

# SOUND

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**TE MATAKITE TE AOTEAROA** – a film documenting the Maori Land March. It's a month-long trek down the North Island from Te Hapua in the Far North to Parliament in Wellington, where the protesters will demand the return of ancestral lands. Each night we're invited onto a new marae with the full sequence of traditional protocol: the karanga and welcome, speeches, songs, feasting, communal discussion, and sleeping in the carved house of the ancestors, everyone together on mattresses on the floor. One morning, well before dawn, I'm awakened by an old man reciting a karakia, a sacred Ringatu chant, accompanied by an orchestra of one hundred people snoring – a vocal solo over a dense tide of harmonic breathing – as if ancestor spirits are communing on the breath of the living.

**THE BUDDHA'S FEET.** With a memory of the gigantic reclining Buddha image imprinted on my mind, I return to Bangkok to revisit Wat Po temple. Rather than roam around, I sit in contemplation of the Buddha, some 160 feet long, 40 feet high, and covered in gold leaf, resting on one elbow, the face peaceful, though not without irony. I'm struck by an unusual sound I can't place. Cascading pitches of watery metallic voices, sort of bird-like, bell-like; sometimes clear sometimes blurred; close yet distant; golden but earthy; echoing and resonating throughout the temple. Later it layers with a burble of playing children nearby. After an hour or so of enchantment I set out to find the source. Along the length of the Buddha's back the sound becomes visible. 108 metal bowls line the wall, each a slightly different shape and size, supported at waist height in a ring of metal. For a donation, devotees receive a bowl of 108 tiny coins. They walk along the row of bowls, tossing a coin into each as they go, for good luck. The sounds are as random as the number and the action of the visitors, the pitches and rhythms equally surprising. (108 inlays in mother of pearl, depicting the Buddha's life and virtues are carved into the giant soles of his feet.)

**NGAHAU.** A series of bays run south from Mimiha, isolated and removed from the crowds. Ngahau and Mimiwhangata were once strongholds of Northern tribes with fortified promontories jutting into the sea. It's quiet there aside from the regular rhythms of the sea, the peeps and squawks of nesting seabirds and the continuous high pitched twitter of skylarks hovering over the dunes at the back of the beach. There's a pa on Ngahau with deep trenches that lead to a remote and idyllic bay, where the stones are veined with colour and crystalline quartz. These stones have felt the breach of raiding canoes on the beach, and warble underfoot with the same floating harmonics as the skylarks of Mimiwhangata. Unsuspected sentinels of intruders on the silence.

**CICADA.** Equipped with a set of Sennheiser headphones, a shotgun microphone and a Nagra reel-to-reel, I'm recording sound for *Test Pictures*, an alternative feature about a couple who drop out and go rural. We're on location at Little Huia and Whatipu, dramatic bush and beach environments on Auckland's West Coast. At the peak heat of the summer day, the cicada sound is a thick fog of high frequencies. Taking a solitary excursion into the bush – eyes closed – I enter an intense sound world, my microphone slowly scanning a microscopic zone of percussive layers and intricately phased pulsings. A pair of cicada, isolated out from the background texture, click and chirp a love duet in slowly phasing rhythm and pitch - like a looped eclipse of the moon.

**HAPPY.** A From Scratch performance in Balmain requires three pianos. Although we recommend grands we are prepared for uprights so it's no surprise to arrive and find three small Chinese pianos at the ready. The pianos have names emblazoned across their fronts: two are named "Blessing" and one "Happy". A happy and two blessings seems a good omen. The piece requires placing the instruments in an equilateral triangle in the middle of the space, keyboards out, facing the audience. The piano tuner has been in to double check the sonority of the pianos and early in the evening they are moved into position for a rehearsal, which goes smoothly to plan. 7.55pm and the audience has arrived in high expectation of what lies ahead. I do a final check on the set-up, making a fine adjustment to the positioning of the pianos. Happy is a bit out of line, and one nudge fixes things. But as I walk away, Happy falls full over face first behind me with a mighty crash, as if some divine boundary had been broken, the instrument lying there in a scream of sustained tones. The keyboards are unusually front heavy, and that one nudge tipped Happy's balance. Happy it is no longer. Quickly recovering from the shock, many hands put Happy upright, but the sustain pedal is jammed and no amount of fiddling will free it. So after a good 20 minutes delay, dismantling the instrument before a bewildered audience, we play the piece with Happy on full sustain. What the rendition lacks in rhythmic clarity it gains in resonant sonority.

