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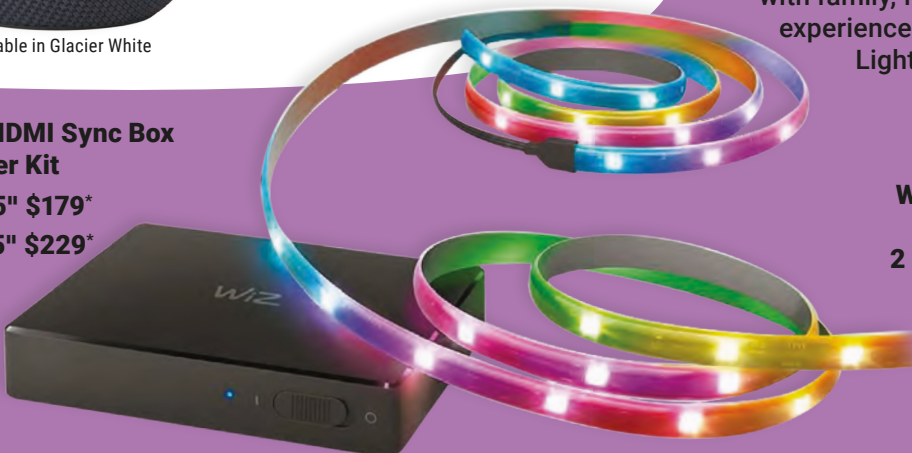
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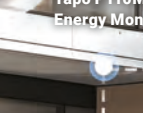
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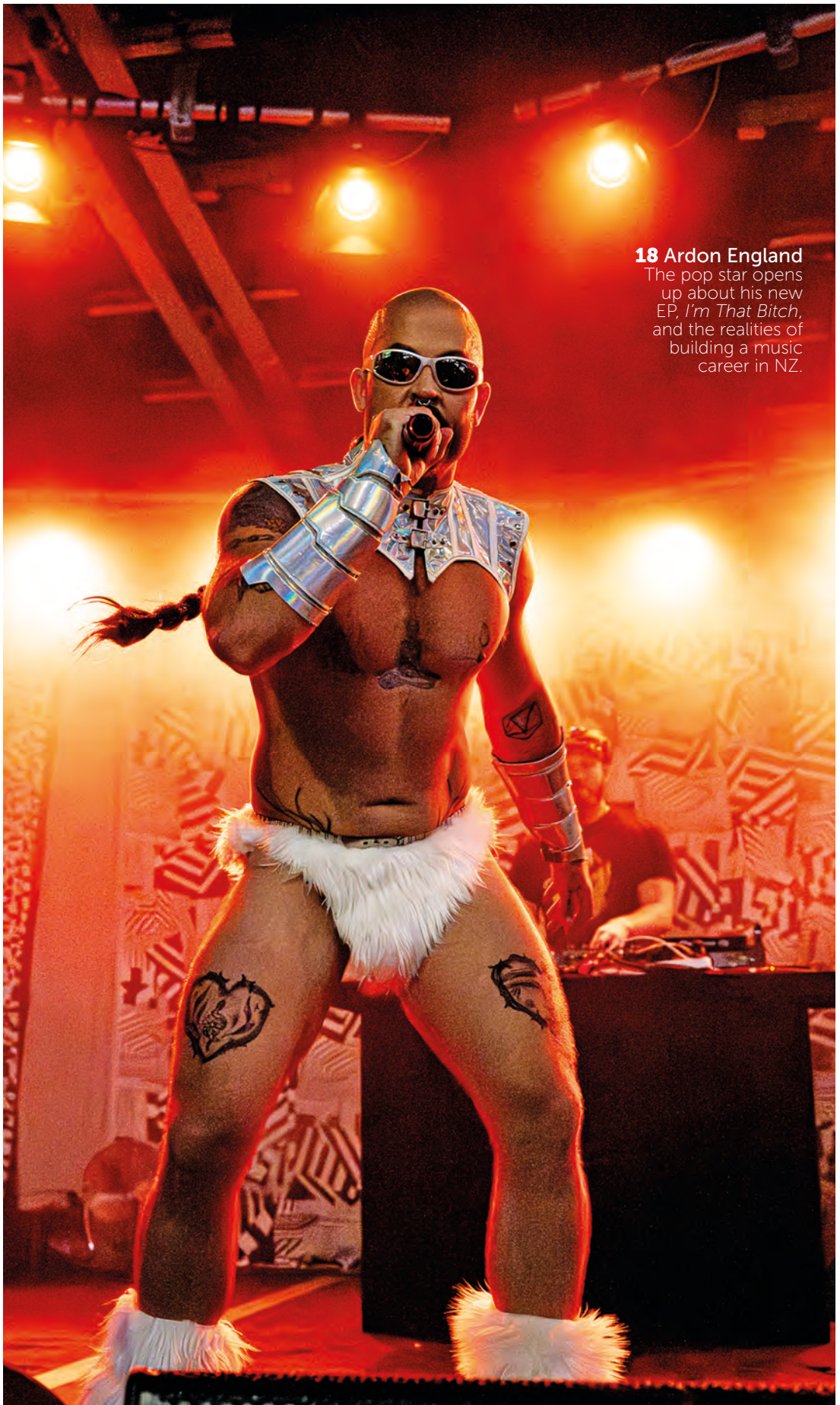
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FROM THE EDITOR



