

Tutira Mai Nga Iwi (Line up together, people) Constructing New Zealand identity through commercial radio

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses a controversy within New Zealand radio broadcasting policy. As part of its activities to ensure the promotion of New Zealand content in the media, the non-government public organisation New Zealand On Air funds music recordings, promotional videos, album promotion and radio airplay initiatives targetted at the commercial broadcasting sector within that country.

Supporters of the organisation, and its music sector agent provocateur Brendan Smyth, point to the increase in New Zealand music sales, improved concert attendance and greatly enhanced representation in mainstream media and popular culture as evidence of the scheme's resounding success. In some popular music genres, New Zealand content has increased from under 2% representation on commercial radio playlists to over 20%.

Detractors argue that in attempting to increase the quantity of New Zealand-sourced music that is broadcast, funders have favoured to the point of exclusion music that emulates international repertoire in order to appeal to conservative radio programmers, and in so doing have decimated that which makes New Zealand popular music uniquely "kiwi".

The article seeks to shed light upon the conditions and decisions that led to this situation, rather than attempt to reconcile these two divergent positions. However, it also endeavours to point to some possible lessons that may be found in the case of New Zealand music radio for broadcasting policy-makers and those that would seek to promote local music through radio programming interventions.

The title of this article refers to a popular traditional Maori song often used in a powiri ceremony, greeting newcomers to the marae. An exchange of songs takes place, and 'Tutira Mai' is the Maori language song most often learned by non-Maori speakers for the occasion. It is thus ingrained in both Maori and non-Maori New Zealand culture alike and is taken here as symbolic of a coherent bicultural New Zealand-ness, as problematic as that concept may be.

INTRODUCTION: POPULAR MUSIC AND THE NATION STATE

There are significant problems when discussing national characteristics within popular music culture. The first of these is the fact that contemporary popular music is *pre-globalised* in terms of its aesthetic content. Contemporary popular genres as diverse as Country, Reggae, Hip Hop, Rock and Dance each have common derivatives that, while rooted in geography, have become independent of it. The

second (and perhaps more significant) problem is that the popular music business is intensely globalised, and the vast majority of economic activity in the commercial sphere of the recording industries is rooted in multi-national corporate business – even in those instances where the recorded music is released and consumed exclusively within national boundaries.

That is to say, while artists such as Strawpeople, Brooke Fraser, and Che-Fu enjoy success almost exclusively within New Zealand's borders, they are nevertheless part of the Sony / BMG international music marketing machine, and the finance capital flow upon which artists like this depend are subject to corporate policy decisions made at a global, as well as at a local level.

Recorded popular music culture is largely placeless in many respects, and while there is an economic and sociological argument for conceptions of geographic localism both in terms of 'scenes' and 'enterprise clusters', by and large the majority of recorded popular music is understood in terms of a globalised recording industry. As Simon Frith (1992) points out:

“...while a local authority like Sheffield has developed in its cultural industries policy, a much more interesting set of arguments around pop music than the Labour Party has nationally, it hasn't answered the question of why a "Sound of Sheffield" that depends on international marketing for its impact should be different to the sound from any other global pop setting.”

Martin Cloonan (1999) expressed the difficulty of asserting nationality within popular music from exactly this perspective: that the geographic, cultural and economic boundaries of the nation state do not seem to necessarily define the characteristics of popular music. Instead, he asserts the dual forces of nationalism and globalisation are negotiated and balanced against each other – and that each individual Nation-State has a degree of autonomy over the extent of its response to each. However, he highlights – as do Shuker and Pickering (1994) – that the case of New Zealand music is one that, in common with Luxembourg and Finland, is defined more in terms of the nation than in terms of the city or region, as is the case in, say, the United Kingdom.

Just five years after New Zealand radio's wholesale deregulation, Shuker and Pickering's call for a national quota for the broadcast of locally-produced content (*ibid.*, p. 21), insisting upon it as the single most important issue for Nation-States that are subject to such a significant quantity of imported material, was echoed by many in political and academic circles. They describe a situation whereby New Zealand artists often found that the only way to secure broadcast on New Zealand radio stations was to first leave the country (*ibid.*, p. 274) and secure airplay on American, British or Australian radio stations (in descending order of perceived

influence). In order to survive, they claimed, New Zealand music must be protected by legislation.

In other countries where local content quotas have been established (with the notable exceptions of Australia and Ireland), the issue to be addressed was primarily one of language. France provides a significant example of this. While Maori language representation has been a key element of media policy development in recent years, the majority of music radio consumption in New Zealand consists overwhelmingly of English language popular music, and it was in this area that the problem of local representation was considered to be at its most urgent. Promoting and fostering *Te Reo* (Maori language) was addressed through other channels, such as the development of further radio and television services, rather than the implementation of across-the-board mandatory proportional representation. Allowing for the largest number of New Zealanders to hear a greater proportion of local music was the issue at stake when the notion of quotas was discussed.