**KUNDUS AND ROTARY FANS.** We arrive in Moresby around 3am to a tribal welcome of kundu drumming on the tarmac. Kundus have this powerful sound that goes right for your solar plexus. Fifteen or so drummers are beating a regular unison pulse that resonates in the humid night air, eerily penetrating the thrum of the aeroplane engines. Awestruck by the unexpected welcome, our delegation is ushered off the plane into the Customs Hall where large low-slung rotary fan blades whip the warm air, sounding like the idling props of helicopters. In this remote environment of speed and travel, I'm struck by the fact of both instruments moving the air in powerfully rhythmic ways, the kundus by hand and the fans electrically – sound-signs of two cultures talking past each other.



**IVOR.** In San Diego I visit Ivor Darreg, the venerable maestro of microtonality and seasoned builder of eccentric instruments. Out the back of his shack, where timber and other junk is stacked, Ivor peels back some plastic, wipes off the cobwebs, and reveals the Megalyra – his giant zither. The instrument intrigues me. It's a 6 by 6 inch slab of solid timber several metres long, each of its four faces strung with bass piano wires according to the intervals of a different tuning system. It's miked up with peizo contacts and amplified through an old valve amp. Well in his seventies, Ivor enthusiastically demonstrates the instrument's microtonal potential with a steel bar the size of his arm, sliding the tones with gusto and stopping them with great amplified clonks at intervals of Pythagorean significance. He pauses to eyeball me and let the tones sink in. The following yarn is Ivor's own. "The first time I was able to hear out the harmonics of a compound tone, I must have been about 10 years old. There was this hill I'd go up about half a mile from my house where there was a large power transformer. The harmonics of its hum could be heard from a distance. They were mainly odd, that is 3rd, 5th, 7th, 9th, 11th and 13th. I found I could hear a similar thing in the telephone dial tone, a raucous low E flat, not as smooth as it is today. And if I cupped my hand over the receiver the way you modulate your mouth cavity, I could hear those same harmonics ringing out loudly. At 14 I took up the cello and learnt to control these things". Hung over the entrance to Ivor's house a small, strident placard announces his life's mission: "SAY NO TO 12 TONE EQUAL".

**SINGING RACK.** Following the From Scratch tour of Hungary, I visit ex-Scratcher Neville Hall in Ljubljana. For two days we drive the breadth of Slovenia exploring mountains and caves, rivers and coast, accompanied by an unusually wide frequency band of pure whistling harmonics, resonating from somewhere in the upper region of Nev's car. Subtle shifts in acceleration make dramatic changes in the harmonics, and when the window is down the volume increases enormously. But the exact source is a mystery. The roof-rack seems responsible, but something more than just a tube of stopped pipe is causing these melodies and I'm determined to find out what. A thorough inspection follows. Neville's roof-rack includes a slotted fitting for transporting skis. As we drive along the air passes over the slot at varying velocities activating and shifting the harmonics with changes to the acceleration. I discover that if I partially cover the slot with my fingers, the harmonics abruptly stop. For those who enjoy harmonics, a few improvements to the design and it could end up an attractive substitute for the car radio.

**EARTHQUAKE.** Napier, where I was born, is an epicentre. In 1931 the town was destroyed by a wave of quakes that lasted for days, and in my family the threat of an earthquake was a regular feature of our lives. I remember in primary school the practice routines: getting under desks or running to shelter in doorways. My mother was so sensitive she could hear an earthquake coming long before anyone felt the first shudder. She would say: “Shhhh... Listen... Can you hear it? There’s an earthquake coming!” Everything in nature would go mysteriously still and quiet, and then you would feel it, everything shaking and rolling, and occasionally all hell would break loose. I often imagined I could hear an earthquake coming, but now I think it was the absence of external sound and the internal sound of my own heart pounding.

