1950-1959

The early local pop recording industry was dominated by three American genres. Female singers and male vocal groups performed mainstream pop, a wave of recording in a faux-Hawaiian style occurred, and a posse of country and western artists arrived. On the live scene, big bands still featured in cabarets and ballrooms, while in Auckland the Maori Community Centre was a Mecca for aspiring talent.

Hawaiian music's long popularity in New Zealand had begun in 1911, and a key part of the attraction of 'Blue Smoke' in 1949 was its use of the steel guitar. In Auckland, the style was led by two Tongan steel-guitar players who became stalwarts of the live and recording scenes: Bill Sevesi and Bill Wolfgramm. Daphne Walker, a Maori from Great Barrier Island, was the most prominent singer, and it was Sam Freedman – a Russian Jewish songwriter based in Wellington – who wrote the biggest local hits.

Country and western has a history in New Zealand that is almost as long, and evolved from recordings and film. Country recordings by US acts were available in New Zealand in the late 1920s, and western films also inspired those wanting to emulate the cowboy sound (and look). New Zealand's earliest prominent country artist, Tex Morton, remains the most influential. Radio also spread the popularity of country music, through request shows, live broadcasts from regional stations, and specialist shows hosted by Happi Hill and Cotton-Eye Joe (Arthur Pearce). Also important was a square-dancing fad in the early 1950s. The new independent labels jumped onto the country bandwagon immediately, with Tanza finding wide acceptance for the Tumbleweeds, who toured nationally. Otherwise, solo singers dominated the early country scene, so there was little of the interaction seen in jazz and dance bands. It was as if they heard a lonesome whistle while mustering on distant paddocks and practised their yodelling in isolation.

Maori pop music was nurtured at the Maori Community Centre in Auckland's Freemans Bay. Here, the families of the urban migration of the 1940s and 1950s met, mingled and made music. Its stage was an on-going talent quest and proving ground for a diverse array of acts, such the Howard Morrison Quartet, Lou and Simon, and the young Kiri Te Kanawa. It also helped establish many of the Maori showbands that later flourished overseas. For many careers in pop music, the road leads back to the Maori Community Centre.

Opposite: In 1962 Auckland's Maori Community Centre was peaking as a gathering place for Maori – young and old – who had moved to the city in the previous 15 years. *Te Ao Hou* magazine commissioned photographer Ans Westra to capture the Centre's rich musical life. Friday nights would attract 500 dancers, and on Sunday nights, 1000 people enjoyed talent quests that featured many future stars. Ans Westra

Cowboy's dream: the Tumbleweeds perform for a Dunedin audience, and for 4ZB listeners, from a temporary exhibition studio, c. 1949. Campbell Photography/RNZ Sound Archives

FIVE

Canaries and Cowboys 1950s Pop Scenes

By the early 1950s, local singers were competing in record stores against overseas performers like Rosemary Clooney, Patti Page and Dinah Shore. In Auckland, vocalists such as Dorothy Brannigan, Pat McMinn, Mavis Rivers and Esme Stephens were starting to make headway with their releases on Tanza and Stebbing. One Auckland retailer reported to *New Zealand Truth* in 1953 that sales of local records had more than doubled, and were now running neck-and-neck with their overseas rivals.[1]

For those who followed local pop music, there even seemed to be a small-scale star system developing. Thanks to radio play – much of it live broadcasts with dance bands, or recorded jingles, rather than 78s – some young women singers were almost becoming household names. To fans, wrote a *New Zealand Listener* reporter, they were known as 'chicks' or 'canaries', although for those who did not venture to the cabarets, it was difficult to put a face to the voice. Mavis Rivers was the most polished of the class of 1952, said the reporter: always at ease with a song or a band, she was 'hep to the beat and does a fast bounce tune as well'. Her 78s could be heard on Auckland jukeboxes, and sold to 'collectors and kids'. Even Mavis's sisters – Natalie, Sally and Mitzi – became a recording act, releasing five 78s on Tanza as the Rivers Sisters.

DANCING IN MY SOCKS

In each main centre, a female singer was prominent, on the wireless and on cabaret stages. Usually this led to recording work as well, even for those outside Auckland. With Marion Waite temporarily back in the US, she missed out on the early 1950s boom in recording. After the initial burst by Pixie Williams, Wellington's main contribution came from Jean McPherson, who recorded for Tanza and HMV in the twilight of her career. The two Tanza discs are charming if contradictory: the follow-up to 1951's 'I Don't Wanna Be Kissed' was 'Kisses and Affection'.

