



He Waiata Mo Te Iwi Aotearoa: Singing For Our People

'Young, Gifted and Black' is the only cover version on Aotearoa's second album, *He Waiata Mo Te Iwi* ("Singing For Our People"); apart from a Joy Yates/Dave MacRae number all the songs are written by Apanui. It's a bi-lingual album, sung in English and Maori. Aotearoa's aim is to waken young Maori to their own spiritual resources. Led by the determined Apanui, they are a dedicated political band.

"Heaps of Pakeha musicians say, 'Your stuff is political, you're pushing this stuff on us', " says Apanui. "And I say, 'Look. Everything that you sing about, what you wear, the way you look, the language you speak, reflects where you've come from, where your people are at. So don't tell me I haven't the right to do that as well.'"

Whakarongo

Apanui formed Aotearoa in 1984

Heads turn when Aotearoa strike up their rendition of Nina Simone's 'Young, Gifted and Black.' Ngahiwi Apanui, the Wellington band's ebullient songwriter, grins. "A lot of Pakeha people shit themselves when they hear it!" he says. "They're dancing and they stop!"

"It's amazing how a song easily accepted in the 60s can stir such emotion in New Zealand now. But of all the songs written to inspire young black people, that one says it all. Black people don't look at themselves as being talented. It's a self-esteem thing. But all of a sudden you're being told you're young, gifted and black, and you go, *Wow!*"

after meeting his friend Joe Williams at Victoria University's Te Herenga Waka marae. The purpose, he says, was to make "Maori culture and Maori cosmos and being Maori acceptable to young Maori people."

"My first idea was to have a group singing totally in Maori. After a while it became obvious that there was a whole section of Maoridom that would miss out on what we do if we didn't sing in English as well."

Since the days of the band's first single 'Maranga Ake Ai' the composition of the group has changed as members have come and gone — so maintaining the original concept has been difficult. "In the beginning we had people who knew everything about what we were doing intimately. Now, the band is more typical of Maori youth, with varying degrees of knowledge of things Maori. It's been hard to get them past this thing that it wasn't the music that was the most important thing, but the concept."

Implicit in adhering to that concept is an understanding — and belief — in the spiritual side of "being Maori."

"There are a lot of spiritual forces at work which can either punish you or support you. The concept that we carry, the kaupapa, is very dangerous and a lot of people shy away from it. People say you can get stung by it."

Apanui talks of "timely little reminders" to do things correctly, or with the right motive. "Things like visitations. I've seen it happen. There are times when I've felt under threat. When I've woken up in the middle of the night and I've been fighting with something that's just about given me a hiding ..."

"For me the concept of the band is something totally Maori, and therefore deserves everybody's total respect. It has to be for the music to come out convincingly."

He Waiata Mo Te Iwi is a consistent album, with superb singing and musicianship on many fine songs. The vocals are confident, with lovely harmonies. "Maoris have always got this thing for melody," says Apanui. "They love melody, heaps and heaps of it! ..."

"Maori songwriting has always been totally different to English songwriting, because the emotions that are evoked in Maori songs are very deep ones. Maoris have very, very deep emotions. Go to a tangi and they just sob — they call that 'e hotu hotu manawa' — your heart sobs, it really does, it really hurts."

"It's the same when you get angry, so pissed off you can't hold it. Young people today are probably

more angry than 20 or 30 years ago. They're angry because they feel they've missed out on something, something they felt would have made them whole. It's made them feel like, 'I've wasted 20 years of my life and finally discovered what I am.'"

Being Maori

So now it's a matter of "overturning conditioning." While the album has traditional elements such as the opening song of welcome 'He Waiata Powhiri' or the timeless melodies of 'Sweet Child' and 'E Hine', the influence of reggae is still very strong. Apanui, however, believes that Rastafarianism doesn't fit in with "being Maori."

"We take what the English press call 'a modernistic approach.' We use methods that are familiar to people to put across our messages. If our whole concert consisted of two hours of waiata they wouldn't know what we are talking about, basically because they're not familiar with it."

"We're using reggae and rock and soul and funk to put across these messages they're familiar with. We sort out which medium is going to suit best the theme of the song, and reggae has become the black political music. So because a lot of our songs are politically motivated we've used reggae — and have become known as a reggae band rather than a Maori band."

To this writer, a "Maori band" usually means strong singing and exquisite playing, from Herbs to any small town pub band, and Aotearoa's album reflects this. However Apanui is aware of the negative stereotypes as well.

"The words 'Maori band' have always had negative connotations, but for me it's now. What it actually means is a band based on things Maori."

"The problem is that Maori musicians have been at a disadvantage — not talentwise — but because there's a heap of stereotypes about what they do and their attitudes. I know several bands that have been really good but have been ignored, so after three or four years bashing

their heads against the wall they give up. So then it's 'Oh, a typical Maori band, breaking up, no stickability.' That would kill most bands."