**WHISTLES.** In my mind's ear I like to mix the sounds of stones. On the southern beach of Mahurangi, the sea carves the soft sandy rock into shelves, whose patterned intricacy is revealed on the low tide. This is a good beach for natural taonga, stones modelled by the attrition of wind and water, many with holes that produce a wispy edgetone when you blow gently across them. The local Maori say on a windy night you can hear the voices of the ancestors – those high whistle tones of the stones – sighing and crying for the land. When tapped, the same stones have a muted sound more like a whisper than a song. I find a stone here, naturally hollowed like a small cup, whose resonance mirrors the hollow acoustic of the sea washing up against the soft Papa cliffs.

**FROGS.** A friend of mine, Ron Allen, is the lighthouse keeper at Cape Brett. One moody afternoon I take a long walk along the peninsula. Returning near dusk, I hear a loud chorus of frogs in a swamp a little way off the track. I approach quietly, attending to their croaky conversation. But as I draw close, all goes silent. I stand still and wait. One old croaker sounds the all-clear, and slowly the whole pond returns to life with frog talk. I move, and again all goes silent. So I take the initiative and do the first croak myself, and gradually, one after another, all the frogs reply until the pond is back in full chorus. For a timeless spell I join their ritual of call and response. It is night when I hop back along a dark and silent track.

**PIPES.** From Scratch is invited to perform at the South Pacific Festival of Arts, a cultural festival of mainly black and brown nations. We are scheduled to perform one noon at the Tokarara Horseshoe, an open air venue on the outskirts of Port Moresby. The midday sun is intense as we wait our call, glued to the circling rhythms of West New Britain dancers, the dry earth thumping under their feet. Under cover of a noisy applause, we carry on our instruments – large stations of PVC pipes shaped like giant panpipes, with chimes and drums slung underneath. A long file of excited children from a nearby school are led on site and sit themselves close up around us. Shaded under wide brimmed hats from a relentless sun that has bent the tunings haywire, we strike out on the pipes, paddling furiously to make an impact in the hot open air. Geoff whirls a Growler drum-drone over nearby heads and the crowd bursts into unstoppable laughter. Infected, we paddle on through a wild microtonal mix of sunstroked instruments and hysterical audience, managing only just to hold things together. Waves of hilarity greet each move we make. Never before have the locals had such a good laugh at the expense of us whiteys in the noon-day sun, whirring drones and beating out rhythms on plumbing pipes.

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**SUAN MOKK.** Needing a break from Bangkok I catch a train south to Chaiya, then hike to Suan Mokk, a forest retreat set into a jungle of lush humidity. Welcomed and then left to my own devices, I wander through the forest and among the buildings, exploring the lotus gardens, the Darhma boat and meditation halls, and sample aphorisms in the Spiritual Theatre: “In the complete silence you can hear the grass”. Seeking just this I take a walk one early evening to the stone amphitheatre, an open-air forest shrine on top of a small hill, where a Buddha image presides over the stillness. I linger until dusk when a distant bell calls the monks to prayer, and hoping to hear their chanting I make my way in it’s direction. Nearly stumbling into lotus ponds, I’m suddenly engulfed in a surround-sound orchestra of frogs and toads – big ones, small ones, on the ground and in the trees, along with what I think are insects making vibrating clicking sounds like sticks do when twanged across the edge of a table. From every quarter insects click in cross rhythms, frogs in trees chirp at short intervals and toads hop about quarking low and loud. The rhythms phase and combine with a massed urgency that abruptly stops, then as suddenly cranks up again in a cacophony of pitch and polyrhythm. A remote P.A. adds its crackly accompaniment as the monks begin the evening chant. Large raindrops slap down through my broken umbrella.



**CRYSTAL SETS AND RADIOS.** Like many boys of my generation, I made crystal sets. I grew up in the Radio Era, when whole families would tune in to listen to weekly episodes of the funnies, like *The Goonshow*. But guessing there must be more to radio than this, I constructed a crystal set and discovered the private, secret world of headphones under the bedclothes late at night, the midnight hours of *Randy Stone* and the *Night Beat!* Later I developed a fascination for short-wave listening and would spend hours trawling through the frequencies on an old valve radio, eavesdropping on the air waves of the world, in search of alien voices and foreign music. There was one station I always received loud and clear, an American gospel station, *The Voice of the Andes*. Nothing could be more remote and rarified than the Andes, nor the thought that these mountains had a voice. And the idea of God transmitting from the Andes made short-wave radio an awesome medium.

