wise and on stage. So, while it was frustrating that there was a big fat gap, it worked for me creatively.”

With *Rua*, you’ve improved further on *Tabi*’s marriage of funk, and hip hop, and indigenous sounds.

“Yeah, I think it’s moved along, and I guess that comes with the time frame, and how we’ve developed as a band and the confidence that you get to explore things and take a few more risks. With *Tabi*, we were just starting out, on *Rua* we’re trying to get a bit more substantial, trying to compose hakas instead of just using the sounds, and we’re trying to really using those traditional instruments to their fullest. I hope that we’ve moved on in the last four years in terms of our music, and creatively.”

Again you’ve collaborated with several people, Neil Finn and Ruia Aperahama, amongst others. What are the strengths in working that way?

“I think you can get a lot of energy off other people. Other people have got certain skills that I don’t, I’m a beatless chick, and I can’t play anything for a start. I’m totally lost in the studio, but I can hear notes and have the concepts, but I need somebody to interpret those at that level.”

Because it’s been five years since *Tabi*, do you feel you have to rebuild a profile?

“We’ve always been a playing kind of a band, we’ve done heaps of festivals around the country, the WOMAD thing and different Maori rock festivals, and myself, I’ve always had a strong media profile anyway. People have been waiting for [*Rua*], and I don’t feel like we’ve been out on a limb.”

With your various speaking engagements, and your Maori Smokefree position, and *Shortland Street* etc., do people see you as a musician trying to act, or an activist who’s also a musician? Do people confuse your roles?

“I would have hoped everyone would have forgotten about *Shortland Street* by now, that was Moana just having a childhood dream. I don’t see what I do as incompatible. *Smokefree* is part of Maori development, and that’s what I’m talking about in music. My music is about stories of this country, or things that are happening around me that I find really fascinating, and a lot of that’s to do with Maori

On Waitangi Day, Labour leader Helen Clarke cried after being told off by Titiwhai Harawira, and Moana and the Moahunters played a concert at the Auckland Town Hall to launch their new album, *Rua*. Late that afternoon, Moana went to TVNZ’s Auckland headquarters, and met Clarke in the make-up room, readying herself for an appearance on the six o’clock news.

development. And working in the media is part of that, so I don’t see any tension between the roles that I take, they’re all part of the same package, with music being the priority. In my songs I’m talking about the Treaty, that I’d be talking about on the *Ralston Group*.”

Are you conscious of having to be a role model in everything you do?

“It’s a responsibility, unfortunately. It comes with having a media profile when there are very few Maori women that have one, so whether you like it or not, that’s just the way it is. How many people say to you, ‘John, you’re a role model for young Pakeha guys.’ I get that all the time, and on one hand I feel it’s annoying because it’s putting a big deal onto me, and on the other hand I understand it. It can be restricting in some sense, I’m quite aware of how what I do or say impacts upon Maori, teenagers, or kids, or even



kaumatua, what sort of impact what I say on television or what I do, has on them. It amazes me all the time — I’ll have the chairman of the Tuhoi Maori Trust Board get excited because he’s met me, and he’s seen me on TV, and the same with a bunch of 10 year olds.”

That pressure must become a real burden sometimes.

“It can be, but in another way it’s lovely, it’s sweet, and it’s a very special thing. I’m kind of used to it because it’s been that way for awhile, and it’s nice to get positive feedback, especially when things are going a bit hard and someone drops you a note and says that your music touched them in a certain way. But I’m well aware that Jordan Luck wouldn’t have the same kind of pressure on him.”

Do you ever wish to do something that doesn’t require a particular stance or message?

“Oh yeah, I don’t want to sound like I’m an evangelist either, because I’m not — I’m not writing songs to teach people things or educate. When I write a song, ‘Ancestors’ or ‘Treaty’, it’s just writing about what I’m fascinated with, I’m not doing it to deliberately take an educational point of view or stance. That’s always the way it’s perceived because I’m not writing love songs, so if you’re not writing love songs, everyone turns it into something majorly political.