The Sound of Autumn

Music sits at the heart of this issue. From our cover star, Theia, who speaks candidly about her journey in the industry, to the distinct creative paths of Ardon England, Tyrun and Flavio Villani, these pages celebrate artists in Aotearoa doing bold, fascinating things across pop, R&B and classical music.

That spirit of creativity and curiosity carries through as we explore the spaces we make for ourselves in our Home & Living pages, with ideas for creating rooms and homes that feel more beautiful, more personal and more like kāinga.

Elsewhere, we have fascinating conversations with animal experts at Auckland Zoo, whose work reminds us just how much care, patience and wonder can sit behind what the public sees. And don't miss Bill Costello's moving story about coming out at 76!

As always, thank you for reading and for being part of this whānau with us. We hope this issue leaves you feeling inspired, energised and a little more connected — to music, to home, to nature and to each other.

Olly & Matt



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INDIGENOUS EXCELLENCE: THEIA EMBRACES HER STAR POWER

ARTICLE | OLIVER HALL
PHOTO | CHRIS CUFFARO

NEW ZEALAND MUSIC

For the first time in three years, proudly Māori and lesbian artist Theia is at home in Aotearoa for New Zealand Music Month. She has just returned from New York after speaking at the United Nations, and is juggling the realities of being an independent musician with side hustles, tours and study. Despite the weight on her shoulders, this wahine has risen to the occasion.

There is a lot happening in Theia's world right now. In the space of a few short months, the Aotearoa artist has released her long-awaited debut album *Girl, In A Savage World*, returned to university for a Masters, prepared for a Canadian tour, and delivered a powerful speech on an international stage at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York.

For some artists, that kind of schedule might read like pure pressure. For Theia, it feels more like alignment.

"My reo and my culture have always been very important to me," she says. Music, academia and advocacy, she explains, now co-exist. They overlap in places, but also "stand firm in their own right too".

That sense of hard-won integration sits at the heart of who Theia is today. Known to many as a fearless alt-pop force and to others through her te reo Māori project TE KAAHU, Em-Haley Walker (Theia) has spent the last several years becoming more fully herself in public. Not more polished or palatable. More authentically herself.

The songs on Theia's debut album reach into colonisation, religious trauma, queerness, and tino rangatiratanga with a clarity that is both intimate and political.

"I wanted to write about issues that were central to my life and those around me," she says. "So being a young Māori lesbian who grew up in a conservative Christian family, it was inevitable that my debut album was going to explore such themes."

She also points to the coalition government coming to power in 2023 as a turning point in the emotional life of the album. "Tino rangatiratanga is a strong thread that runs throughout the album too. This was especially fuelled by the rage I felt when the coalition government came to power in 2023, undoing decades of progress for Māori, women and takatāpui communities."

