

# THE SILENT ECHOES OF CHATHAM ISLAND

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## Introduction

The fieldwork for this paper was originally designed to uncover the church music practices and trends on Chatham Island. As work progressed it became clear that the research net needed to be cast more widely. Thus, the current musical culture of Chatham Island in general came into focus. Before reporting on my research on Chatham Island, I will provide some background to the current culture that can be found there.

The Chatham Islands are part of New Zealand, yet are situated some 768 kilometres east from Wellington and 749 kilometres from Napier. The Chatham Islands (44°S 176°W) consist of two main inhabited islands: Pitt Island (population c50) and Chatham Island (population c650). Pitt Island lies 23 kilometres south east of Chatham Island. There are a further 23 islands contained within a radius of 50 kilometres, also considered to be part of the Chatham Islands.

The original inhabitants of the Chatham Islands were the Moriori people, who are thought to have landed on the islands from New Zealand between 700 and 1000 years ago. The Moriori people named the island Rekohu, which means ‘misty island’, and although there is a growing body of research on the history and culture of the Moriori, much remains to be discovered about their musical practices (see especially King, 2000). Accounts such as the following inform our piecemeal understanding of this musical culture:

*For amusements, the [Moriore] people had high-jumping . . . and skipping with a rope . . . but no musical instruments, although they knew traditionally of the Koauau, or flute of the Maoris, the use of which, however, was neglected. They had also Kapa, a kind of dance, somewhat similar to the Maori haka, in which the people were arranged in two parallel rows one behind the other . . . and it was accompanied by a song.* (Shand, 1911:11)

Awareness of the Chatham Islands among Europeans occurred with Lieutenant William Robert Broughton, commander of the ship the HMS *Chatham*, in 1791. Broughton named Chatham after his ship, and Pitt Island after William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham.

Yet, rather than European colonisation, it was Maori invasion in 1835 that would change the life of the Moriori forever. Official records report that the Maori killed 226 Moriori—most of these cannibalised as well—although this number is probably over 300, when children are taken into account as well (King, 2000:63). The death toll amounted to about one fifth of the Moriori population. Over one thousand further Moriori subsequently died as a result of Maori aggression. The effects on Moriori culture were catastrophic.

## Early Christian Contact

The Chathams had their first exposure to Western Christianity in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1840, a ship carrying three Anglican Maori students from a mission near Otaki arrived. They taught Maori people on the island to read and write. One of the Maori, Wiremu Tamahana, preached at Waitangi for 25 years. Also, a Wesleyan minister, John Aldred, sailed from Wellington with three Maori Wesleyan students in 1842. They brought with them portions of the Bible written in Maori, which proved enormously popular with local people (Holmes, 1993:148).

However, without doubt the most famous Christian contact came via the deployment of German Lutheran missionaries to the island. Island historian David Holmes wrote:

*The five German missionaries to the Chathams were Johannes Engst, Johann Baucke, Johann Muller, Franz Schiermeister and Oskar Beyer. They were all members of the Lutheran Gossener Mission in Berlin and belonged to the Moravian Brethren sect. . . . [They arrived in 1843 and moved around a little before] they all ended up at Te Whakaru, where they acquired a section and built two or three houses of schist stone using burnt pipi shells for mortar . . . the missionaries tried to preach to the Maori people but with little success. . . . In 1845 the Berlin mission sent three women to be wives for the missionaries. There were originally five women but two pulled out before leaving Berlin [they arrived in 1846 and were married to 3 of the missionaries 8 days later] . . . The missionaries and their wives all lived at Te Whakaru for a number of years, after which events began to divide them . . . Schiermeister went to Pitt Island to teach Frederick Hunt's children. He became very ill and was taken to Wellington by Bishop Selwyn about 1855. Later he went to Brisbane as a Lutheran pastor. . . . Two families on the Chathams today are descended from the Bauckes—the Seymours and the Prendevelles. (Holmes, 1993:148-150)*

For all their ascetic fortitude, the German missionaries are most remembered today for their farming. It is popularly accepted on the island that not one soul was saved through their evangelistic efforts. The circumstances of their mission remain most curious. What pictures of their exceptionally constructed house do not reveal is that it was built in the farthest north-west corner of the island. Furthermore, the house is hidden on the ocean side of the steepest rise on the island. This is not a setting that would have attracted any passing traffic at all. In fact, the walk into Waitangi in the 1850s would have taken a full day, the best part of which would have been devoid of human contact.