There was eventual support for the idea of quotas at the highest government level by 1999. Helen Clark's incoming Labour Government was well-disposed to the idea, and Broadcasting Minister Marian Hobbs was a vocal proponent of mandatory content quotas across all media. Despite this, and because of some strong lobbying by the Radio Broadcasters Association (RBA), who represent the interests of commercial radio broadcasters in New Zealand (mostly multi-national corporate interests at that), the end result in 2000 was for a system of voluntary targets.

Music and radio were hot topics on all sides of the political spectrum in the lead-up to the 1999 New Zealand General Election. Quotas were debated as campaign issues, and both the conservative National Party and Labour claimed the idea of a public broadcasting Youth Radio Network (YRN) as their own. However, it is important to understand that the context in which these discussions took place were subject to historical, cultural and legislative baggage. Not only was it impossible to put the worms of deregulation back in the can, the very idea of what it means to be of, from, or even *in* New Zealand when making music is hardly a simple matter.

As a colonised nation, the issue of 'New Zealandness' is a fraught, contested and complex concept when it comes to the construction of identity. Issues of *Tino Rangatiratanga* – Maori sovereignty – rightly dominate any discussion of belonging in New Zealand. Considering that New Zealand has a diverse ethnic mix – including significant proportions of the population originating from China and Polynesia (particularly Western Samoa and Tonga) – and given a large section of the population with ancestry dating back to Europe within only three generations, the notion of what it means to have the quality of New Zealandness raises immediate questions. Even so, there are generally accepted and popularly referred-to icons of 'kiwiana' that few New Zealanders take issue with. The wooden pull-along childrens' Buzzy Bee toy, the kiwifruit, the jandal (footwear known elsewhere as the

'flip-flop'), the kiwi bird, the pukeko (another native bird), greenstone and Christmas at the beach are all images that are universally accepted as being part and parcel of New Zealand popular culture.

And equally, there are popular entertainment icons from mass media culture that have become part and parcel of the New Zealand conception of identity: from television comedians Billy T. James and Fred Dagg to local characters The Wizard of Christchurch and author Barry Crump; sporting heroes Tana Umaga and Jonah Lomu to singers Kiri Te Kanawa and Hayley Westenra; artists Colin McCahon and Len Lye to actors Cliff Curtis and Sam Neill.

Among these icons is a wide range of New Zealanders who produce and perform popular music, whether based in rock, pop, hip-hop, R&B, metal, house, reggae or indie musical genres. As anywhere, the dominant popular music forms (regardless of point of origin) are widely promoted, disseminated and consumed via the medium of radio. Despite the very real barriers put in front of musicians in New Zealand when it comes to marketing, promotion and popular acceptance, there has nevertheless grown to be a generally accepted sense of a New Zealand Music. Perhaps rather than conceptualise it as a language of its own, it can be thought of as Western Popular Music with a New Zealand accent.

New Zealand radio has, over the past 18 years, been unique in the extent to which it has been deregulated and opened up to the forces of free market economies. It should come as no surprise that such a seismic shift in the political economy of a mass media institution would have a significant impact on the cultural life of that medium's consumers – in this case, the public of New Zealand.

In this article, I describe the conditions of the relationship between radio broadcasters, the music business and policy makers within New Zealand, and highlight a debate that problematises one of the key objectives of an organisation whose role it is to promote New Zealand content over the airwaves. Since deregulation in 1989, New Zealand On Air has initiated and managed schemes to promote and support the broadcast of New Zealand-made popular music on commercial radio. The extent to which those efforts can be considered a resounding success or a colossal failure depends on the answer to one fundamental question: 'To what end?'

POLITICAL ECONOMY OF NEW ZEALAND RADIO

In 1989, the New Zealand radio industry was entirely deregulated in one fell swoop. Neo-liberal economic theories were applied more thoroughly and to a much further extent in New Zealand broadcasting (indeed, to all sectors of the New Zealand economy) than in any other country. As Jane Kelsey explains:

The aim of successive governments and their supporters was to put 'globalisation as ideology' into practice. 'The New Zealand Experiment' – the relentless pursuit of free-market principles that began in 1984 – exposed a small, remote country of 3.8 million people to the full impact of international market forces (Kelsey, 1999, p.8).

Public institutions were dismantled and sold to private enterprise and everything from telecommunications to transport was left to the logic of the market. In 1988, the Lange-led Labour Government announced a relaxation of laws of ownership and released the spectrum for free-market radio broadcasting competition in its purest form. These were implemented in the 1989 New Zealand Broadcasting Act. Establishment of a radio station now depended entirely on competitive bidding for scarce spectrum resources, and control over content extended only to established codes of decency. At the same time, all available frequencies the government could identify as available for sale were sold at auction¹. If a broadcaster could prove through a process of engineering and testing that there was room for one more, that space would also be auctioned. In other words, with the exception of National Radio and the Concert Programme², the airwaves were up for lease as a revenue-generating activity for the nation's purse. But as well as simply a strategy to redress trade balance deficits, deregulation of the radio industry was part of a larger movement away from government intervention in commercial enterprise:

Neo-liberal economics argued that the market should be liberated from heavy handed state regulation to go about the rational business of providing competitively priced range and variety for consumers (Zanker, 1996).

