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A TRIBUTE TO MERVYN EVAN MCLEAN 1930–2022



Mervyn McLean. Photograph by Harold Anderson.

In 2006 Mervyn McLean published *Pioneers of Ethnomusicology*, an anthology of the discipline’s multifarious influential figures and their accomplishments. Writing always with a degree of understatement no longer common in the discipline, however, he omitted any reference to himself, despite having long enjoyed an international reputation for his groundbreaking and sustained work on traditional Māori music.

Starting his fieldwork in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1958, six years before two of the four founding members of the Society for Ethnomusicology produced their seminal works—Alan Merriam’s *The Anthropology of Music* and Bruno Nettl’s *Theory and Method in Ethnomusicology*—Mervyn focussed on recording Māori *waiata* ‘songs, chants’ throughout the country, eventually recording 1,300 items at a time when few non-Māori knew of

the existence of the many genres of sung and recited compositions. He later estimated his total distance travelled was 42,000 kilometres (1996: 5). He was, quite literally, an ethnomusicologist before the word was in common use.

An adjunct of Mervyn's fieldwork, unusual at that time, was an explicit commitment to provide singers with a copy of their recordings, and also to give younger Māori generally a free copy on request, in the interests of providing future generations with access to waiata as a teaching resource. And the desire to provide Māori with details of earlier recorded collections prompted him not just to publish annotated catalogues of collections—by the Māori Purposes Fund Board (1983), Radio New Zealand (1991) and the Museum of New Zealand (1992, with Jeny Curnow)—but also to distribute a copy free to every public library in the country.

In many of his publications, Mervyn was keen to use his knowledge and his recordings for the future benefit of Māori. The titles of the first two of his ten articles in the journal *Te Ao Hou* reflect this concern: “Can Maori Chant Survive?” (1964a) and “The Future of Maori Chant” (1964b). Subsequent journal articles contained transcriptions of waiata he had recorded. Indeed, Mervyn saw transcriptions as a very useful aid to the learning of waiata, and in 1975, together with Margaret Orbell, he published an annotated and translated anthology of 50 waiata and chants in a book format large enough to be laid flat so several students could read it simultaneously as they sang, aided, if necessary, by the inclusion of two CDs of original recordings. The volume, described by Auckland University Press as “the classic collection of Māori waiata”, is still available, as an e-book.

Several of Mervyn's publications acknowledge his principal benefactor and mentor, Arapeta Awatere, and each of his books includes a long list of Māori singers and informants. Indeed, an entire book, published with Orbell, is devoted to one man, Kino Hughes, who, at age 80, “set himself the task of recording for future generations all the songs he knew” (2002: 1).

In his relentless search for published research materials in the pre-computer, pre-internet years, Mervyn confronted the many difficulties that geographical distance and slow lines of communication imposed on both his own work and the new discipline with undaunted patience and determination, methodically and painstakingly writing letters requesting photocopies, many sourced from overseas libraries, of pages from the many publications containing references to Pacific music and dance. Much of his office was occupied with the results of ten years of collecting, housed in a dozen or so filing cabinets, a process Mervyn modestly acknowledged in his 1977 *An Annotated Bibliography of Oceanic Music and Dance*: “most of the items ... have been personally sighted by the compiler” (p. 7). A 1995 revised edition added a further 500 entries to the earlier 2,200.

Similar tenacity underpinned Mervyn's determination to research the *kōauau* ‘Māori cross-blown flute’: he personally tracked down and played

every known kōauau in museums around the world, publishing his findings in 1982 to demonstrate a chronological and geographical distribution of flute scales. His insistence that the flute was blown with the mouth, while historically correct, was not shared by a younger generation of Māori and non-Māori performers alike who preferred using the nose; such is the nature of changing attitudes to the historical model. However, something of the acknowledged breadth of his knowledge of organology more generally was reflected in the 185 entries he wrote on Oceania instruments for the *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (McLean 1984), the greatest number of any contributor.