That rage has become part of Theia's creative language. Rage as a way of naming what many others are feeling and turning it into something visible.

There is often a professional cost to that kind of honesty, especially for women, queer, and Māori artists expected to make themselves digestible. Theia knows this. She just refuses to let it govern her.

"I'm aware that my activism through political

protest music will have impacts," she says, "but I wouldn't be able to continue if I constantly worried about repercussions."

"I stopped measuring my success in numbers when I became an independent artist," she says. In an industry obsessed with streams, followers and likes, that shift feels deeply freeing. Theia speaks openly about being happier without the machinery of major label expectations behind her. There is less pressure to please everyone, and more room to make work that says exactly what it needs to say.

That freedom matters, especially at a time when building a life in music has become harder than ever.

"The brutal truth is music isn't a lucrative or sustainable career for me," she tells us. Her bluntness highlighting the lived experience of an artist, as opposed to the fantasy of endless riches the music industry can perpetuate.

Theia has returned to university this year to begin her Masters, fitting study around touring, recording, and the endless admin that comes with being an independent musician. It means exams during a Canadian tour. It means, as she puts it, "constantly hustling on the side".

Her assessment of the wider industry is just as clear-eyed. Streaming does not pay enough. Commercial radio remains difficult to access for many local acts, especially outside pop. Touring is expensive and risky. AI adds another layer of uncertainty. And yet, amid all that, there is still community. **There is still aroha. There are still fans buying merch, backing crowdfunding campaigns, and there are still businesses that pay their annual music licensing fees to support artists and help keep them going.**

But underneath every conversation about art, money, and visibility, sits the mental health of the artists who are trying to survive. Theia is frank about that too.

"The music industry is brutal and misogynistic," she says. Protecting her mauri, she explains, means medication, karakia, and being surrounded by people who fight for her and hold her best interests at heart. "As a woman, as a Māori person and as a wahine-moe-wahine you are vulnerable and it is top priority to ensure I'm rooted in community," she tells us.

"We rangatahi Māori carry much on our shoulders," she says, "trying to survive in a system not made for us whilst trying to learn the language that was stolen from us and pay the rent."

And that is an issue which Theia discussed on a world stage in late April.

Theia was one of only seven people selected from more than 2,000 applicants worldwide to attend and speak at the UN Permanent Forum in New York on Indigenous Issues. She represented Aotearoa and Māori, carrying with her not only her own voice but the voices of many rangatahi.

"Despite being terrified about it all, I was so proud to represent my people and my ancestors," she says.

"I represent many other rangatahi Māori who are proud of our identity," she says. "We are standing in the shadow of our ancestors, we are determined to not allow our Indigenous human rights to be undermined and will protect them for the next generations."

Theia's three-minute address received rousing applause at the United Nations and she received dozens of messages of support from people back in New Zealand who watched the live stream. A woman standing in her mana. An artist refusing compromise. Despite exhaustion, financial pressure, and the reality of carrying so much at once. She stood in front of global leaders and remind them what Indigenous excellence looks like when it is self-defined, political, personal, unapologetically queer, and rooted in whakapapa.

On her own terms, Theia is showing the world exactly what that can look like.

Girl, In A Savage World is out now

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NEW ZEALAND

LESBIAN EXCELLENCE IS OUT OF THIS WORLD

From Sally Ride to Billie Jean King, Jessie Lewthwaite celebrates the queer women whose brilliance, courage, and innovation changed history on Earth and beyond.

Last month, the world held its breath as the astronauts of the Artemis mission safely returned to Earth. Seeing such an impressive feat of science in a world that, at the moment, seems to be getting dumber by the day provided so much hope that maybe humanity wasn't as bad as all that. As the astronauts disembarked from the craft and one particular astronaut was helped into the light, the lesbian world collectively grabbed our phones. I don't have the data on this, but I can only imagine the spike of traffic on Google that day as all sapphics collectively asked, "Is Christina Koch a lesbian?"