The enthusiastic adoption of the economic philosophies behind deregulation stopped short of re-allocating publicly owned stations National Radio and Concert FM (then the Concert Programme) but, in 1995, under the guidance of Broadcasting Minister

¹ At the time, Radio Pacific, the station at which I was Production Manager during this period, used this process as an opportunity for expansion. Multiple frequencies were bid on in most of the available regions, and around this time, the company was listed on the NZ Stock exchange. The ability to distribute nationwide networked programming interspersed with regional commercial advertising provided a very attractive business proposition. By 1993, Radio Pacific broadcast on 26 frequencies throughout the country, divided into six regions for sales, advertising and promotion purposes.

² As they are now known, Radio New Zealand National and Concert are public radio stations primarily concerned with speech programming and classical music respectively – approximately parallel to the UK's BBC Radio 4 and Radio 3

Maurice Williamson, state-owned commercial broadcasters³ were soon privatised in an attempt to 'level the playing field'. The deregulation of the radio industry meant that there were no restrictions on the number of radio stations a business could own; no restrictions on foreign ownership; no restrictions on cross-media ownership; no restrictions on format or genre; no public service remit for commercial broadcasters; no controls over content. Stations could broadcast whatever they wanted whenever they wanted to whomever they wanted.

As well as reducing restrictions on foreign ownership and allowing for unrestricted cross-media ownership, the new Broadcasting Act eliminated advertising hours, and disbanded the Broadcasting Tribunal and its system of tariffs and strict criteria for applicants in favour of tradable spectrum rights. FM radio in New Zealand was in its infancy and the combination of a fierce competitive environment and the influence of American radio consultants led music programmers to opt for proven international hits. The result was the lowest representation of New Zealand music on the airwaves in history.

In an attempt to rectify this situation, legislators established New Zealand On Air – a body whose role it was to encourage and support the representation of New Zealand works on radio and television. The implementation of this policy, and the strategies used to promote New Zealand music through commercial radio have been, by different measures (and according to different commentators), wildly successful and/or catastrophic.

The effect of deregulation was simultaneously complex and almost entirely uniform. New entrants to the market sprang up around the country - from small operators in rural areas taking advantage of the new freedom to establish community-focused commercial enterprises, through to major international organisations purchasing shares in large urban market stations. With the massive addition of new spectrum available to general auction, this was a period of intense proliferation of small radio stations and groups. Stations such as Energy FM in New Plymouth were started by small groups of investors and private owners, keen to take advantage of the new environment⁴. Prior to deregulation, independent commercial stations operated in a

³ The idea of state-owned commercial broadcasters requires some explanation to many non-New Zealanders. Essentially, these were public broadcasters with a commercial imperative. These popular radio stations carried advertising and were not only supported by commercial revenues, but were in fact charged with maximising and returning a profit to the public purse.

⁴ The business that purchased the frequency and established the station Energy FM was started by a small group of Massey University students with an investment of \$100 each and was eventually sold for tens of millions to CanWest in May 2000.

strongly protected commercial environment⁵ and to the lucky few who were allocated spectrum, broadcasting seemed a licence to print money. So the opportunity to join those lucky few was enthusiastically embraced by many new entrants to the field.

Unsurprisingly, with advertising as the economic base for commercial broadcasting, the revenue available to the industry as a whole was divided more thinly with each new broadcaster. Although diversity had been a stated goal of the deregulation process – the idea being that each new entrant would cater to an as yet under-served segment of the population, many broadcasters found themselves instead competing for the largest share of advertising, that section targeting the household shopper. As a result, many of the radio stations had very similar playlists and presentation styles⁶. The underserved audience remained uncatered for, and mainstream audiences became the focal point for a majority of stations. Competition became increasingly fierce and many stations failed, their assets swallowed up by bigger companies.

Deregulation opened the door into an arguably less diverse, more ‘safe’ array of programming served up by fewer providers with less interest in the public good of New Zealanders. The net effect was arguably to reduce representation on the airwaves and place control of the industry into fewer hands whose interests were those of foreign shareholders, rather than those of the New Zealand public⁷.

After the period of intense proliferation and aggregation that lasted throughout the 1990s, culminating in the purchase of the Radioworks group⁸ by CanWest in 2000, New Zealand radio now exists in a virtual duopoly. At the time of writing, the overwhelming majority of all radio stations in the country, including all nationwide

⁵ Under Broadcasting Authority rules, direct competition was not only discouraged, but proving that you would not compete with incumbent broadcasters was a prerequisite for gaining a licence

⁶ However, unlike the Greek example given by Angeliki Gazi elsewhere in this journal, slick professionalism based on an idealised notion of American FM radio became the norm, rather than the plethora of poorly-produced music programmes she describes.

⁷ The extent to which deregulation has reduced consumer choice and placed the industry in the hands of international corporate interests has formed a large proportion of the relatively small body of New Zealand Radio Studies literature since 1990.