Mervyn's family's obituary in the *New Zealand Herald* identified his most enduring achievement and legacy: the founding and directing of the Archive of Maori and Pacific Music at the University of Auckland. Funded from the Department of Anthropology's annual grant throughout his 23-year tenure as director, the archive progressed from a collection of tapes in a technician's workshop in a villa in Symonds Street to customised premises next to a language lab in the then newly built Human Sciences Building. Largely through Mervyn's tireless advocacy among his colleagues, the archive grew within two decades to house the world's largest recorded collection of traditional music from the Pacific. More recently, the change of name to the Archive of Māori and Pacific Sound acknowledges the many spoken and orated assemblages of Pacific-wide material included in its holdings. Originally a repository of material for largely academic use, the archive is now a specialised collection unit within the University of Auckland Library, with greatest use by Māori and Pasifika themselves.

In 1983 in cooperation with an international team, Mervyn led the Archive in co-ordinating a UNESCO-funded Territorial Survey of Oceanic Music, inviting established scholars to apply to survey the music of nominated parts of the Pacific experiencing rapid culture change. Ten surveys were undertaken in what was the first such project within Pacific ethnomusicology to incorporate the training of local co-workers in recording and documentation, as well immediate repatriation of copies of the recordings.

Mervyn once said that he wrote his autobiography *Tō Tātau Waka: In Search of Maori Music 1958–1979* (2004) in a matter weeks, and that he was delighted that Māori descendants of his informants, when contacted for photographs of their *koro* and *kuia* 'elderly male and female relatives', readily supplied them for inclusion. Such was the enduring high reputation of his fieldwork, and such was the growing public interest in things Māori within the country. The book was Auckland University Press's best-selling volume for that year.

Ethnomusicology was and is a relatively small subdiscipline within Anthropology at Auckland University, residing collegially but always competitively with archaeology, social anthropology and biological anthropology. During Mervyn's time, Māori studies and linguistics were also

part of the department, which as a whole was solidly focussed on Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific. It was pure luxury to be able to get an instant expert opinion on practically any aspect of Polynesian society or culture simply by walking along the corridor and knocking on the appropriate door. Many of Mervyn's publications acknowledge such collegial cooperation.

Mervyn edited or co-edited the *Journal of the Polynesian Society (JPS)* from 1968 to 1976. As M.P.R. Sorenson noted in his centennial history of the Polynesian Society (1992: 124–26), Mervyn arrived at a time when *JPS* was running six issues behind, his co-editor having left for overseas fieldwork. By prioritising the journal and even sacrificing part of his leave, he brought the issues up to date. Indeed, Sorenson characterised his five-year period of sole editorship as of “a meticulous standard”. In 1977, the Polynesian Society honoured Mervyn with the award of the Elsdon Best Memorial Medal, in recognition of his outstanding scholarly contributions to Māoridom and the Pacific.

Mervyn made only two significant departures from a focus on Māori music. One was a period of fieldwork on Aitutaki and Mangaia, the other a chapter on the structure of Tikopian music in Raymond Firth's monograph *Tikopia Songs* (1990).

In 2007 the Department of Anthropology published *Oceanic Music Encounters: The Print Resource and the Human Resource; Essays in Honour of Mervyn McLean*. A presentation copy was given to Mervyn at an Auckland restaurant, together with pre-recorded tributes from the 15 contributors. A comprehensive list of his publications was included in that volume.

During his “retirement”, Mervyn continued to be active, broadening the scope of his publications even as his colleagues were tending to narrow their own research focus. Geographical diffusion of singing styles and musical instruments came under his scrutiny. He first presented his accumulation of knowledge of the Pacific in *Weavers of Song: Polynesian Music and Dance* (1999), a major work unlikely to be repeated by a sole author. He further extended the scope of his Pacific research to embrace Polynesian origins and languages in his final major work, *Music, Lapita, and the Problem of Polynesian Origins* (2014), incorporating data from linguistics and archaeology. By all measures, this was a remarkable achievement for any author, but an achievement made more poignant by a statement appearing at the very end of the 231-page document: “Because the writer is now blind, this book has been necessarily dependent on the help of many people.”

Moe mai, moe mai rā e te rangatira.

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