In Christchurch, Coral Cummins was a household name, especially through her work with Martin Winiata. 'She sings with a cozy, intimate jauntiness', said the *Listener*, her voice coming out of the radio 'as personal and intimate as a kiss from your fiancée'.[2] Cummins was always elegant, whether in rehearsal – all in black, with a string of pearls – or in flowing satin ballgowns on stage. She began singing in her teens and during the war was appearing with the bands of Brian Marston and Winiata. The residency with Winiata – at the Union Rowing Club on the banks of the Avon – made them a drawcard right into the 1950s. Cummins was also regularly featured on 3YA with the studio bands, and ventured up to Auckland for a year to appear at the Peter Pan and Metropole with Art

Coral Cummins broadcasts over 3ZB, Christchurch, with band leader Brian Marston on trombone.
E. M. Alderdice Collection, PA1-q-182-28, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington

Rosoman. 'Coral's hip style is just what is needed to do full justice to [the] fine Rosoman arrangements', said *Jukebox* in 1946.[3]

In Dunedin, Leone Maharey began as a child singing in the competitions and on radio, before becoming the featured vocalist in Dick Colvin's band on 4YA. The band regularly played Joe Brown's Town Hall dances, where her future husband and singing partner, Dave Maharey, was a 'crooner'. The ZBs took Leone on a national tour, and after the war she sang with clarinettist Keith Harris's group the Rhythmaires. In 1951 the Mahareys recorded a duet for Tanza, 'Perimpo Perampo' backed with (b/w) 'Don't Sing Aloha'. The *Listener* commented, 'With Leone the tune always comes first and the feeling that puts the tune across; after that the frills. In a word she's a torch singer.'[4]

But Auckland had the stars whose names resonated for years: Mavis Rivers and Esme Stephens, ostensibly rivals at Tanza and Stebbing, and Pat McMinn, dedicated to pop. Stephens was the first to become prominent, when she sang with Artie Shaw's band during its visit in 1943. She had been singing pop songs since childhood, accompanying herself on the piano when she should have been practising her scales. 'In fact, she liked to sing all the time, at home, at school, and at her first job in an Auckland store.' A part-time musician working at the store suggested she audition for Theo Walters, who needed a vocalist for his Friday night *Band Wagon* show on 1ZB. When his contract ran out, there was no shortage of work: Stephens sang with the bands of Len Hawkins, Fred Gore, Art Rosoman and her future husband, Dale Alderton. She described herself as 'strictly a commercial singer', and 'a nervous one at that'. Perhaps because of her modesty, said the *Listener*, 'her warm love of singing comes through very satisfactorily and makes the customers feel warm, too'.

Stephens was the vocalist on HMV's first release by New Zealanders, the Latin-flavoured 'You Can in Yucatan'. Her biggest solo hit came in 1951, 'Between Two Trees', which sold over 7000 copies and was often featured on 2YA's *Hit Parade*; her best seller was a collaboration with the Duplicats, 'Mockin' Bird Hill', which had already sold 6000 copies before the original version by Les Paul and Mary Ford had arrived from overseas.[5] Besides Stephens, this vocal group featured Alderton, Ena Allen and pianist John Thomson, modernising pre-war popular songs such as 'If You Knew Susie'. The group was soon in demand for its 'old songs in new dresses', some in the style of Spike Jones.[6]

Alderton described Stephens as 'a romantic singer, who liked Rosemary Clooney and Ella Fitzgerald, of course, all those marvellous singers: it was part of her in-built repertoire'. She died suddenly in 1992, aged 68, within a week of her 1950s contemporary, Mavis Rivers. Forty years earlier, the pair had released a duet for Stebbing's Zodiac label: 'Ya Got the Makin's of Love' b/w 'Promises'.[7]