## Sounds of the Past

Interviews with long-term residents of the island, along with photographs from the island's museum, reveal that the musical culture on the Chathams used to be very different to that present today. Resident George Hough recalled playing in a band during the 1950s and early 1960s, which featured saxophone, two guitars, accordion and harmonica. He played accordion and harp, but could also play violin and guitar. The band played for dances, or "for anyone who wanted to have a sing" (interview with the author 6/12/05). During that time, there were many functions held in the community hall, most of which would feature the band. In the 1950s, it was common to have square dances in the community hall. These dances featured the local band and a dance caller who was a resident and had learnt the various square dancing calls mainly through listening to records.

Various permutations of the band played with touring artists, often representing a vast realm of styles, including opera, swing and country. These tours most often occurred around the time of the annual races days, usually held at the end of December. Hough recalled that the New Brighton Silver Band from Christchurch toured the island twice with a 26-piece band. This, he noted, was the biggest, most exciting musical tour ever to come to Chatham. Today, photos of the tour still feature in the museum. As well as such musical encounters, various minor singers have appeared too, but not many, and most were related to someone on the island. Several musicians interviewed regretted that more artists did not tour the island. A major factor in the lack of touring is the sheer cost of getting to the island. Airfares are relatively expensive for internal domestic flights, and the sea journey option is charged out according to space rather than weight, meaning that a touring band would be a most expensive enterprise. In addition, both air and sea travel to the Chathams can be risky due to weather, with passages often delayed or cancelled.

The Air Chathams Christmas party that was to occur the weekend after I left the island best reflects the contemporary culture of musical visitors to the island. The party was being touted as one of the biggest social events on the Chatham calendar, with many staff and ex-staff flying in for it. The airline was flying in a band called Luck for the event from the mainland. As it turns out, Luck is made up of members from the successful 1980s New Zealand rock band, the Exponents. No only does this speak to current musical preferences—an old rock band well past their use-by date being preferred over younger musicians, or even locals—it also highlights the vast absence of performance opportunities for local artists.

### “What songs do you know?": Church Music on Chatham

For a lowly populated island, the Chathams have a history of supporting numerous religious organisations and churches. During the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there were no less than three operational Anglican churches on the island and two functioning 'home churches', a number necessitated in part due to the inaccessibility of various sections of the island. The island also supported a Catholic church, a strong Ratana following and, in more recent times, a Christian Fellowship church.<sup>[1]</sup> Pitt Island has

always been almost exclusively Catholic, due to the heritage of Gregory Hunt, who saw to the initial Catholic education of the islanders. Upon my visit in December 2005, there remained but two churches: the Anglican Church at Te One, and the Catholic Church in Waitangi.

By the time of the first Sunday of my visit, most locals on the island knew why I was there—to research the religious music culture of the island. This purpose was always met with shocked, or in hindsight, moderately amused looks. It was Sunday before I realised why.

I arrived at the Anglican Church ready for the one Sunday service. Suspecting that I might be true to my word, the Minister informed me that he had powered up the generator and turned the organ on in the hope I might play. Including myself and the island's other tourist that day, whom I had dragged along, the congregation totalled just six. All concerned felt this was a most excellent result. The minister then asked me to “just play something” to start the service off. I obliged. The selection of hymns for the morning's service then took place. This was done by someone yelling out a title and a show of hands indicating how many people knew the melody. This process continued as they scurried through word books and printed words sheets, which appeared to be the most popular source of songs. This process was repeated every time a hymn was called for in the service outline. While *Amazing Grace* and *What A Friend We Have In Jesus* were recognisable and enjoyed by those present, other selections were best left *a capella*—in view of my randomly improvised organ part and the fact that few appeared to know the melody.

On attending the Catholic church later that same day, I was somewhat more prepared for the congregation size of three—and this while the locum priest was visiting the island.<sup>[2]</sup> The Catholic church is in possession of an old harmonium, and the priest was most keen to see if it still worked, given that the organist had “died about 20 years ago”. Once again, *Amazing Grace* echoed through the old building, the constant pedalling required on the harmonium making this a slightly less enjoyable experience for the organist.