Unfortunately, we all found out that despite looking incredibly gay, astronaut Christina Koch is in fact not a lesbian. However, that did not stop sapphics the world over from making thirst-trap edits of her. Christina, if you're reading this, you are for sure an honorary lesbian, which I assure you is a much higher prize than whatever award Trump gave you. However, this got me thinking, because although Christina ended up not being family, I found with very minimal research that the first American woman to go to space was! Sally Ride brought lesbian excellence to space way back in 1983, and since then two more out lesbians have followed in her footsteps towards the stars: Wendy Lawrence and Anne McClain.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that the achievements of women, let alone queer women, have been mostly overlooked in history. Many names that are famous for great deeds get divorced from their queerness the more widespread their renown becomes. And many who have had an incalculable impact are never to become household names. In my relentless efforts to monetise my ADHD hyperfocus, I feel that this is an injustice. Thirsting after straight women, a long-held lesbian tradition for sure, isn't required when we do have so many excellent queer women we could be celebrating.



Christina Koch.

If you want a woman who could combine brilliance with moral courage, Florence Nightingale deserves a place in the canon. She revolutionised nursing by insisting on cleanliness, structure, and evidence-based care, and she also brought sharp statistical thinking to public health. In a world that tried to limit women to ornamental roles, she became one of the most influential figures in modern medicine. That kind of achievement is not just competence; it is a full-scale refusal to be underestimated. Her name is so well known, even outside medical circles, but many don't know she was queer, history having erased that part of her identity.

Billie Jean King is one of the most important figures in tennis history, not just because she was an extraordinary player, but because she helped change the sport itself. Her famous

1973 win over Bobby Riggs in the "Battle of the Sexes" became a cultural moment that challenged sexist assumptions about women athletes and helped boost respect for women's tennis. She is a big part of the reason that the big four Grand Slams of tennis are one of the only areas in sport that have equal prize money for their divisions.

Lynn Conway, a trans woman and lesbian, invented the microchip that would go on to allow for mobile phones. Dr Sara Josephine Baker invented flyscreen, which has gone on to save literally millions of lives from diseases carried by mosquitoes. I really could go on forever, but hopefully you all see my point. In a time when the world feels like it's regressing to caveman politics, our ancestors remind us: we've always been the ones who reach for the stars — literally!

PHOTO | BILL STAFFORD

IN MEMORIAM

TAKATĀPUI, TRUTH, AND THE COURAGE TO LOVE:

A TRIBUTE TO SHARON HAWKE

The mother of Marriage Equality, Louisa Wall, pays homage to Sharon Aroha Hawke (13 April 1962 to 10 April 2026)

I stood beside Sharon Hawke on 23 February 2025 at Albert Park in Tāmaki Makaurau as the call went out across the city: *Defying Destiny*, a day of queer power. It was loud, young, and unapologetically Black, Brown, and every strand of our takatāpui whānau, carrying both anger and hope in equal measure.

When Sharon took the stage, the energy amplified. It deepened as Ngāti Whātua was there to tautoko.

Sharon stood not only as a leader of Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei and Ngāti Mahuta, but as a proud takatāpui wahine. She embodied the truth that our identities are not separate from our whakapapa; they are part of it. She reminded us that tikanga Māori, in its truest form, makes space for the fullness of who we are. Rainbow people are not outside the culture. We are the culture.

In a time when religion is often used to justify exclusion, Sharon brought clarity that was both political and deeply personal. She understood the tensions many Māori navigate between whakapapa and Christianity but refused to let that tension excuse harm. When takatāpui are excluded, she said, it is not tikanga. It is colonisation.

That was Sharon. Unflinching. Grounded in truth. Fiercely loving.

Her life was shaped by resistance. As a young girl, she walked the 1975 Land March with Dame Whina Cooper, witnessing the power of collective Māori voice. Soon after, she stood with her whānau at Bastion Point during the 1978 occupation and eviction and was among those arrested. From an early age, she learned what it meant to hold the line when everything around you pushes back.

Alongside that political fire was an expansive capacity for love.

Sharon's relationship with her partner, Lope Matalavea, was a powerful expression of aroha.



Sharon Hawke pictured at a 2019 Auckland Philharmonia fundraiser with wife Lope.