Of the top three female vocalists, Rivers and Stephens concentrated on sophisticated pop, aimed at adults, while the other member of the triumvirate became best known for her novelty songs. Pat McMinn, an accomplished singer during the war while still in her teens, was probably New Zealand's busiest vocalist in the early 1950s. In fact, she had never stopped singing professionally since winning the Dixieland's talent quest in 1943, aged fifteen. After five years at the Trocadero came another six singing for Ted Croad's big band at the Orange, where she met her first husband, drummer Eddie Croad. During an evening at the Orange, a trio of McMinn's Astor collaborators would support her singing a bracket of her latest Tanza hits. 'We would make a feature of doing them while they were on the hit parade', said McMinn. The audience would stop dancing and stand in front of the stage, watching.[8]

McMinn released more than 25 sides for Tanza, including several of the label's biggest hits. Her first recording was on 'Choo'n Gum', as vocalist for John MacKenzie and the Astor Dixie Boys.[9] Besides her biggest hit, 1956's 'Opo the Crazy Dolphin', her other successes included 'Bimbo' (on which she duetted with herself, thanks to Peach's over-dubbing), 'Dancing in My Socks' and 'Just Another Polka'. 'Mr Tap Toe' was also a hit in Australia: McMinn's version was on the market there before Doris Day's. She learnt it from sheet music, parcels of which were still arriving from the US, sent by the mother of the GI she befriended during the war.

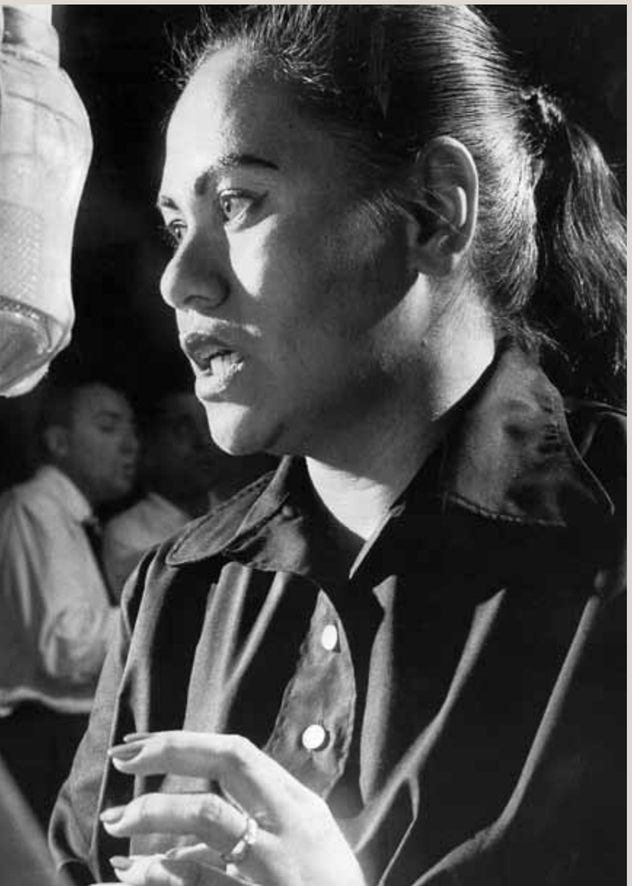
A few days after the Tangiwai disaster, Pat McMinn performs at Whangamata, late December 1953; Colin Martin on saxophone. Pat McMinn collection

Stan Dallas regarded McMinn as the finest vocalist Noel Peach recorded in Auckland: she was always in tune, and brought drive to every song.[10] All her recordings are sprightly, even 'Bell Bottom Blues'. McMinn's success at novelty songs meant she rarely got the opportunity to record adult material, like torch ballads. Instead, she was given 'I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas' (b/w 'Too Fat for the Chimney').

MAVIS, SING!

Her voice took her from Apia to Las Vegas, but the six years during which Mavis Rivers was Auckland's leading singer were crucial to her career – and the fledgling New Zealand pop industry. Rivers, whose pure voice managed to combine subtlety and confidence, would record with Frank Sinatra, stand in for Ella Fitzgerald at her request, and perform regularly with the bands of Benny Goodman and Red Norvo. Before that, however, came a busy apprenticeship of which her international fans were largely unaware.