But there is more than a humorous story here. Certainly, the decline in religious music, in terms of repertoire knowledge, facilities, communal opportunities and leadership is sobering. However, there was one unexplainable aspect to the worship at the Anglican church. As I mentioned, the primary source for song words were photocopied sheets (about eight in all) that contained the typed words to various songs. These were the songs they most often sang, or most often wanted to. While the sheets contained classic hymns such as *Holy Holy Holy*, *How Great Thou Art*, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus* and *Abide in Me*, there were some other surprising inclusions. Curiously, other early choruses such as *Give Thanks*, *When I Look Into Your Holiness*, *There is a Redeemer* and *Jesus is Lord* were also included. But the last few songs in the collection were even more puzzling. Songs from early releases by Australian Pentecostal church Hillsong were printed there. Songs included *Thank You, Lord* and *The Heaven's Shall Declare, Shout to the Lord*, and *Power of Your Love*. When quizzed about these songs, Reverend Preece was suitably vague about their source, or even where the sheets came from. One

congregation member said they would love to sing the newer songs, but no one knew how the melody went. One possible source of this ‘newness’ is that Sky TV is beamed into the island, and indeed to the home of the Reverend, who confessed to watching a Christian TV programme on the Sunday morning as “preparation” for the service. This discovery proves that, at some point within the last 10 to 13 years (based on the age of the songs listed), someone has been knowledgeable enough of new developments in congregational song, and enthused enough to type out all the words and have them collated into song sheets, to attempt to introduce a new song repertoire to the Anglican church. The fact that the small (predominantly elderly) congregation had no idea how these songs went, but liked “the look of the lyrics”, suggests this repertoire change was attempted many years ago, by people no longer involved in the church. I would hypothesise that this development was initiated by a short-term worker to the island, most likely a teacher given that Te One School is directly across the road from the church, and a big importer of service employment. The possibly three-year term of our modern worshipper simply was not enough time to plant new songs successfully into the liturgy of the church.

### Island Identity: The *Chatham Island Song*

Most alarming about the music culture of Chathams was the near complete lack of songs about, influenced by, or generally representative of, the islands themselves. While residents returning home on the flight into the island mentioned the *Chatham Island Song* to me, the fact that no one I spoke with, until I visited the Te One School, could sing or relay the song to me, was indicative of the apathy towards promotion of island ideals through music. There are no obvious island influences or sounds that resound; in fact, the *Chatham Island Song* music is fairly standard folk/pop.

Nehu Tewiata, who wrote the song, must have written it before 1936 as George Hough could remember singing it at school and at home. The original version has been changed somewhat lyrically, but remains largely the same. Tewiata was known for writing parodies of other songs (ie he would take the lyrics and change them, but keep the original melody intact). His willingness to borrow even extended to the *Chatham Island Song*, which was originally sung to music of *Candy Kisses*. Eventually, the music was rewritten by George Day and a teacher from the Te One School.

While there was vigour and enthusiasm for the song at the school, there were not many thoughts offered on the history of it, or what it meant to people—this might just have been nerves and politeness from a large group of primary school children. Many of the teachers are imported (like much service labour) from the mainland, so their enthusiasm was commendable, but perhaps again not indicative of island attitudes. That said, at least they knew the song.

Eva (Gregory-Hunt) from Pitt Island is largely regarded as the best musical talent on the island. She plays guitar in the (Catholic) congregation on Pitt, making it more modern than other congregations on the island. As with many residents of the Chathams, most of Eva’s CDs come from her children buying them while at school on the mainland, or else she makes a list of tracks she likes (from radio and television) and then relatives on

the mainland burn them to CD for her. Her preference is for country music (a preference stated by many on Chatham). There are no official venues at which to play, but if someone is having a party then invariably someone will “pull out a guitar and start playing and singing. It’s amazing, you can have lived with people all your life and not known they were musical until they suddenly begin to play” (Eva Gregory-Hunt, telephone interview with the author 7/12/06). That aspect of ‘hidden’ culture seems quite apparent on Chatham as well.

Eva mentioned that a *Pitt Island Song* was in existence, akin to *Chatham Island Song*, but confessed she had never heard it, “by all accounts it is very beautiful, but no one has sung it here for a long time” (ibid). Given Eva is the island’s most regarded musician, it might appear that the song has been lost forever.