Their marriage in November 2025 reflected pride, visibility, and courage. In a world that has often asked takatāpui to shrink, Sharon chose to live and love openly.

At the centre of her world was her whānau. Her daughter, Tu Te Kiha Penehira Hawke, and her mokopuna, Panitīnaku, were constant sources of pride and purpose. They were her grounding and her future, carried with her in every space she entered.

Sharon moved through many worlds with integrity. In the screen industry, she worked for over 16 years as a camera operator and producer, helping shape Māori storytelling and expanding who gets to be seen and heard on screen.

As Board Chair of Silo Theatre, she championed diverse voices and bold storytelling. In health and community spaces, she advocated for

better outcomes for whānau, particularly wāhine Māori, and supported breast cancer awareness and early detection initiatives.

On the water, Sharon found another form of connection. A dedicated waka ama paddler for more than 35 years, she began with Ōkahu Bay Outrigger Canoe Club and represented Aotearoa at the 1990 World Sprint Championships. She often spoke of kaitiakitanga, the responsibility between people and Papatūānuku, and lived that principle through mentoring rangatahi, supporting tamariki, and giving her time generously.

Across all these spaces, her takatāpui identity remained central. She understood that the wellbeing of our communities depends on the wellbeing of all our people. She stood for equity, representation, and belonging without hesitation.

At Albert Park, speaking to a new generation, Sharon bridged worlds. She connected the legacy of land struggle to the ongoing fight for takatāpui and rainbow liberation. These were not separate struggles, she reminded us, but bound together through whenua, identity, survival, and love.

And always, through love.

Sharon Hawke was a force. A takatāpui trailblazer. A defender of whenua. A storyteller. A paddler. A partner. A mother. A grandmother. A wahine toa.

She stood her ground so others could stand in theirs. She loved openly so others could do the same.

Moe mai rā, e te māreikura, e te tuahine, e te wahine toa. Your legacy lives on in the whenua, in your whānau, and in the fierce, unapologetic love you shared.



FLAVIO VILLANI

ON IMPROVISATION, GRIEF AND WHY CLASSICAL MUSIC MUST STAY ALIVE

*The Italian New Zealand pianist talks to
Oliver Hall about finding authenticity
beyond perfection*



For Flávio Villani, classical music only feels old if you let it stagnate. Villani moved to Auckland in 2008 and later completed a Master of Piano Performance at the University of Auckland, and has built a career that resists treating the repertoire as something fixed behind glass. His work as a performer, teacher and composer came to prominence in the documentary *Crossing Rachmaninoff*, which followed his preparation for his first orchestral performance of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto in Italy.

"For me, classical music only becomes historical if we treat it like a museum object," he says. "The composers we play were living artists responding to their own time, their emotions, and their audiences."

That idea sits at the centre of his live concerts. "When I perform, I try to approach the music as something alive in the present moment," he

says. "Every performance is slightly different, and the connection with the audience changes the meaning of what we play. The tradition gives us a foundation, but the real vitality comes from how we engage with it today."

It is a philosophy that also underpins his research. Villani has just completed a DMA in Music focused on improvisation strategies in classical music pedagogy and performance, an area that looks backwards in order to reopen something that was once ordinary.

"Improvisation used to be a natural part of being a classical musician," he says. "Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, they were all extraordinary improvisers. In many cases the music we know today grew directly out of improvisation."

What changed, he argues, was not one dramatic rupture but a long shift in how music was taught and valued.

"Over the 19th and 20th centuries, classical performance gradually became more focused on fidelity to the written score," he says. "That brought many positive things, but it also meant that the creative role of the performer became more restricted."

He traces that narrowing to several linked developments. Music education became more standardised. The composer became "a kind of untouchable figure". The score came to be treated as authoritative. Then recording culture intensified the pressure to sound flawless.

"This environment and the rise of the recording industry and the myth of the 'perfect interpretation' also contributed to a fear of mistakes, where risk-taking and personal expression could feel unsafe," he says.

"Reviving improvisation reminds us that interpretation is not only about reproducing

CLASSICAL

“I don’t think I’ve ‘coped’ with the grief in a linear way. It’s something that changes shape. Somedays it’s very present, almost physical, and other days it sits more quietly in the background.”

something correctly, but about actively engaging with the musical language.”