Mavis Rivers in Hollywood, 1959. Fairfax Media Sundays Archive



From 1947 until she left for the United States in 1953, Rivers was the queen of Auckland's pop vocalists, flitting between gigs at the Peter Pan and Orange ballrooms to recording sessions for Tanza and Stebbing's. By day she was a stenographer at Farmers Trading Company, often falling asleep over her typewriter after getting home at two in the morning. As a shy nineteen-year-old she impressed her co-workers when she picked up the sheet music of a song she hadn't heard, 'Mona Lisa', and started singing.[11]

Mavis was one of thirteen musical children born to Moody and Louisa Rivers in Apia, Western Samoa, in 1929. Moody was an alto sax player in a dance band with his brothers. Once a week he organised Family Night, at which every child was expected to perform an item, culminating in a finale featuring all fifteen members of the Rivers family. As a girl, Mavis went everywhere with a ukulele, and her grandmother encouraged her to perform for women's clubs. 'Mavis, sing! [But] I was singing before they asked. I was destined to sing.'[12]

When she was twelve the Rivers family moved to Pago Pago, American Samoa, and soon the harbour was full of US warships; hundreds of tents were pitched near her home, sheltering the troops. She began singing with her father's band – 'I loved big bands with a passion' – and became a favourite of the Americans. Still in her early teens, she was almost a mascot, travelling from camp to camp singing several shows a week. For the marines based in outlying areas, a special hookup was arranged using the telephone system linked to camp intercoms.[13]

The family moved to Auckland in 1947, settling in Grey Lynn. It was guitarist Tommy Kahi who first spotted her talent when she sang with a Mormon choir in Auckland. 'She had this one bar and I thought, Gee, what a voice. I went back and said, "Was that you? Look love, I'm having a jazz show tonight, would you sing?" . . . "Yes, I'd love to."' At the rehearsal Kahi introduced her to George Campbell, Frank Gibson and Derek Heine. 'I said, "Look, you guys, I'd like you to back this young lady" . . . . She sang about eight numbers, and once she sang "How High the Moon", the boys were rapt.'[14]

Mavis Rivers with Crombie Murdoch, Auckland, c. 1950: 'I was destined to sing'. Dennis Huggard collection

After meeting Noel Peach at Astor Studios, work quickly followed: jingles, nightclubs, radio bands, record releases. At the Auckland Swing Club she met Crombie Murdoch and soon she was singing 'The Coffee Song' at the Peter Pan with his group. 'We were all very impressed . . . . Like all good vocalists she almost invariably got her lyrics wrong but the thing that always struck us about her was her natural musical ability and perfect diction.'

At Astor in 1949, Rivers was commissioned by Warner Brothers to record four songs from the film *My Dream is Yours* – 'I'll String Along with You', 'Canadian Capers', 'Someone Like You' and the theme song. These became Peach's first productions for Tanza. 'Mavis was a wonderful little trouper', Peach said later, 'and she could accept direction when necessary – not that she needed teaching, for she was a born singer.'[15]

Rivers became Tanza's leading vocalist, recording over 40 sides for the label. Among them were pop novelties ('Choc'late Ice Cream Cone', 'Candy and Cake'), lush ballads ('Too Young', 'At the End of the Day'), jazz standards (a delicate version of 'How High the Moon' with guitarist Mark Kahi), and the requisite Polynesian romances ('Farewell Samoa', 'Fijian Holiday' and even 'The Maori Way'). She broadcast on 1YA and 1YD with the radio dance bands and with Nancy Harrie's Quartet on the show *Around the Town*. Harrie later said, 'I was completely captivated by Mavis's voice and her strong sense of rhythm.' Together they recorded the novelty 'Aba Daba Honeymoon', in which a chimpanzee falls in love with a monkey.

A more celebrated session took place on 1 February 1950, when Duke Ellington's former trumpeter Rex

Dennis Huggard Archive, MSD10-0538, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington

Stewart was in Auckland for a brief stopover. He was persuaded to enter the Astor Studios to back Rivers recording 'I'm in the Mood for Love'. Harrie, also on the session, said, 'Rex prophesied quite a future for Mavis, but even he never realised how far she'd go.' Stewart's endorsement did not come cheaply: after the session, when asked if he wanted a fee, instead of just suggesting a standard union rate, he replied, 'You can give me £50 if you like.' Peach and the Tanza musicians, stunned by the massive amount, could only respond by having a whip around.[16]

In August, Rivers had the starring role with Auckland's top players at the city's 'first' jazz concert; she had been singing professionally for little over a year. But there was always a plan: to get experience, then go to the States. When Rivers moved there in 1953 – to a secretarial scholarship at the Brigham Young University at Provo, Utah – the Auckland papers said she was destined for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. She took part in Salt Lake City's limited entertainment scene, including television appearances, but had to leave the US when her student visa ran out.