⁸ Radioworks was the last major fully New Zealand owned commercial radio network. It was the target of an aggressive takeover by CanWest in May 2000.

networked brands, are in the hands of one of two companies: CanWest⁹ and The Radio Network (owned jointly by Clear Channel Communications, Wilson and Horton, and Independent News and Media Plc) {Rosenberg, 2004 #24}. There are pockets of independent commercial radio outside those two media giants as well as two nationwide public broadcasting stations, local Access Radio stations, Iwi Radio, Pacific Island broadcasters and student stations. However, a large majority of listenership and economic activity within the local industry is commanded by those two international corporations.

The effect of conglomeration – a seemingly inevitable outcome of deregulation on this scale – was to significantly reduce the number of media interests and therefore also diversity and dissenting voices. As Robert McChesney explains:

The situation may be most stark in New Zealand, where the newspaper industry is largely the province of the Australian-American Rupert Murdoch and the Irishman Tony O'Reilly, who also dominates New Zealand's commercial-radio broadcasting and has major stakes in magazine publishing. Murdoch controls pay television and is negotiating to purchase one or both of the two public TV networks, which the government is aiming to sell. In short, the rulers of New Zealand's media system could squeeze into a closet (McChesney, 1999).

Elsewhere, commentators and theorists have explored this seismic shift in our broadcasting ecology (Zanker, 1996), and it would be an exercise in repetition to attempt to enumerate all of the effects of this policy. It is significant, however, to point out the coincidence of the deregulation of the radio industry and the arrival of FM radio – and the predominantly American FM radio programming consultants employed by the new licence-holders – in New Zealand.

RADIO, MUSIC, GOVERNMENT AND THE PUBLIC

According to New Zealand On Air, the body set up to ensure that New Zealand content would be represented in the new deregulated environment, of all the music played on commercial radio, the proportion that had been made by New Zealanders

⁹ CanWest is a Canadian-owned multi-national organisation largely owned and controlled by the Asper family, with strong interests in both television and radio in New Zealand. They have recently indicated their intention to divest their investments of New Zealand media, and have announced that they will sell to an Australian private equity firm, Ironbridge Capital Pty Ltd.

(<http://www.canwestglobal.com/international/newzealand.html>, accessed June 3, 2007)

was less than 2%. At a time when commercial radio commanded in excess of 80% of the listening audience, this presented a challenge for the organisation.

New Zealand on Air was, until the late 1990s, funded by a broadcasting fee similar to the TV licence scheme currently in place in the UK. The money was divided between priorities, including funding the creation of New Zealand television programmes, annual funding of public broadcasting, and the support of New Zealand music on commercial radio. This last was the responsibility of Music Manager Brendan Smyth. In position since the creation of the organisation, and still performing the role today, Smyth's initiatives have been central to the implementation of policy laid down in the Broadcasting Act 1989¹⁰.

Smyth's first initiative was to co-fund radio programmes that featured New Zealand music. The programmes were initially designed to be sold to radio stations at a subsidy, and would provide a weekly slot where a small representation of local music could be heard. After the independent producers were unable to secure broadcast for these programmes, the strategy was changed and the programmes were supplied free to the radio stations. The funding was given in its entirety to the independent programme-makers if a commitment to broadcast from a significant number of stations in different markets across the country was secured.

The first, and longest running of these programmes was called 'Counting The Beat', after a 1981 hit by The Swingers. The programme went to air in late 1990 and was broadcast in Auckland on 91FM. The programme was hosted by Cheryl Morris and produced by Tim Moon and Trevor Reekie (all three actively involved in independent record labels), and was written by music producer and recording artist Paul Casserly of Strawpeople¹¹. The programme was considered a success in terms of getting more New Zealand music onto mainstream commercial radio, but at this stage, the success was limited to a ghetto of one hour per week on a Sunday night.

Among the reasons given by radio programmers to Smyth's queries about why they were reluctant to play New Zealand music ("It's poorly produced," "It's not as good as international repertoire," "It doesn't really suit our format," and – incredibly – "Nobody likes it") was one that could be simply addressed: "We don't get sent it and we can't play it if we don't have it." In response to this, Smyth initiated the Hit Disc scheme: a series of compilation CDs supplied to all New Zealand radio stations on a

¹⁰ It is important to recognise that Brendan Smyth can therefore be considered the author of the five 'phases' of the New Zealand On Air's Music Strategy. As a result, criticism of New Zealand On Air's approach to music is often framed as personal criticism of Smyth's performance, ideology and competence. It should be made clear that nothing in this article could be construed as personally targeted.

¹¹ After the first few months of production, I replaced Bryce Hay as the programme's technical producer.

periodic basis, comprising the most promising and potentially radio-friendly tracks recently released. New Zealand On Air also employed the first of the pluggers – promoters whose task it was to visit the key radio stations in the key markets, and endeavour to encourage programmers to listen to selected tracks from the Hit Disc and then secure playlist status for artists represented.

