

Mahinarangi Tocker

Remembered by Sandra Dickson

Mahinarangi Tocker, of Ngati Raukawa, Ngati Tuwharetoa, Ngati Maniapoto, Hebrew and Celtic ancestry, is a well-respected musician in Aotearoa. So respected she opened Parliament in 1999 at the request of newly-elected Prime Minister Helen Clark. So respected she was awarded the Member of the New Zealand Order Of Merit in 2008's New Years Honours List. And so respected there have been many articles discussing her death of a heart attack in North Shore Hospital. Her tangi was held in Kauriki Marae in Taumarunui on 19th April.¹

Her accomplishments are many. She began recording original music in 1982, with the release on tape of the glorious "Clothesline Conversations" - a feminist Maori lesbian, singing of mana Wahine, of loving women, sketching stories of living here in Aotearoa.

And this was before the Homosexual Reform Bill in 1986.

*I'm black inside...but I'm a rainbow
when you look at me
I have no labels but those you
choose to see
Wahine Toa*

Her subsequent albums included "I'm Going Home" (1987), "Mahinarangi" (1995), "Te Ripo" (1997), "Touring" with Charlotte Yates (2000), "Hei Ha" (2002) and "The Mongrel In Me" (2005).

All albums featuring her own distinctive vignettes in Te Reo and English, her use of her guitar, but most memorably, featuring that voice. Her voice is literally unforgettable, soaring and filling her music with a distinct, unique beauty, she uses it to play, to dance, throughout her songs.

She was also the first Maori woman to sing in various music festivals all over the world - from Canada to Europe to the Michigan Womyn's Festival. She described herself as supporting 'diversity without judgement,' and was an active advocate for destigmatising mental illness, for the Aids Foundation and the LGBT communities,² and for the use of music to support learning and creativity, holding workshops in schools for young people.

*Marilyn loves a woman...hides in
her closet, keeps the world away
Soon her inner self will say "hey
marilyn...hey, hey marilyn"
I'm not gonna wait forever...as
soon as I find my dancing shoes...
we're stepping out, we're stepping out*

Mary, Marilyn and Me

Mahina literally performed all over Aotearoa, and watching her play live was sometimes almost painful - her nervousness and anxiety were often only too plain to the audience. She would sometimes speak too softly between songs to be heard, often giggle to herself, always have the audience completely entranced with her gift, her humility, her humour by concert end.

I don't think I realised, when I first started going to see her in the late 1980s with feminist friends, quite how staggeringly brave it was, to tell the stories she told. I was just so glad to find someone writing music I could relate to, music to dream to. I wore out "I'm Going Home" and have never been able to replace it, despite many attempts. Mahina taught this white girl something about race here in Aotearoa too, by telling stories I could imagine myself as part of. By making me think again about the racist stereotypes I'd learnt well at school, growing up here in the Hutt Valley. By gently, gently refusing to be anything other than all she was, all the time. Maori, wahine, lesbian.

Her death has touched me, made me reach out to some of the women I discovered her music with twenty years ago. I can't quite believe she's dead at 52. I met her once, about 15 years ago, through mutual friends. It was not a conspicuous success.

Mahina: "Kia ora", leans in to kiss my cheek.

Me: "Kia ora". Dazed, stand still, fight urge to touch my cheek. Look inane.

But even though I didn't ever manage to

speak whole sentences in her presence, I still felt very much like she was part of my journey as a young woman - becoming an activist, coming out. Her music was the soundtrack to my late teens and early twenties. It reminds me of the first time I fell in love with a woman; of pasting up fliers and getting drunk at parties starting with Mahina and Tracey Chapman, ending with Janis Joplin and the Topp Twins. It reminds me of all the wonderful women I organised conferences with, wrote articles, planned demonstrations and tried to imagine what

a gentler, kinder, fairer world might look like.

I know she has been equally important to many, many queer people in Aotearoa; to many, many Maori; and to many, many feminists. I know I'm not alone in feeling great grief at her loss, and great joy at the startling gifts she shared with the world in terms of her voice, her

lyricism, her humour, herself. Rest in peace.

*Play me a melody with your eyes...
dance me 'round your fingers swirl me to
some sweet surprise
And I'm screaming, ...and I'm screaming...
and I'm screaming on cloud 29*

(Footnotes)

¹ See www.stuff.co.nz and www.gaynz.com for tributes and articles on Mahina's life and death.

² LGBT refers to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender communities.