George Hough could not recall anyone involved in composing their own songs, especially those dealing with island themes. However, the island’s souvenir shop did contain a CD by former resident Hemi Tauroa entitled *Jahziah* (named after his son). Tauroa now lives in Australia and, unfortunately, could not be interviewed for this project. The CD is most readily identified as reggae-styled, acoustic rock. It features strong off-beat vamping acoustic guitars, a ‘do-it-yourself’ production aesthetic that works well with the generic sound created, and lyrics predominantly concerned with love relationships. Only one song on the album acknowledges Tauroa’s island heritage, but it does so very eagerly. Entitled *Chatham Island Song (Rekohu)*, it bares no resemblance to the ‘official’ Chatham song, but does feature key references to life on the island. Unlike the rest of the album, a strong Chatham accent is present, particularly in spoken vocal interjections. It is the spoken, rather than the sung or the musical elements that tie the piece most intrinsically to Chatham Island.

## The Bigger Picture

Although there seems to be a good quantity of musicians on the island, and certainly some respectable musical ability, there are few avenues for public performance. Further hampering this is the fact that musicians are poorly organised, often remotely located and largely unmotivated to group themselves into performative clusters. Indeed, much of the population is scattered around the island, with only a relatively small settlement at Waitangi. A few roads have been sealed in recent times, but most remain fairly rudimentary, with darkness, weather and inadequate grading all posing hazards to transport across the island. Solo performance efforts would require much more effort and perseverance, as well as ultimate relocation in order to record and promote music.

It would appear that music had its most powerful presence on the islands from the 1950s to the 1970s. Many older members of the island lamented the disappearance of live music, and were often quick to point towards SKY TV and home stereos as the cause. Despite the tough living and expensive amenities of island life, most homes own a satellite television dish, and beam in all manner of programming from mainland New Zealand and beyond. As a result, people are happier to stay at home and choose their entertainment, rather than venturing out into the elements for an unknown result.

As noted earlier, the lack of live performance venues on the island is a startling hurdle for musicians. This was not always the case, however. After fairly brief public debate, it was decided by the island's council that a public hall would be built, despite not all the funds being available for the construction. The Waitangi Centennial Hall was completed in 1940, "as there was still a small funding shortfall [for the building of the hall], dances, concerts and card evenings were run. In time the hall was paid for and furnished, and the island had a good public hall that was much used" (Holmes, 1993:28).

The transformation of the community hall into a Maori *marae* has severely altered the community engagement with live music. The public venue available to performers is now the island's one pub, situated at the Hotel Chathams. The pub is quite small, especially given the number of people who like to frequent it, although the Hotel's adjoining restaurant would also provide a suitable venue for live performance. In the time I spent at the pub—across all times of day—there was never music to be heard. The entertainment in the pub is dominated by one SKY TV set, which in the time I was there never moved off the SKY Racing channel. Whether greyhounds or races, or one of the three poker machines there, gambling is an intrinsic characteristic of island life. Any form of musical performance would have to strive hard just to compete with that, let alone overcome it.

Re-establishing a live music culture on the island would take some resolve. Increased tours from respected, famous and/or gifted musicians may contribute to energising younger people to pursue musical desires. With the high school children off the island (except in their holidays), there is a strange absence, which is filled by those returning from holidays who have experienced the full gamut of teenage urban life (in Christchurch). They may well return with cultural sensibilities and skills that have no outlet in the Chathams, or are unvalued by their contemporaries. The relative toughness of life on Chatham is reflected in the hobbies and leisure time of the residents. But more than others, these are people with stories to tell, struggles to relate, and a relative distance from the Western world that might avail the production of powerful music.

## Endnotes

[1] The Ratana congregation formed around 1924 after a lengthy letter was sent to the Chathams by the self-proclaimed prophet Tahupotiki Wiremu Ratana. Ratana:

*Had been trained as Catholic but became more Pentecostal in orientation, and the Catholic Church was not delighted about that. He formed a new 'denomination' which was strictly Maori in membership. While they were very powerful politically, they tended to be more political than theological.* (Father Golding, interview with the author 7/12/06)

[2] Chatham Island cannot sustain a full-time priest. One comes out from the mainland for stays of between six weeks and three months. A lot of that time is usually spent on the more religiously minded, and Catholic, Pitt Island.

## Bibliography

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