“I’ve never taken a stance without it being carefully thought out and discussed with my management [Moana’s husband Willie Jackson, and Wyn Osborne]. We will only say or do something if we think it will progress the development of Maori music, or right what we perceive to be an injustice. We don’t see why the music industry should be exempt from challenge and evaluation regarding its commitment to and treatment of things Maori. The way we look at it is, we have the profile and the support base to do so, so it’s our responsibility. And though we might get slagged off or maligned, it’s not about us personally, the issue is a bigger one — it’s about Maori music.”

How often do you suffer from people believing that pro-Maori means anti-white?

“I’ve had so many stupid rumours floating around about me, there’s two that I really love — that I sacked my soundman and all that ‘cause they were white — they were useless, that’s why I sacked them. The UB40 one was the classic one ‘cause that actually did me a lot of harm. It was that I said, ‘all honkies leave the tent.’ Can you believe that I would say that [laughter], in front of 10,000 people at Mt Smart. That started ‘cause I said, ‘hands up if you’re young, gifted, and black,’ because I was doing the song, and it ended up on talkback! I don’t know who started it, but when we tried to get future gigs after that, people who were working around the promoters said, ‘he won’t have anything to do with her after those statements,’ so that was quite damaging. I remember one time when Willie’s car got

robbed and a whole lot of our CDs got ripped off. This little hood, his aunt found them and she rang up and said she had all this stuff that was burgled, and she wanted to bring it back. We were like, ‘you lovely lady, thank you very much, come in,’ and she goes, ‘I was so nervous to come here because my friends said that Moana hates Pakehas.’ There’s this whole preconception out there, just bullshit carry-on, but I don’t know how you combat that. It’s amazing the prejudices that people have.”

Speaking of prejudices, aside from Iwi radio, do you see any inroads with local radio playing Maori music.

“My observation is that radio has severely regressed. Classic hits and easy listening — they’re regurgitating stuff that was crap first time around. Basically, if you use Maori language you’ve blacklisted yourself off the radio anyway, anything that has a discernible Maori style to it is out. I didn’t realise until I looked at the tracklisting [of *Rua*] the other day, every song has got Maori language in it. I have no expectations whatsoever that we’re going to get mainstream radio play. We’ve given up basically, I can’t be bothered, what’s the point? It just hasn’t changed, and you get stations like Mai FM that are touted as Maori radio, but if you put a song like ‘Treaty’ out, it doesn’t get played on there even though it is a Maori track. National Radio, which I always thought was the doyen of the middle class, they’re wonderful, they play all our Maori language tracks — National Radio, Iwi Radio

and Student — that’s it for us. It’s almost like Maori music — and I’m not just talking about us — it’s underground here. Everyone talks about ‘alternative’ music, Flying Nun or whatever, but anything that’s got Maori language in it is just so alternatively alternative, it doesn’t rate. I still think that Maori music is still not considered to be as credible as, or part of, kiwi music, it’s still looked on as a novelty — we don’t salute that style of music.”

It annoys me when local acts water down or tailor their sound to try and get played on commercial radio.

“There’s no point, ‘cause there’s no guarantee you’re going to get the recipe right anyway. I am mind boggled when I hear about how people allow their songs to have some dickhead from a radio station say, ‘move the chorus to here’ or ‘cut 10 seconds here,’ it’s just unbelievable.”

Are there any possibilities on local television?

“We can’t even get on the *Havoc* show, they’re not interested, it’s an ‘editorial decision.’ When someone representing us asked if they were going to take me on, this was last year, we were told, ‘we’re interested, but we’ve just had Tama Iti.’ That was a strange comment to make, but I let that one pass. It pisses me off that something that’s been touted as supporting New Zealand music isn’t interested — I remember interviewing Mikey Havoc when he came on *Yahoo*.”

Rua’s out now, so when do you start on *Toru*?

“I’m bugged if I know what I’m gonna do now. What to do next, that’s always the challenge isn’t it. I’m trying really hard to explore fusion music and I feel like I’m being pulled further back into the past, but I’ve got to keep trying to move it into the future somehow, so that’s a challenge. I’ll rest on that for six years I think!”

JOHN RUSSELL