"Golden Havest, with Karl Gordon out front, were great. Then he left, and no one took any notice of them after that, because they were all Maoris. The same with Taste of Bounty down here. They were a great band. Hori and Hemi were good too, they were the same as we are about."

"When I started this band I thought there's no way we're going to be ignored because it's gonna scare the shit out of everyone. Sure enough our strength — what's made us noticed and newsworthy — is what we've been singing about. People said, 'You won't get exposure, they won't listen to a Maori political band.' And I said, you just watch ..."

But, says Apanui, it's much harder to run a band with a political attitude than one which just wants to entertain. "You tend to take a lot of flak, people yelling 'Get off!' or 'You don't know fuck all about the country!' People think singing about politics is a load of crap, but everything you do on a stage is political! You dress and play in a certain way and people think, oh wow, that looks really cool, I'd like to dress like that. Music is put up as a kind of fantasy world, so it's a powerful medium to put across messages."

Solidarity

The album contains songs such as 'Positive' and 'Singing For Our People' that are the assertive voice of the Maori renaissance, plus the supportive 'Kanak People', which urges unity among the people of the Pacific. "The Kanaky case really sticks out in the Pacific at the moment. A lot of Maori people feel it's wrong to pull together, but Maori people are preoccupied with surviving. Any time they get to put into Maoritanga is a bonus. There's a divide-and-rule mentality of administration in the Pacific. Lots of Maoris hate Islanders, or Islanders hate Maoris. Why should they? Out of all the people in the Pacific, we're

CONTINUED ON PAGE 12

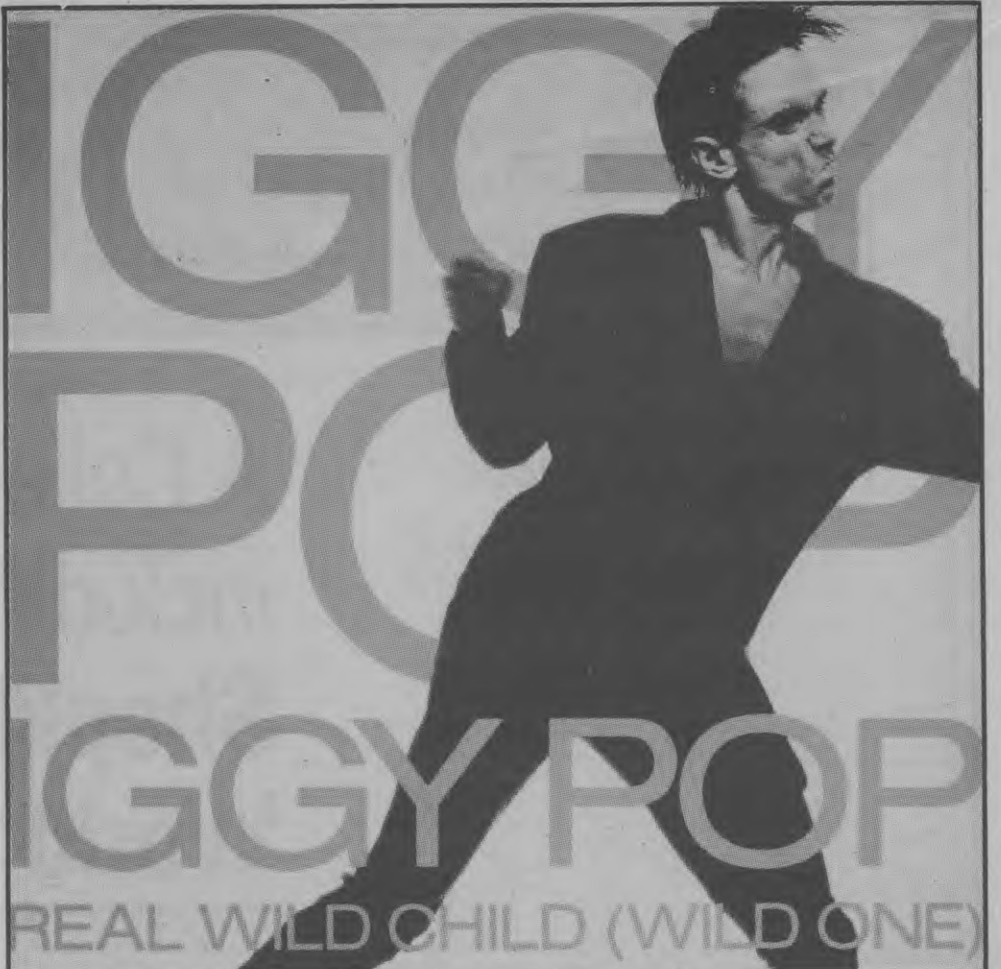
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