That engagement also changes the atmosphere of live concerts. “Improvisation introduces a sense of risk and spontaneity. The audience knows that what they are hearing is being created in that moment, and that changes the energy in the room.”

Villani spoke about the personal pressures surrounding performance in *Crossing Rachmaninoff*. The film documented his return to Italy for that key concerto performance and also touched on his family life, including a difficult period around their acceptance of his sexuality.

Looking back now, he says the platform was ultimately worthwhile. “The film gave my family and me the chance to talk about things that had been unspoken for a long time,” he says. “In the end, being open about it helped create more understanding, and brought us closer.”

He also sees a changed landscape within classical music itself. While the field has often been associated with conservatism and coded silences, Villani tells us the culture has progressed.

“In today’s classical world there is a growing number of openly queer musicians and composers, and that has made a real difference,” he says. “It’s given me a sense of community within the community.”

His advice to younger queer musicians is direct: get involved! “There is space for you, even if it doesn’t always feel that way at first,” he says. “Classical music is constantly being reshaped by the people who take part in it.”

He points to the fact that in New Zealand especially, many musicians are no longer hiding who they are. “Your identity is not something separate from your musicianship, it’s part of what gives you a unique voice,” he says. “The more you allow yourself to be honest and present in what you do, the more meaningful your music-making can become.”

The most affecting part of Villani’s recent work, though, may be the way it has been shaped by grief following the sudden loss of his partner, David. “I don’t think there is really a way to prepare for something like that. It breaks something in you, and at the same time it asks you to keep going.”

In the aftermath, he found himself writing imagined letters to David. “As a way to keep a thread between worlds,” he explains. “There were also dreams, very vivid ones, where it felt like I could meet him somewhere else, in a space that didn’t follow the same rules as waking life.”

He resists any tidy narrative of recovery. “I don’t think I’ve ‘coped’ with the grief in a linear way,” he says. “It’s something that changes shape. Some days it’s very present, almost physical, and other days it sits more quietly in the background.”

What it has changed, unmistakably, is the way

he hears and makes music. “It has definitely shaped my musicianship,” he says. “It has stripped something away, a kind of surface, and brought me closer to a more honest place. There is less interest now in trying to impress or seek approval, and more of a need to connect, to listen, to allow space.”

That sense of stripped-back honesty returns when he talks about returning to his piano following David’s death. “Sometimes I had had enough of giving words to my feelings, so I would sit at the piano and let something emerge,” he says. “Not in a controlled way, but more as a kind of listening, almost like trying to follow something that was already there, just beneath the surface.”

In recent times he has explored memory and loss in performance and composition, including projects that bring classical repertoire into conversation with visual art.

Villani has worked with film, theatre, and dance performance, and says those exchanges open music into a wider imaginative field. He cites his recent collaborations with painter Star Gossage as some of his most memorable experiences.

“I’m interested in creating experiences where different art forms can speak to each other,” he says. “These collaborations allow me to explore sound in new ways, often shaped by the inspiration and ideas of other artists. There is something very fertile about that exchange.”

Whether he is talking about improvisation, queer visibility, grief, or collaboration, Villani keeps returning to the same belief: that meaning happens in spontaneous moments. For a musician long associated with Rachmaninoff’s intensity, it is perhaps the clearest measure of where he is now. Not chasing perfection, but always searching for something authentic.

For more information on Flavio Villani’s musicianship and upcoming concerts, visit flaviovillani.com



THE PURPOSE BEHIND TYRON'S BILINGUAL R&B



PHOTOS | SHERRIDAN KANAVATOA

Aotearoa and Niuean artist Tyrun talks about blending growth, queer visibility and Vagahau Niue into his fresh contemporary sound

On Tyrun's single *FILA*, the singer songwriter questions what happens when love is forced to change.

For the Aotearoa and Niuean artist, that came from a period of personal reflection.

"Saturn returned!" he explains, laughing. "It made me hyper aware of how I had been living my life, and it was a good time to reflect on my growth as an adult."