**MOSQUITOES.** Hitching through Spain I meet up with Darcy's brother Roger, a burly farmer from Taranaki. He has a small Morri' van and we travel south together to the Portugese border. We spend the night on a sandy river bank in a Litchenstein landscape dotted black with olive trees. As we settle into our sleeping bags a cloud of mosquitoes descends. I retreat into my bag pulling the folds up around my head and a squadron of mozzies follow, buzzing and squealing into every corner and crevice. I go deeper into the heat of the bag, wondering how to escape from the fearsome frequencies of a million mozzies intent on forced entry. Emerging in a panic for air, I am astonished to see friend Roger sprawled half naked from his bag in a deep snoring sleep with not a mozzie in sight. I've often wondered whether his protection was mental or chemical, and later heard that beer drinkers are seldom bothered by bites. The vitamin B acts as a deterrent.

**RIEDENBACH 25.** On arrival at the Media Art Festival in Osnabruk, I'm given an address out in the suburbs, a map and a key, and told to get off the bus by Lutherkirk Corner. My room is in a block of flats, with an entry at street level and a lock I have to battle with for ten minutes. The bedroom looks onto a narrow street facing an old church tower. Every quarter hour on the hour, the church bell clangs and bedroom and belltower fuse into one. It's as if the bell were within the flat, its sound tactile, the vibrations palpable. But there is more to come. On the hour all the bells chime for a full six minutes, exhilarating and randomly sonorous. I'm soon hooked on its regularity. Sundays are the best. At 9am and again at 11, the bells set every molecule into vibration with harmonic beatings and patterned permutations of the tunings – tonic, 2nd, just 3rd, and a perfect 4th below the first – the invention on four notes stunning and hypnotic. I carry this memory through Europe, where bells regulate the day. Later, descending the spiral staircase from the roof of the Florence Duomo, I poke my head through a circular port in the thick stone wall to hear bells peeling in an adjacent tower. Time and space are again obliterated by four spare notes booming, filling the air inside and outside of my head. A high harmonic ring continues still. My hearing's never been quite the same since.

**DOOR.** In Tokyo, Keiko takes me to a Western style coffee bar below street level. When the door closes, a draught blows through a gap at the bottom of the door and a haunting chord of sound comes through into the room. / Later I dream of a large door slightly ajar, and when the wind blows through it, a divinely haunting chord of sound comes through it into the room. / Years later I am in Wellington's City Gallery thetrette watching silent films. But the films are not silent, they are accompanied by a similarly haunting chord of sound, which my ears gradually trace to the theatre door held slightly ajar by the pressures of a draught outside and air-conditioning within. As the wind blows through it, a haunting chord of sound comes through into the room.

**DEAF LISTENING.** Otomo Yoshihide and Dean Roberts' performance is LOUD – relentless noise textures and timbral layers amplified too high for comfort. So it's fingers in my ears, deriving pleasure instead from sound waves massaging and vibrating my body. It's odd that through the wide and muffled bandwidth I can hear conversations. I'm confused - is it real or a psycho-acoustic illusion? I think I recognise the voice of a friend and turn to see if he's nearby. At the top of stairs, some distance from where I'm sitting, he's chatting to someone. Listening now for voices through the layers, I tune into a narrow band of frequencies jiving through a cacophony of white noise peppered with clunks and clonks. Amazing, the detective power of ear and brain. Suddenly the performance stops, but the shouting voices continue, the audience suddenly exposed in the absence of electrics and amplification. This moment, the best of the performance.

**ENGINES.** Driving into Monaco, we realise too late we've got ourselves stuck in the centre of the annual Grand Prix. Various traffic diversions have been arranged and soon we're inching along an underground tunnel directly beneath the race track. The whine and roar of high-revving motors overhead echoes and distorts throughout the tunnel producing a sound like trumpeting elephants in a cathedral. We join in, exuberantly singing out the car windows.

