

Black New Zealanders find their own voice through hip-hop

PACIFIC PRIDE

By Clinton Walker

AS BIG, DARK AND PULSATING as it is, at 11:45 in the morning, the Sydney Big Day Out's Hordern Pavilion "Boiler Room" is hardly happening. Punters wander in, have a look around and continue on. Only a handful shuffle around the dance floor.

The first live act of the day, the Sisters Underground, shy at the best of times, their sweet harmonies more appropriate to an intimate, late-night vibe, mark a tentative beginning. They even have trouble getting with the backing-track for "In The Neighbourhood", one of last year's great singles, which means their short set is concluded on a down. Any lingering disappointment, however, or sense of being out place, is completely blown away from the moment the Otago Millionaires Club take the stage.

A DJ and guitarist/percussionist — both of them very big, round and brown — back up front-man Paul Fuemana and his female foil, Sina. The sound is hard-driving funk, the bonus being that there are songs in the mix too. And that Fuemana is an absolute natural, a man who sings and moves with the sharp easy confidence of a young Marvin Gaye.

This is the new face of New Zealand music, advance warning of the next wave.

Australia has always been more than willing to listen to New Zealand music; we have, in fact, cheekily co-opted the best of it as our own. Most of that has been in the realm of rock — from the La De Das to Split Enz — although more recently the Flying Nun guitar bands have fiercely clung to their Kiwi identity. Now black New Zealand is asserting itself, producing the exciting new Aotearoa sounds.

Sharing with Afro-Americans a strong tradition of singing in Church (one of the essential roots, after all, of soul music), black New Zealanders — Maoris, Tongans, Samoans, Niueans



The Otago Millionaires Club, led by the enigmatic Paul Fuemana

like Paul Fuemana — are now finding their own voice. After an apprenticeship playing reggae or in show bands, they are happily marrying the universal hip-hop base to their own ends.

"In The Neighbourhood" crossed over, kept out of the number one spot in New Zealand by Prince's "Most Beautiful Girl". It then crossed over the Tasman, and though it may have peaked at 62 in Australia, it was a big turntable hit (81 on the Triple-J Hot 100). And that's just the tip of the iceberg: the album from which "In The Neighbourhood" was lifted, *Proud, An Urban-Pacific Streetsoul Compilation*, confirmed the fact. A New Zealand number one, it contained terrific material by not only the OMC, but other acts like the Semi MCs, Pacifican Descendants, Radio Backstab & DJ Payback and MC Slam.

Watching the OMC at the Big Day Out, it's hard to believe Paul Fuemana won't be a star, that he can't spearhead a movement.

"We're musical people, us Maoris," Alan Duff wrote in *Once Were Warriors*. "Comes natural to us;

plays a bigger part in our lives. . . We got passion, us Maoris. Or maybe it's style. But not like that Negro style you see on the TV of being swank, hip, cool, moving with their black rhythmic groovin', not that kind, but a cross between that and the less showy whites."



Supergroove: massive success in NZ, high hopes for Australia

Says Paul Fuemana's older brother Phillip, who formed the OMC: "I think what Flying Nun have done is special for New Zealand. We've moaned about it, Polynesians, how it's all white music, but we should have got on that wagon ages ago. . . We're really influenced by the Afro-American culture, but we want to keep



Sisters Underground: sweet and shy

some of ourselves. A lot of the guys had to go back and study where they're from, and what beats to use, what music. The gelling of the two is really urban-Pacific."

SOUTH AUCKLAND, THE POLYNESIAN capital of the world (population: 240,000), is no LA ghetto. Despite what the wannabe gangstas might like to think, it doesn't have crack dealers on every corner — there's none, period — and nobody's carrying Uzis. But it is depressed, like any old industrial town. Unemployment is high, and as *Once Were Warriors* so powerfully illustrates, even as the extended family system stands fast, there's still plenty

of problems. Violence is a way of life, exacerbated by alcohol abuse. And so with 45 per cent of the population under 25, there's a lot of kids looking for something else.

"It used to have a bad name," says Tim Mahon, of the governing Manukau City Council, who has been instrumental in youth/music programs in the area, "but less and less so now. Polynesians came here in the late '50s/early '60s looking for work; two genera-

tions later they feel more secure, more integrated. . ."

Certainly, South Auckland has become a hotbed of musical activity. "It's not a colour thing, it's not a race thing or a culture thing," says Phillip Fuemana, "it's just about us, born in this city, who have something to share, we do have things to say."