Around the same time, the Music Video scheme was launched. Although seemingly a television initiative, Smyth reasoned that funding New Zealand artists to the tune of NZ\$5,000 in order to produce a promotional music video clip of broadcast quality would result in greater radio airplay for these artists. The goal was not to sell more records – or even to contribute to New Zealand cultural identity by providing more opportunities for New Zealanders to hear their own music, even though New Zealand On Air's slogan 'Our Songs, Our Stories' would indicate that this would be the case. Smyth's interpretation of his role – and the purpose of initiatives such as the music video funding scheme – were more pragmatic.

In interview (2003), he summed up his responsibilities thus:

My job is to get more New Zealand music played on New Zealand radio. End of story. I don't do it to promote New Zealand culture, though I think that would be a good thing. I don't do it to help New Zealand music business, though I think that would be a good thing too. I do it because the Broadcasting Act says that that's my job. My job is purely and simply to get more New Zealand music heard by New Zealanders, and the way to do that is through commercial radio, because that's where most people are doing the listening. It's not my job to act as a gatekeeper and decide whether a band or a song is 'New Zealand' enough. My job is to get local music on commercial radio – and, like it or not, commercial radio plays 'hits'. (2003)

Through the 1990s, New Zealand On Air's strategy for promoting local content continued through these and a range of other schemes, including 'Double Digits' awards for stations that crept up to 10% of broadcast content consisting of New Zealand music in any given month, and involvement in the Kiwi Music Action Group (KiwiMAG) – a body of representatives from the radio industry, the recording industry and NZ On Air. KiwiMAG's biggest success was in the establishment of New Zealand Music Week, which was a nominated week in the calendar in which radio stations agreed to prioritise and promote New Zealand Music. However, the KiwiMAG project was almost derailed by the Youth Radio Network.

Since the publication of a New Zealand On Air research report entitled *Youth Television and Radio Needs* (1997), the idea of the potential establishment of a Youth Radio Network troubled the radio industry. The commercial operators saw teens as their primary audience and were opposed to the idea of a public broadcasting outlet that they believed would directly compete against their stations, for which

frequencies had been auctioned and bought in a market environment that did not include a government-funded competitor. APRA¹² executive Arthur Baysting's vocal support of musician Neil Finn's proposal for a YRN that would not only provide a public broadcasting alternative to music radio, but also actively promote local music, began to strain relationships between the rights organisation (representing the interests of the musicians) and the RBA (representing the interests of the commercial broadcasters), and by 1999 the goodwill between the two interests represented in the KiwiMAG project had begun to disintegrate.

Nevertheless, in the lead-up to the 1999 General Election, first National and then Labour claimed the YRN as a cause celebre – and as their own idea. The youth vote looked as if it could swing a very close election race, and politicians were more concerned at that moment in the hundreds of thousands of registered voters under the age of 25 than in the in-fighting between two creative industries. The YRN was good PR.

The commercial radio industry in New Zealand had more to concern itself with than just the threat of the YRN, however. The FM Licences that they had secured at auction for a 20-year lease in 1991 would expire in 2011, with no clarity as to the government's policy about the re-auctioning of leases or the security of incumbent position on the existing frequencies. The Minister of Broadcasting was making more and more noise about mandatory content quotas and rallying vocal support from the music and cultural industries. Labour was also interested in reassessing various advertising regulations around children, health products, alcohol and cigarettes. While it had never been unusual for a Broadcasting Minister's agenda to be at odds with that of the commercial radio sector, this was the first time at which the parties seemed to share no common ground at all.

After Labour's victory in 1999, and Prime Minister Helen Clark's adoption of the Arts, Culture and Heritage portfolio, New Zealand music moved further up the agenda. The Broadcasting portfolio was assigned to staunch advocate of mandatory content quotas, Marian Hobbs and the Youth Radio Network was virtually a *fait accompli*. Moreover, as part of an \$86m Cultural Recovery Package, Clark announced an injection of extra money into New Zealand On Air's coffers. The body was now no longer funded through a licence fee, but through general taxation – a move that had concerned supporters of public broadcasting, since the organisation now had to compete with Health and Education for limited resources. For New Zealand On Air, and the sectors of the local music industry it promoted, The Cultural Recovery Package was an unexpected windfall.

¹² Australasian Performing Rights Association

Smyth's response to the extra millions in New Zealand On Air's coffers was to implement the Phase Four scheme¹³ -- an initiative that invested in the creation of recordings that would find popular and airplay acceptance as well as additional promotion through an increase of staff pluggers and marketing budget.

Three categories of recording support were enabled. The first of these was the New Recording Artist support, which provided Funding of \$10,000 was available per project, comprising \$5,000 to record a *radio single* and an additional (conditional) \$5,000 to make a music video. Artists or bands can apply for a maximum of two New Recording Artist grants. The stated purpose of the grant is to find new artists and new songs that will work on commercial radio, and to provide a track record on commercial radio for the artists.

The second funding category is the Album Funding scheme. New Zealand On Air will match funding up to \$50,000 to record an album by artists with at least two current commercial radio hits to their name. The album should have the potential to provide at least four additional radio hits. The funding is recoupable on domestic sales of the record. Its intention is to encourage record labels to invest in local recordings.

