

From outrage to No 1 hits: how Māori musicians conquered the charts in their own language

Once, singing in te reo Māori could trigger a backlash – now New Zealand's indigenous language is at the heart of its music scene



Māori singer Stan Walker says he had to 'build up the courage to be able to sing in my own language'.

Tess McClure *in Auckland*
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“It was never a good thing, a positive thing being Māori when I was growing up,” says Bic Runga. She sighs audibly into the phone.

Runga, who is of Chinese and Ngāti Kahungunu descent, shot to international fame in her 20s with 1997 album *Drive*, and went on to become one of New Zealand's leading songwriters. “I was someone that grew up with pretty sustained, garden-variety racism,” she says. “I don't really have the words for it – it's just like a wash of backdrop. It's the actual scheme that the whole thing is built on ... It's like asking a fish to describe water. It's in the very makeup – we're a settler colony, you know?”

But Runga is now part of a wave of popular musicians who have not only embraced te reo Māori, the indigenous language of New Zealand, they have propelled it on to the world stage.

The past three years have been marked by a series of high-profile releases by artists across the musical spectrum: Runga re-recorded hit single *Sway as Haere Mai Ra*, Rob Ruha and Ka Hao's song *35* hit No 1 in January and became a TikTok sensation with tens of millions of shares, and Australian Idol winner Stan Walker released a full-length album in Māori. Last year saw Lorde's release of an EP entirely in te reo, and some of the country's most promising young performers – including TEEKs, whom *Vogue* called “the male Adele”, and country singer-songwriter Marlon Williams – now regularly perform in their native tongue.

For many of them, the moment has been a long time coming. “When I first got into the industry, it was a ‘never’ thing: it was never gonna happen. It wasn't a matter of if, or when, or how – it just wasn't going to happen,” says Walker, a mainstay of New Zealand pop and R&B, who released *Te Arohanui* last year. Despite learning to speak Māori as a child, he says: “I had to build up the courage to be able to sing in my own language.”

Runga didn't learn to speak Māori as a child, and began exploring te reo translations of her music around two decades after her first album. “You feel quite cut off from your own culture – and in a way you've had to be cut off, in order to succeed and to thrive,” she says.

For years in New Zealand, te reo Māori was violently suppressed, and students who spoke it in school were often beaten. As a result, many did not teach their children the language, and the portion of speakers dropped precipitously, to sit at around 1 to 3% of New Zealanders.

My parents used to tell me, ‘the reo's not going to get you anywhere, not going to get you a job’
Stan Walker

‘The cornerstone of our culture’

When Dame Hinewehi Mohi stepped off stage after singing New Zealand's national anthem at the 1999 rugby World Cup final, she was met with a wave of anger. Not for her voice – a bright, clear soprano – but for the language she sang in. Rather than the English verses considered traditional at the time, Mohi had sung the anthem in Māori, and taken the rugby union, broadcasters, crowd, and millions-strong broadcast audience by surprise.

“My grandparents were beaten for speaking their native tongue. My parents didn't think anything of it because their parents never taught them,” Walker says. “My parents used to tell me, ‘the reo's not going to get you anywhere, not going to get you a job’,” he says. “That's what they were taught, and that's all they knew.”

The backlash that followed shocked the softly spoken singer. “It was devastating at the time,” she says. In the years since, however, she has helped to shepherd in an era where the sound of te reo Māori is no longer a surprise to stadiums or radios.



New Zealand singer songwriter Bic Runga says she grew up with 'pretty sustained, garden-variety racism'.

Mohi was one of the driving forces behind *Waiata/Anthems*, a compilation project released in 2019 that worked with artists – including Runga, Walker and TEEKS – to reimagine their songs in te reo Māori. “It was the most intense kind of work that I’d ever done in the music industry, but the most rewarding because people’s lives were changed,” she says. “The response from every artist that was involved was so

overwhelming – and showed that there was a real desire to do this work and for people to reconnect with the language and culture.”

Popular music gives the language a crucial platform, she says – for breaking down remaining stigma, and for normalising it in accessible, everyday ways. “Language is the cornerstone of our culture,” she says. “Without it we’re just paying lip service to our true identity.”

You could never get the same dissemination of language as you can through song
Sir Tīmoti Kāretu

Sir Tīmoti Kāretu, 84, is one of New Zealand’s foremost linguists, and has turned his hand to assisting artists to translate their songs. Brisk, no-nonsense, and known for his unwaveringly high standards, Kāretu says he welcomes the wave of te reo emerging in pop music.

“If anybody’s going to go to all that trouble of learning it correctly, pronouncing it correctly and wants to sing in the language, then I think it’s good,” he says. “You could never get the same dissemination of language as you can through song. Song and music in every culture is one of the most important elements.”

‘The more we hear it, the more it’s normalised’

But the popularisation of te reo – particularly among Pākehā New Zealanders – can sometimes cause uneasiness, as well as celebration: why should those whose ancestors devoted their energy to wiping out the language now be welcome to embrace it? For those who have had their language stolen or suppressed, it can provoke feelings of shame or trauma at what was lost.

Te Karehana Gardiner-Toi, who releases music as TEEKs, says he understands the reservations – but ultimately believes the language needs mass use to survive. “The more people that take up the language, the better,” he says. “I understand there is a little bit of controversy around that. But at the end of the day, I think for the language to thrive, we have to be able to let non-Māori in, to be a part of the healing. It’s going to take a collective effort.”

Gardiner-Toi grew up listening to his father, a school principal, sitting in the lounge, composing waiata [Māori songs] on his guitar. The strum would echo through the house, he says, and through his childhood memories. Māoriness is part of his musicality, whether he is singing in te reo or English.

“Even if my songs are not in te reo Māori, when I’m in public space, when I’m standing on stage, or if I have to say something – I always open in Māori, and I speak Māori first because it’s my first language. The more we hear it, the more it’s normalised.



Māori soul singer Karehana Gardiner-Toi, also known as TEEKS, believes the more people that take up the language the better.

“I look at TikTok and see how far it’s travelled internationally, how all these different people from different cultures and different backgrounds are jumping on this train, embracing this language that they know nothing about, but it sounds good to them, and they appreciate good music? I don’t think the language is a barrier.”

The rise of Māori culture in the music world is not only a matter of language, Runga says. Beneath the surface is an equity movement, working to get recognition, rights and royalties for the myriad of Māori artists who write waiata.

“There’s a feeling you get, when you hear a haka and it’s making all your hair stand up.” She likens it to the poet Lorca’s discussion of *duende*, describing the dark, elemental or ineffable qualities of some artworks that prompt a visceral response. “It’s basically death and sex,” she says. It’s those attributes of Māori music and performance that she also wants to draw into music-making, Runga says, “bringing the really elemental parts into pop music, rather than just straight translations”.

When Runga looks back on her younger self, projects she has collaborated and sung on like *Te Ao Marama*, the Lorde Māori-language EP, are some of what she wished she’d had. “If an international pop singer with that much reach had been singing in te reo Māori in the 80s when I was, you know, terrified, walking through the square past skinheads – I would have actually felt quite a lot more security in a cultural way,” she says. “I can’t say enough good stuff about that. It makes me want to cry.”

For Walker, there’s a joy in seeing indigenous language as an insurgent force: infiltrating the mainstream, resonating through radio rotations, turning up as melodies the minds of those who might have disparaged it.

“Suddenly our reo has made its way, through music, into people that wouldn’t necessarily ever have accepted it,” he says.

“The same people who will write nasty comments are humming these songs.”