After six months back in Samoa – where she worked as 'girl Friday' and disc jockey on the island's only radio station – she returned to the States in January 1955 as an immigrant, determined to have a singing career. In Los Angeles, as a singer and guitarist, she joined a Hawaiian band named the Johnny Ukulele Quartet. Rivers did not share the musical tastes of its virtuoso leader, but met her future husband, the bass player David Catingub.

Rivers put her singing on hold while she had two sons until, in 1958, some friends encouraged her to make a demo tape and found her an agent. Two weeks after approaching Capitol Records, Rivers had a deal: the company's A&R man made his decision after hearing only eight bars of her voice. 'I was such a *greenhorn*, so overwhelmed by this', Rivers said in 1990. 'And they asked what I wanted to do, and I said I'd give my right arm to record with Nelson Riddle. "Let's ask!", they said.'

A legend for his productions earlier in the 1950s for Frank Sinatra, Riddle agreed. At the first recording session at the Capitol Tower studios in Hollywood, when Rivers heard the orchestra strike up, she started to sing, then sat down and wept. 'All of a sudden I was thinking of my dad. Look at me! I'm big time, recording with Nelson Riddle! We did one number and then the string players applauded with their bows. So I started crying again.'[17]

A glittering US career followed for Rivers: three albums with Capitol; several more with Sinatra's label, Reprise; and a residency at his hotel at Lake Tahoe. Riddle described her as having 'the authority of a poised nightclub singer, the beat of a jazz vocalist, and the expressiveness of a girl who really feels what she sings. What's more, she combines these qualities in a professional style that comes to very few. I think she's just great.'[18]

From the late 1970s Rivers returned several times to perform in New Zealand, often in a band led by her son, saxophonist Matt Catingub. She died in 1992, aged 63, shortly after a performance in Los Angeles. Frank Sinatra allegedly described her as having the 'purest voice' in jazz, comparing her to Ella Fitzgerald.[19] Rivers once acknowledged, 'I guess I'm up there with the Sarahs, Ellas and Carmens. At least, that's what they tell me.' But, she said, the best thing to happen to a singer is when people stop saying you sound like someone else. 'After a while you want them to say, "D'you know that singer? I think she's been listening to you."'[20]

But McMinn always sang with a smile, and had the last laugh when a frippery she recorded in just one hour was broadcast every day for nearly 40 years on Auckland radio stations. It was a jingle about false teeth, which became as familiar as a playground chant to several generations of Auckland school children:

Broke my denture, broke my denture
Woe is me, what can I do?
Take it in to Mr Geddes
And he'll fix it, just like new.

What's the address, what's the address?
Hurry please and tell me do.
Top of Queen Street, on the corner
And the number's 492.

Geddes Dental Renovation clinic was in the same block as the Metropole, just 100 yards away from the original Dixieland (which had been built on the profits of Frederick Rayner's denture empire). Written to the tune of 'Clementine', the jingle has lyrics attributed to Mrs Geddes.[21] It featured Astor Studio's top session musicians of the day – George Campbell, Nancy Harrie, Lee Humphreys and character actor Athol Coates, plus McMinn – all on their way to the annual Musicians' Union ball. Forever more, McMinn fielded requests to sing it, especially at parties.[22]

Usually, McMinn's sunny pop songs were accompanied by the honky-tonk piano of Crombie Murdoch. But the person tickling the ivories on 'Broke My Dentures' was the most successful female session musician in New Zealand: pianist Nancy Harrie.

With Noel Peach energetically recording at Astor, many other Auckland women made it to disc. Dorothy Brannigan began as a violinist, in a family that contained its own chamber group, giving camp concerts during the war as the Diggle String Quartette. Church choir and light opera performances led to radio work on 1ZB, as a vocalist with John MacKenzie and Maurice Tansley, and as a violinist with the station's orchestra and dance band. She released more than twenty sides with Tanza, many of them smooth, country–pop duets with Buster Keene (the pseudonym of the Knaves' Doug Mowbray).

John MacKenzie with vocalist Maurice Tansley, 1ZB studio, Auckland, early 1950s. RNZ Sound Archives