Finally, funds are made available through the Radio Hits grant, which provides a \$5,000 reward-based incentive for record companies whose artists achieve significant airplay on commercial radio. New Zealand On Air does not seek applicants for this funding category, and instead contacts record labels directly after analysing airplay logs. The top five most played New Zealand singles in any quarter are awarded the grant. However, songs that have already benefitted from the support of New Zealand On Air, either through the New Recording Artist scheme or if the song is from a recording made with the assistance of Album Funding, are not eligible for a Radio Hits grant.

As of December 2005, almost exactly half of Radio Hits grants were awarded to independent record labels (220 of 436), including all those who have distribution deals through major labels, but not including those 'indies' that are owned outright as subsidiaries of the majors. Sony BMG is by far the label with the most Radio Hits grants to its name, and while this draws attention to the fact that public funding is being paid directly into a multi-national, multi-million dollar business to reward its commercial success, it also highlights the label's active role in the recording, marketing and distribution of local artists.

¹³ Phases 1 to 3 consisted of the series of initiatives including video grants, music radio programme funding, Hit Discs, pluggers and the Double Digits scheme. It is unclear where one phase ends and another begins, as these were only conceptualised as phases retrospectively by the development of Phase 4.

VOLUNTARY TARGETS

Despite both Marian Hobbs' undaunted enthusiasm for local content quotas for radio and the industry's outright antagonism to the idea, in March 2002, the RBA, under the direction of Executive Director David Innes, came to a proposed solution in conjunction with the Minister: Voluntary Content Targets. The targets were a series of moving goalposts that the commercial radio industry would endeavour to reach, and these were variable according to station format. 'Legacy' brands that played exclusively older music were exempt on the basis that the initiative was designed to favour the contemporary local music industry¹⁴. Within five years, Contemporary Hit Radio and Rock formats were to strive to reach 20% local content.

Although the commercial radio industry was reluctant to support New Zealand music on the basis that it was an unknown quantity and (as they asserted) 'nobody likes it,' they maintained that the voluntary targets were a tremendous display of goodwill on their part. The Minister agreed to the proposal, and to refrain from imposing mandatory quotas – though she reserved the right to re-introduce them if the targets were not sufficiently adhered to.

Although a victory for the government's plan to foster and encourage local music through representation on air, the deal provided the commercial broadcasting sector with powerful lobbying leverage: they now had a bargaining chip to take *off* the table if negotiations in other areas (such as the YRN and the 2011 licence expiry) did not proceed according to their preferred plan. As the Prime Minister was also the Minister for Arts, Culture and Heritage, local content would always take priority over other considerations when it came to broadcasting legislation. Despite their claims for the risks they were taking in playing local music, broadcasters knew that radio creates hits far more than it follows the taste of its audience. Through exposure comes familiarity and popularity. This was to prove to be a no-lose deal for the RBA.

Contemporary, though not necessarily related events that followed in quick succession: Marian Hobbs was replaced by Steve Maharey as Minister of Broadcasting; The Youth Radio Network left its place at the top of the government's agenda; incumbent broadcasters were assured first right of refusal and market rates for FM spectrum beyond 2011; and the Kiwi Music Action Group settled its differences between members and went on to transform New Zealand Music Week to New Zealand Music Month – a nationwide celebration of local popular music throughout the month of May.

¹⁴ The cultural consideration of allowing New Zealanders to hear their musical heritage was not a factor.

Unsurprisingly, the more radio played local music, the more radio audiences liked local music. At first, the inclusion of more New Zealand content was unheralded, and many listeners were unaware of the geographic origins of the music they were hearing. However, with the ready availability of recording artists for interviews – and having already witnessed the success of 1999's Popstars television phenomenon¹⁵, which resulted in the creation of the country's first manufactured girl band 'True Bliss' and prompted enthusiasm from radio audiences and record buyers despite its obvious local origins – it became increasingly clear that acknowledging and promoting local music on the basis of its localism was good practice. Playing New Zealand Music quickly became an instrument of public relations, and stations began to use the proportion of local content they played as an inducement to listeners.

For the first time, New Zealand Music was something that artists, labels and commercial radio stations could all agree on, and audiences were enthusiastic supporters of local content. Local sales of recorded music increased at retail, as reported in Billboard magazine:

Sean Coleman, managing director of New Zealand's biggest specialist music chain – Sounds – says "Overall, 2002 was a great year for New Zealand music, and that's why our marketplace hasn't been as badly affected [by declining sales] as the rest of the world." (Ferguson, 2003, p.53).

Radio stations had almost exclusively positive responses from its audiences – and even unrelated businesses were keen to use the 'New Zealand Music Renaissance' as a springboard for their own marketing. Major New Zealand brewery Lion Industries ran a billboard campaign for Lion Red Beer in May 2004. The signs simply read 'We Love New Zealand Music' on a red background, accompanied by the Lion logo.