"Rap now is not just an American thing, it's a new universal language." Alan Jansson

American-born Hasana, of the Sisters Underground, says that, in Otara, one of South Auckland's suburbs, "there was a lot of music around, a lot of groups, there were clubs, people getting into dancing, but they couldn't get anywhere because no-one was very interested. People normally concentrate on rock bands."

When Tim Mahon, a former musician, joined Manukau Council in 1989, becoming program supervisor at the Otara Music Centre, he could see something brewing. With his contacts in the music business, as well as pull in government circles, he could get things done. (When Crowded House wanted to play a free concert in New Zealand last year, it was Mahon they contacted. "I've been aware for years that he's been doing stuff down in South Auckland," Neil Finn told New Zealand television, "organising entertainment for Manukau and trying to get some local music recorded and out there basically, because there's a huge resource of music there that's largely been ignored.")

If Tim Mahon was a white midwife in the birth of this new black music, he had an equal partner in Auckland studio-owner and producer, Alan Jansson. Jansson is an old punk who pioneered electronic rock in New Zealand with his band, Body Electric; a serious car accident, however, put paid to plans, and Jansson took to the other side of the mixing desk. In the late '80s, he cut a couple of big local hits with a rap act called Chaingang, who went on to become 3 The Hard Way, of "Hip Hop (I don't like hip-hop, I love it Holiday)" fame.

Jansson was already working with the Semi-MCs, Pacifican Descendants and the Sisters Underground (then known as the RBG — red, black and green — Crew, who'd come up through talent quests), and sending tapes over to Volition Records in Sydney, when *Proud* was conceived as a companion piece to *High*, the compilation of Australian dance music Volition put through its Second Nature offshoot. Jansson went to his old friend Tim Mahon, with whom he'd worked on MC Slam's "Prove Me Wrong", which the Justice Depart-

ment commissioned as a "stop-the-violence" statement.

"Up until now there hasn't been the encouragement or the role models," says Jansson. "Polynesian people have represented us in sport, and it's only a matter of time before they rep-



Post Boiler Room: the OMC relax with the Sisters

resent us in music, and I'm just so proud that I was able to be one of the pioneers in helping that happen."

"We've got a real talented Maori base," Jansson says. "They can just sit down with a guitar and it's beautiful. The Polynesians are in the same boat; they can listen to a rap track from the States and straight away they can start rapping too. Rap now is not just an American thing, it's a new universal language."

THE VERY FIRST RECORD MADE IN NEW Zealand, in 1948, was by a Maori band, the Ruru Karaitiana Quartet, but, ironically, it was in the then-popular Hawaiian style. Less than a decade later, the first new Zealand rock & roll star was Johnny Cooper, "the Maori Cowboy".

Their grounding in gospel music stood Maoris and new Polynesian migrants in good stead to tackle soul music in the '60s. Tim Finn remembers Maori artists bringing the sound of Motown into his world. With the emergence of reggae in the '70s, black New Zealand slotted right into the

groove, led by the Herbs; bands like the Twelve Tribes of Israel are still popular today.

But it was the advent of hip-hop, with its strong strain of roots revisionism, that got young black New Zealanders thinking. Old-school show band graduate Dalvanus Prime suggested the possibilities in 1984, with the number one hit "Poi E", which was sung in Maori and melded elements of traditional Maori music to pop.

At the tail end of the '80s, the Upper Hut Posse was a promising prospect until volatile leader Dean Hapeta was subsumed by Black Muslimism. At the start of the '90s, Samoan-German Kane Massey launched Deep Grooves, and the label has subsequently produced a steady stream of invigorating, often reggae/dub/ragamuffin-flavoured dance music. Its roster includes 3 The Hard Way. But if Deep Grooves has pronounced itself "The new sound of Grey Lynn" — Grey Lynn being a trendy central Auckland spot — Second Nature has gone straight to the black heart of the matter in South Auckland.

At the Otara Music Centre, respected local musicians Phillip Fuemana and Ina George were appointed to oversee *Proud's* pre-production. Acts like the Vocal Five, Di-Na-Ve and Rhythm Harmony were bought on board. Fuemana also led a crew of his own, called the Otara Millionaires, in which his little brother Pauly occupied a back seat.