That sense of awareness feeds directly into *FILA*, a track that sits somewhere between devotion and doubt. Tyrun describes the song as growing out of conversations with his partner about change and the idea that relationships evolve in stages as you both age.

"We talked about falling in love again and again and again because with each new stage of growth we reach, it feels like that," he explains. "Getting to know each other again with each new era."

But *FILA* is not simply a love song. It is a song that does not fear asking, "what if?"

"I'm a 'what if' kind of guy," he says. "What if that growth resulted in growing apart? What if we let the insecurities of inadequacies in a

relationship win? What would falling in love again in the future look like?"

WRITING IN TWO LANGUAGES, FROM THE HEART

Part of what sets Tyrun's work apart is how he moves between English and Vagahau Niue in the lyrics of the same song.

"I let the music guide me," he tells us, explaining initially wrote *FILA* entirely in English, then had it translated into Vagahau Niue before shaping the final version.

"There's an effort to not alienate listeners with extensive use of the language," he explains. "I chose sections I thought fit well melodically, and parts where it almost becomes unavoidable to learn if you want to sing along."

His approach considers how people encounter language, and how music can lower the barrier to that encounter. Shorter lines, stronger hooks, repetition that invites participation. The goal is not to simplify the language, but to make it more accessible.

That instinct comes from his own experience of disconnection.

"There was a time I felt really disconnected

from my culture, like borderline internalised racism. It felt like nothing met me where I was," he says.

For Tyrun, contemporary pop and R&B were already familiar spaces. What was missing was seeing Niuean identity reflected within them.

"It's not like we as Pasifika people can't speak the language of contemporary pop and R&B," he says. "I just never saw it in a Niuean context, and certainly not in a queer context."

That absence has become the foundation of his work.

"There are now people all over the world who have heard Niuean because of my latest releases. We are small but we are mighty, and I want to preserve our language in any way I can," he tells us.

FINDING HIMSELF

Born in Tāmaki Makaurau, Tyrun spent a decade in Pōneke before returning north, a period he describes as formative.

"I loved growing up in Wellington, I found my chosen family there," he says. "I was able to dream and fantasise about the life that we lived."

R&B

That sense of chosen family was especially important given the environment he grew up in.

"I was raised Catholic and went to Catholic schools my whole life, so of course the typical idea of homosexuality was that it was bad," he explains.

Even so, his experience was not defined by rejection.

"My best friend and I were able to find and hold onto each other pretty fast. That helped me through school a lot," he says.

Support extended beyond friends. His family, he says, adjusted and learned, and ultimately accepted him.

"No one was particularly shocked. Overall, [my sexuality] wasn't really treated as a big thing."

VISIBILITY

In the industry, Tyrun is described as part of a new wave of artists creating space for queer Pasifika stories, but he does not overstate his role in that shift.

"It's not something I've thought about too much, honestly," he says. "I'm creating because it's how I best express what I feel."

Still, he recognises the impact that visibility can have.

"I hope the stories I'm telling find their way to queer Pasifika people who need or want to hear them," he says. "Visibility just feels so good."

That sense of connection becomes most tangible in his live performances.

"The energy is different, it feels warmer," he says of the queer gigs he has played. "There's just a bit more acceptance in the air. There's more dancing and making noise!"

"There was a time I felt really disconnected from my culture, like borderline internalised racism."

FINDING HIS 'WHY'

If Tyrun's music is about growth, it makes sense that he does not claim to have everything worked out.

"You've actually caught me at the worst time with this question," he says when asked what success looks like to him.

What matters, for now, is the ability to keep exploring.

"Artistry is most important to me. Being able to express myself is what makes me feel successful, but I don't know that I've said all I want to say yet," he tells us.

Tyrun's work is not about neat conclusions. It is about asking questions and staying with them.

If there is a message that runs through everything he does, it is one of encouragement. When asked if he has a message for young queer Niueans discovering their identity and language, he tells us: "You've done the hard part, starting. Move through your journey at your own pace and always remember why you chose to begin. There's so much waiting for you."