NEW ZEALAND BUT NOT 'KIWI'

Amongst this seemingly overwhelming success and support for New Zealand music across the board is a small band of dissenters – largely consisting of independent musicians and small label owners – who claim that New Zealand On Air's Phase Four plan (and indeed, their entire agenda) has been disastrous for local artists, culture and creative industry. It is, perhaps, easy to dismiss such objections as sour grapes and self-interest from a sector that has failed to produce music that would

¹⁵ The brainchild of New Zealand broadcasters Peter Ulrich and Mark Tierney, Popstars was the first of the contemporary elimination-based television talent shows. The format was licensed around the world, and adaptations such as X-Factor and Pop Idol dominate music on network television worldwide.

warrant a share in the kind of success that New Zealand On Air encourages and rewards. However, their concerns are legitimate and centre around the fact that Phase Four openly fosters an environment in which international repertoire is routinely mimicked in order to obtain airplay and funding. The road to success for local popular artists seems not lie in the display of a distinctive quality and the local appeal of popular music with a kiwi accent – but in the extent to which anything that distinguishes it from international pop repertoire has been eradicated.

By rewarding airplay with cash incentives, funding music videos based on a panel of commercial radio programmers expressing the likelihood of playlisting the tracks proposed, and match-funding albums by major label artists, New Zealand On Air has effectively discouraged and dis-incentivised 'New Zealandness' in popular music.

Moreover, detractors claim that the funding is used to artificially prop up acts that do not require the support of public funding in order to survive or even thrive in the contemporary radio marketplace, which has already committed itself to filling up to 25% of its playlist with locally-produced music. Those artists that could most do with the support and active lobbying for airplay are those artists that express a unique vision that reflects the experience of New Zealand, rather than the more overtly derivative alternatives that reflect only American popular culture and genres. If it sounds exactly like the kind of international pop music from LA, New York and London that gets played on the radio already, then where is the cultural advantage in making room for it simply because it happens to come from Auckland, Wellington or Christchurch?

It's a valid concern: with the possible exception of popular country artist Barry Saunders and his Warratahs, the genres represented in the New Zealand On Air album funding all fit within existing mainstream radio formats¹⁶, covering a comparatively narrow range of rock, pop, hip hop and R&B. Reggae makes an appearance, though this is not entirely unusual for commercial radio formats in New Zealand. Moreover, in the case of reggae band Katchafire, the record label funded to produce the record (Mai Music) is wholly owned by the radio station most likely to play it (Mai FM). This ownership of a record label by a mainstream commercial radio station – even an Iwi station¹⁷ – seems to go significantly beyond what would, in

¹⁶ Apart from one brief experiment in Auckland during the 1990s and a small, local radio station in the South Island, country music is not typically heard on mainstream radio in New Zealand...

¹⁷ An Iwi station is one that is owned by Maori tribal interests. The New Zealand government allocates spectrum for Iwi broadcasting, and this is assigned to geographically-centred tribal groupings (Iwi) around the country. These are not auctioned or leased in the usual way, as this segment of the spectrum is not considered to be under Crown ownership. However, Iwi stations are not required to be public broadcasters

international terms, be characterised as 'payola'. However, the fact that it means broadcast exposure, artist development and sales success for a New Zealand act means that it is not only overlooked, but actively encouraged by policymakers.

Much of the comment on the effectiveness of Phase Four and New Zealand music on radio takes place on the NZ Radio List¹⁸ – a discussion forum for industry professionals and interested observers. The list is open to the public, and as such is an open forum, but membership is dominated by industry and media professionals. One list member, known by the pseudonym Delphypop but generally reckoned from context and comments to be directly involved with releasing and promoting independent music, sums up one of the problems for New Zealand music he sees as stemming from NZ On Air initiatives:

I think it was a good move to push the easy stuff first, soften them up etc, but without stage 2 and 3 plan that initial solution has lead to bands striving to compromise their sounds so they can be part of the club. I know this cos I see it and hear bands talking about it in the studio. bands who would otherwise be creating a valid and original sound are contemplating how they can bland themselves out so they can be eligible for an NZ on Air grant, which requires you to be commercial radio playable.

I think a two tiered scheme would be appropriate where NZ on Air soften up com radio with some easily digestible tracks and then slowly push some of that pure nz originality through the open door. that's not policy at the moment, and it should be. Com radio should be expected to come to the part rather than nz on air bringing the party to them, to their specs. (NZ Radio List, Message #6459, January 14, 2004¹⁹)

Criticism for New Zealand On Air's policies is often directed specifically at Brendan Smyth himself, and the accusation of fostering a culture of 'entirely derivative' pop music over 'genuinely indigenous' is laid at his feet. While understandable, this is perhaps unfair: Brendan Smyth might perhaps be guilty of not doing the job critics like Delphypop would like him to have been charged with, but he is certainly not guilty of failing to do the job he actually has. In response to a similar thread on the NZ Radio List, Smyth writes:

– or even not-for-profit organisations. They are managed as the tribe sees fit to best benefit the community, the tribe and the region. In the case of Mai FM, the Ngati Whatua tribe run it as a successful commercial business enterprise. Playing a mix of urban, hip hop, pop and contemporary R&B, it is one of the most listened-to music radio stations in Auckland, New Zealand's most populous city.