All the music, of course, was directly influenced by American models. The real goal, at least according to Alan Jansson, was to avoid submitting totally to this cultural imperialism, especially in its hardcore-gangsta form, and creating something unique. "They get bombarded with all this gangsta bullshit from the States," he says, "and I just can't be bothered with it. Guys degrading women — I just don't wanna know!"

Jansson did much more than just produce *Proud*. He wrote the music for a number of tracks, often aided by DJ Andy Vann, and with "In The Neighbourhood" created a quiet sensation.

Time was ripe for a change. After all, boysy guitar rock, having got the top of the tree, can now only go one

way, and that's down. Says F Steven, of the predominantly funk outfit Supergroove, who I enjoyed massive success in New Zealand and now hope to repeat in Australia: "We're quite popular down in Dunedin [home of Flying N because everyone is sick of those j ly, kind of out-of-tune, whining a songs — which even we are influenced by. Now they're getting into funk music with a bit more colour."

Proud has also had the desired effect in that it has instilled some pride in an area that previously perhaps accepted its lot at the bottom of the heap. "It's funny," says Jansson, "as *Proud's* come out, a lot of people are saying they're from South Auckland. People used to say they weren't from there. A lot of people look at South Auckland now and say, 'Shit, that's where it's all going to come from in the next wave.' Since we did *Proud*, I've seen a lot of people sniffing out the talent!"

EARLY LAST YEAR, THE *PROUD* CREW embarked on a major tour of New Zealand. It proved to be a dual-edged sword. On the positive side, it raised the artists' profile. For many of them, barely out of their teens, it was their first time away from home, their first trip to the much whiter South Island.

Phillip Fuemana says that some of the feedback was like "Just Another Coconut" or "This Is Not America" were worn during the tour. "They just grew out of what the guys saw. We'd had these wannabe gangsta guys turn up at shows and the clothes they were wearing just looked stupid. The guys on stage looked out and saw themselves that way, and so now they wear lava shirts and have the Samoan flag up and sing the Samoan anthem."

"They're getting into their own sound," says Jansson, "they're looking into old Pacific Island records and things they can sample and use with their uncles for permission. Rather than look outward, they've started looking inward."

On the downside, though, this has caused a terminal rift within the team. Early in the piece, a kid from Eanisi Tokelau, who was in the Pacifican Descendants. He was dropped. And throughout the tour, money was going unaccounted for; it ended in financial shambles. The upshot was that Alan Jansson and Phillip Fuemana were left. Fuemana has now gone on to Deep Grooves, and taken a whole lot of allies with him. Jans [Cont.]

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[Cont. from 28] son, however, contends that Fuemana did him "a huge favour" — the bitterness creeping into his voice nonetheless — "because, really, the only things worthwhile on *Proud* would have to be the Sisters, the Otara Millionaires Club and the Semi-MCs."

The Sisters have decided to move to Hawaii, where Hasana's mother lives and the girls have previously played successfully. But if Jansson seems none too perturbed, it's because he knows he's sitting on the hottest property of them all: Paul Fuemana.

The OMC has been reinvented as a shape-shifting entity around the charismatic Fuemana. You want gangsta? Fuemana's the real thing, Otara style. Now 25 and wearing a scar on his right cheek, pirate earrings and a Hawaiian shirt from the line he designs and makes himself, he was first sent to a boys home at age 11. By the time he was 18, he'd had enough.

"All my old mates are doing life — they've done the works, murder, everything," he says. "They won't get out. I woke up one day going, 'What's happening?'"

Music has been a constant in his life. "My dad told me that James Brown was the king of rock & roll," Fuemana says. "So when Elvis died, everybody thought the King was dead, but I knew it was James Brown eh?" Fuemana cites gospel music, Sly Stone and Kurtis Blow as influences, as well as Split Enz, Lou Reed and "the Dunedin Sound."

Violence is another constant in Polynesian life. "But after all the aggro shit," Fuemana says, "my dad, he'd get really pissed, and he'd get up and play the guitar, in front of the whole family, and everyone would be clapping. He was a star. That's where I got it from. When I saw Dad, I thought, that's cool, you know? When he'd wake up the next morning he was hungover and not a nice guy, but I still focussed on the night before, when we were all having a good time."

For the Sisters Underground, Hawaii may not be LA — but then neither is Auckland. Says Hasana: "One of our things is, she's Polynesian and I'm a black American, so we don't try to be one thing or the other, we just do whatever, just go with the flow. We're not really stuck on trying to bring out New Zealand music or American music — just our own music." ■