**SKULL.** James drops into the edit suite to find me capturing a still from the video screen. The image recalls a dream he had last night. He and Natasha are on a tour, amidst a sprawl of stone ruins in a geothermal landscape. Steam and smoke issue from fissures and holes in the ground, as if the fires of hell lie somewhere below. They are drawn into a murky room where someone is holding a stick over a dark hole in the ground, conjuring up human bones which fly up and about, whizzing around them. Next thing James has the stick in his hand, waving it over the hole. Suddenly a grinning skull flies up and hovers before them, transfixing them in its sightless stare, and then begins to sing. A deeply resonant and powerful harmonic chant fills the space with its awesome sound. End of dream. The image on the video screen is a grinning skull, to be projected onto a hand-drum suspended at head height in darkness. It faces the viewer and sings a deeply resonant harmonic chant, setting the drum into vibration and filling the space with its eerie sound.

**ROUND MIDNIGHT.** Docking into Round Midnight about 10pm for a beer, I'm rewarded with the best male falsetto ever. High, clear, pure and true. Silly songs, but a voice like crystal. Alongside an open-air food-hall, machines noisily claw the night air, voices in the kitchen pitched high to compete. Four boys in muslin caps and oversized aprons grace the tables with their delicately passive presence. Occasional fireworks intercept the gaps, exploding in the background as if in a movie soundtrack. The boys shyly loiter, sitting on one another's laps, for protection from the old ones. The night is ageing, idling in the absence of customers. I ask for Chinese sweets, but no-one understands. I leave to stroll a solitary night path. An elephant ambles by with a boy on top. I'm offered a ride – for a price. It's midnight in Bangkok. An army hat rests on a table outdoors, a radio plays, and no-one is in sight. The soul of the hat is sleeping, alone in the lamplight, protecting the sprawling United States of America Embassy behind. Only a kilometre or two now to my hotel bed and all the way back frogs piping a crystal glass ostinato. A nightwatchman, ears closed, has heard it a million times.



**rites.** I love the sound of bagpipes outdoors, and living by a park, I sometimes catch a ritual stranger than most. Bagpipes are usually heard in unison, playing the same predictable melodies and drones, but here each piper is out on his own, slowly turning in circles or wandering to and fro, playing long tones and fragments of melodies which from a distance merge into a joyfully random pentatonic harmony. Suddenly one player stops and intently adjusts the drone-pipes of a fellow player, who pipes on regardless. Gradually all the pipers converge in pairs, one playing and the other fiddling with the drone pipes. What is probably an impromptu exercise in tuning looks and sounds more like some esoteric bonding ritual.

**DRUMS.** It's my last day in New York, and I'm trying to cram two of its best museums into one afternoon. Adrenalin up, half-running half-walking between them, I'm stopped in my tracks by a beating of drums amongst a din of jackhammers and dense traffic. I spot some action across the road, a head and arms moving rhythmically amidst a clutter of objects, and zero in on it. A young black guy sits low on the sidewalk surrounded by an array of upturned white plastic buckets (the kind used for paint and chemicals), with a beat up snare-drum and a baking tin to one side. Large metal dishes – which he hits like cymbals – are bolted to the upturned bottoms of three of the buckets. He is totally into the rhythm, spreading continuous quaver beats across bell, tin and drum surfaces with one hand, and punctuating cross rhythm accents on the snare and buckets with the other. A funky river of rhythm flows through the street, to which all the surrounding action jiggles and dances. He's good! Worth missing MOMA for.

**U HEI.** Working near Hokitika on a film about the notorious Stan Graham, I explore dry old river courses in the breaks and discover flat rounds of schist, magically flecked with silver. I find I can make them sing – like a paradiddle on a drum – by holding one flat in the cup of my hand and oscillating another. The stones chatter with voices resonant of water-worn histories. In Tango-cho, a coastal village far out on the west coast of Honshu, I visit old friends, sound artist Akio Suzuki and his wife Junko Wada. Our mutual fondness for stones leads us to the beach. We trek to where a river meets the sea and I find a pair of stones: one in the river – perfectly spherical; and the other on the beach – flat. The river is called “U” meaning cosmos, and the beach is “Hei” meaning flat. “U Hei” – flat cosmos, a kind of koan, maybe illuminated by the song of the stones.

**PUNAKAIKI.** On a dirt path, high on the cliffs of Punakaiki, two crickets sing. Against an accompaniment of the sea surging at the base of the cliffs they weave a hocket, one each side of the track. I lie in the middle spellbound, absorbed in their miniature world.

## *Sound Stories*

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# STORIES

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