¹⁸ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nzradio>

¹⁹ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nzradio/message/6459>

What counts for us is airplay on commercial radio which is where we need to make a difference because that is where there is (still) not enough New Zealand music. Not just any airplay. Getting more New Zealand music played on commercial radio so that the local content figures go up, up, up. So that New Zealand music is not the preserve of student radio. So that commercial radio - where most people are listening - pushes and passes student radio. So that New Zealand music is no longer a ghetto and a minority interest sport. Personally, I have always believed that the best thing that a niche or specialist music label can do is export, export, export. Forget radio. Radio - commercial radio - is a mass, mainstream medium. Forget NZ On Air. NZ On Air is about airplay and is committed to getting more of it in the mainstream where there is not enough but where most of the people are listening. (NZ Radio List, Message #2097, March 15, 2002²⁰)

At a time now when New Zealand On Air has entered into its next phase (Phase Five, as it is called) and is actively promoting and supporting the export of New Zealand music to other international markets, questions must be raised with the benefit of hindsight as to the helpfulness of a strategy that implicitly encouraged small and independent local popular music producers to be more or less indistinguishable in genre and approach from international repertoire with major corporate financial backing. Competing on the world stage is not a problem in terms of quality or fitness for purpose – but a simple marketing question based on unique selling point.

In other words, by normalising New Zealand music in the ears and minds of New Zealanders (including those of New Zealand radio station programmers), New Zealand on Air may well have made the task of selling it to the world all that much more difficult. While they have been demonstrably successful in getting more local music on the radio, the fact of the music's geographic origins as a criteria for selection may not have been sufficient to fulfill the long term aspirations of the organisation. Choosing music based on its inherent New Zealandness is a thorny and problematic challenge to take on, but perhaps by wrestling with issues such as these at an earlier stage, rather than refusing to question the New Zealandness of a New Zealand-based act may have been worth the effort in the light of the end goal.

It is not as if the end goal – that of an export-led music economy – could not have been foreseen. The example of Ireland has long been at the heart of discussions around music quotas in New Zealand. Irish music is arguably globally successful exactly to the extent to which it is distinctively Irish. Gerry Smyth's *Noisy Island* (2005) grapples with exactly these issues of national identity and globalisation, and discusses the ways in which cultural nationalism has contributed to a globalised

²⁰ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nzradio/message/2097>

popular music success story based on difference, within established international practices of popular music culture.

The extent to which the New Zealand music story is comparable is debatable. It is still possible – and yet to be seen – whether the New Zealand popular music voice is sufficiently distinctive to international ears to earn the title of a kiwi sound, or at least be recognised as a notable national musical accent. It is interesting to note that the most significant success in New Zealand popular music, both at home and internationally in recent years has been that of Fat Freddy's Drop – a band whose record existed (at least initially²¹) entirely outside of the realms of public funding, radio broadcast and record labels, and yet whose unmistakable New Zealandness was the key to their widespread acceptance both at home and abroad. The album *Based on a True Story* is the single biggest-selling album by a New Zealand act of all time, and still remains in the charts after three years. It was named by popular British broadcaster Gilles Peterson as his album of the year in 2005 and the band have toured the UK and Europe several times since its release, including a performance at the 2007 Glastonbury festival.

Critics point to Fat Freddy's Drop as evidence that the New Zealand On Air and state-sponsored commercial radio route to popular music success is a shortsighted policy that leads to increased exposure, but also an increase in derivative material that adds nothing to either the cultural capital or export potential of New Zealand music.

It is instructive to consider the New Zealand example in this instance from a wider perspective for two main reasons. First, the problem of whether or not to prioritise locally produced music on local radio is virtually a universal one, and New Zealand is an example that scales well to regions in other, more populous countries (for instance, the UK's West Midlands has a similar population size to New Zealand). Second, as the most deregulated radio market on the planet, New Zealand provides a reference for other broadcasting political economies that seem to be irrevocably tending in the same direction.

More important than the question of *how* to get more local content on radio seems to have been the question of *why*. Several possible answers present themselves: to promote local music business at the local level; to promote local music cultures and scenes; to improve local representation in radio generally; to enhance and propagate

²¹ Fat Freddy's Drop have subsequently been featured on NZ On Air's Kiwi Hit Discs and edited versions of their typically long songs have been playlisted on commercial radio in New Zealand, and though these have unarguably contributed greatly to record sales, the funders have only come on board after it was clear that the band's popular success was undeniable, and that their distinctive New Zealandness was not incompatible with their widespread appeal.

local culture; to eventually contribute to the growth of an industry through export; to provide an environment in which New Zealanders see music as a valid and rewarding career choice, etc. The main criticism that can reasonably be levelled at New Zealand On Air is not to have asked the question in the first place.

Thus, the success of New Zealand On Air in providing an environment in which more New Zealanders hear more music produced in New Zealand by New Zealanders is unarguable. However, in so doing, they have raised the more troubling issue of the extent to which that music is New Zealand Music.

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