

# He Rata Kouru Nui Herbs: The Mighty Rata Grows

"Men may come, men may go, but Ruatoria goes on forever."

Beneath the imposing portals of a meeting house, an elder from the Ngati-porou tribe welcomes a group of visitors from Auckland to the Mangahanea marae in Ruatoria.

Receiving the powhiri (welcome) are Herbs, with an entourage of family, roadcrew, filmmakers and journalists. They've come to spend Queen's Birthday weekend at the East Coast township to launch the band's first album in two-and-a-half years, *Sensitive to a Smile*.

Ruatoria has received a lot of negative publicity after 30 fires in the past two years. But after an arduous eight-hour drive winding round the misty East Cape road, the skies are clear over the town, and all the visitors can sense is a relaxing tranquillity and the spirituality of generations.

After three stirring orations in Maori, the visitors from the city reply in their own way. Lacking a fluent Maori speaker, Herbs stand and sing the traditional 'E Papa,' then 'Long Ago' and, incongruously, 'Reggae Train.' But the message gets across. The weekend is all about communication, giving and receiving. Herbs aren't in Ruatoria to solve the town's problems, but to contribute some goodwill to get people talking. And the community shares the richness of its traditional ways and values with the band and its entourage.

After dinner on the marae, the first concert of the weekend takes place at the Uepohatu hall. It's the whanau concert; family night. Three hundred children, parents and grandparents fill the magnificently carved hall to hear Herbs unveil the songs of their new album and some old favourites. Looking down on the band are two pictures of the town's most loved sons, statesman Apirana Ngata and soldier Ngarimu, VC.

Every member of Herbs sings a lead vocal through the evening, along with their inimitable Pacific harmonies, but the show is led by the ebullient Willie Hona. When the power fails, he finally satisfies the kids sitting at his feet — they've been demanding the Kentucky Fried Chicken ad all night. After the unfamiliar new songs, the hall really bops when the hits start coming: 'Long Ago,' and "the song about a dog." The kids shy away from singing along to 'Slice of Heaven.'

Next morning begins with more speeches on the marae, then it's down the road to Ngata College for some workshops with the band. Maybe the town is too busy preparing for the day's big rugby match, East Coast versus old rivals Poverty Bay, for few are there to hear the band discuss their musical roots.

Willie Hona, "the Cowboy," goes back to playing with Mark Williams in Dargaville in the early 70s. Samoan drummer Fred Faleauto, "the Phantom," is now the only non-Maori in the band; he spent his youth playing in multi-cultural bands in the Islands. Charlie Tumahai's illustrious career is well-known: from cabaret beginnings to bassist for Be Bop Deluxe. "Joining Herbs was an eye-opener for me," he

says. "I have learnt more things in the past 18 months that have been beneficial to me as a person and musician than in the 17 years away."

Hugh Lynn, Herbs' manager and leader of the Warrior Records' extended family, talks of tapping musical talent as a resource for the Maori. "Why are our people so successful at music, but not at the European way, with no control over music or management?" Warrior is one response, another is Whare Tapere, a Fame-type school currently being developed to train young Maori in the entertainment business.

The town is bustling in the afternoon for the rugby, but after holding Poverty Bay at 0-0 through the game, the local side succumbs in the closing minutes to two penalties and a converted try. But the evening's concert more than makes up for it. Once again at the Uepohatu hall (opposite which a new fire station is being built), this time it's a cultural evening for Herbs, with the band giving a short set to launch their album.

Herbs sit as guests of honour while two local cultural groups — Ai-tanga-A-Hauiti from Tolaga Bay and Hokowhitu-A-Tu from Tokomaru Bay — perform traditional songs and poi dances. No one could fail to be moved by the rich choral harmonies. Some of the melodies sneak up with a familiarity, too: goosebumps rise to 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' and 'Born Free,' translated into Maori to encourage use of the language.

A local comic has the overflowing audience in fits with a routine that would put Billy T in his place, and Herbs respond with a musical bracket and a presentation: the first pressed copy of *Sensitive to a Smile*, and a paddle from the Hawaii canoe that sailed from Tahiti to New Zealand last year, landing near the East Cape.

The most powerful moment though is when all the local men in the hall, including one of the estranged Rastas, spontaneously come forward from their seats to give a stirring haka that none of those present will forget.

Then it's back to the marae, where Willie Hona and keyboardist Tama Lundon lead the singalong — classics from Sam Cooke, the Drifters, and Jimmy Cliff favourites: 'The Harder They Come,' 'Johnny Too Bad.' It's 3am before the Herbs entourage beds down in the meeting house.

Sunday dawns to the sound of a helicopter, flying in to film aerial shots of Ruatoria for a documentary on the album launch. At the final concert that night, several Rastas come out of seclusion to attend, and they come back to the marae afterwards for more songs and stories till the early hours.

On Monday morning the poroporoaki (farewell) takes place on the marae. Both hosts and visitors speak: a local Rasta is chosen as one of the marae's four speakers, and TVNZ's Robin Kora articulates the feelings of the Herbs contingent. There's no doubt everybody feels enriched by their Ruatorian experience as the visitors head home. CB



Bandmembers as Saturday's concert closes. Fred back at Marae.

Not a lot was said on the way home from Ruatoria. "Everyone was so overjoyed, they were speechless," says Herbs' bassist Charlie Tumahai.

"What I liked about it was that everybody felt that way," he says. "Regardless of what race of people you were, or what your job was in everyday life. I watched a lot of people there, and coming away from the place was a very sad experience."

It had been the idea of Herbs' guitarist Dilworth Karaka to launch *Sensitive to a Smile* in Ruatoria:

"Everyone was thinking of an Auckland launch, with all the fanfare and buildup, and I said, why not Ruatoria?"

"After all the hassles that had been going on there, I thought it would be nice for our music to in some way bring the people together. Use the record launch as a focus, and hopefully the community would come out. Which happened. It wasn't to try and solve the problems of Ruatoria, it was for communication purposes."

Once the idea had been mentioned, things

snowballed. With Herbs' manager Hugh Lynn, Tumahai and Karaka went down to discuss things with the Ngati-porou runanga on the Mangahanea marae.

"We took our taka — like a proposal — down there, and once it was accepted by the tangata whenua, a wave of organisation took over," says Karaka. Although none of Herbs are from Ruatoria, there are many marital connections between the band and the area.

Herbs have often visited marae but the Queen's Birthday launch was the first lengthy stay for the band and its extended family of relatives and supporters. "Every time you're on a

marae, it's like adding another one to your list," says Karaka. "You become one with those people from that tribe and their marae, and you can always go back."

## Maoritanga

Growing up in the city, as most of Herbs' current lineup have, made it difficult for members of their generation to pick up their Maoritanga, although visits to their local marae — Karaka's is Orakei at Bastion Point in Auckland — were still a part of their upbringing. "But I never spent the time to take up the language, to listen to

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