For NZ Music Month, Tyrun is not just adding another song to the conversation. He is helping reshape what that conversation can sound like.

'FILA' is available now on all major streaming platforms.



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ARDON ENGLAND ON THE COST OF MAKING QUEER POP IN AOTEAROA

*Ardon England opens up about his new EP *I'm That Bitch*, and the realities of building a music career in New Zealand*

Ardon England is a true artist. Even the hair has a concept. What looks at first glance like a mullet is, in his words, “a scullet!”

The idea came to him, he says, while walking down the street. “The wind was blowing, and then I was like, imagine what it'd feel like to have some hair blowing in the back. I always kind of did this imaginary hair flick anyway, and now I can't imagine myself without it.”

That mix of humour, image-consciousness and self-invention runs right through England's work. His new EP, *I'm That Bitch*, has four songs and an intro, and sits in that sweet spot between camp, confidence and hard-earned self-awareness. But behind the attitude is a much less glamorous reality: like plenty of artists in New Zealand, he is trying to build a career in an industry where almost everything costs money, very little is guaranteed, and even a good run of success does not necessarily mean you are making a living.

“I've actually written a whole album,” he says. “We just need some money to make it, which is always the case!”



That money, he says, is needed for everything: recording, releasing, promotion, music videos, the lot. “There are so many moving parts, but getting money to record would be a good start. Then you can apply for funding for each single through NZ On Air. Or the other option would be that you get signed by a label and then they front it.”

Until very recently, none of that support existed for England. “I've self-funded absolutely everything up to this point,” he tells us.

England's first funding only arrived at the end of last year, and even then it was for a very specific purpose: translating one of the EP tracks, “Ego”, into te reo Māori. The grant was \$15,000, which sounds substantial until you hear him talk about what it has to cover. “Generally, for a single they'll give you \$10,000, but because this is te reo Māori, they give you an extra five, just to make sure that you get a proper translation done. It gives you a little bit more wiggle room. But I tell you what, it doesn't go far. It sounds like a lot for one song, but when you break it down into budgets, it's still a stretch.”

The same goes for self-funding. England says he has been lucky with his producer, which has kept recording costs down to around \$300 to \$500 a song, but other expenses stack up fast. “With my last EP, I put maybe about four or five grand into PR and marketing. So it really just depends. You can do things cheaply when you want to do everything yourself, but obviously, you can spend thousands. Some people spend hundreds of thousands on one release.”

And has he made that money back?

“None.”

It is one of the most revealing moments in the conversation. The fantasy the music industry still sells itself on sounds very different to England's reality check.

“Even with radio play, you don't really make much money,” he says. “If you were to get a million streams on Spotify, that would equate to about \$3,000. And a million streams is a big feat.”

Instead, he has learned to think sideways. The song-selling platform Bandcamp has made more business sense than streaming. “I've made my most money off my songs by selling them on Bandcamp.” In one case, he put a song up for free and let people pay what they wanted. “I made the most money off that song from putting it up for free.”

That kind of pragmatism runs through the way he talks about building an audience. He knows where people are listening from. He knows which sales count towards New Zealand chart placement and which don't. He knows physical CDs sold in person can still matter. He knows streaming platforms respond to data and momentum, not just talent.

“There are little cheat codes that you figure out along the way that help you,” he tells us.

He also knows that the business end of music is often less about artistry than infrastructure. Publishing, he says, is one of the few places where money can become real. “I've got a publishing deal with BigPop, so essentially what they do is get briefs and things sent to them to sell your songs to movies or ads. A lot of people get their

songs picked up for gaming soundtracks and things like that, and that's generally where you can actually make good, solid money."

Still, even that sits inside a bigger, slower build. England is clear that overseas is the dream, particularly Pride and circuit party culture in Europe and the US, where his brand of bold, sexy, high-camp pop would make obvious sense. But he is equally clear that leaving too early can backfire.

"You have to build a solid foundation first in your own country, otherwise people don't really look at you," he says. "My goal for the last three years has been to keep building on what I'm already doing and establish that really solid foundation here."

There is also loyalty in that decision. "There are obviously bigger opportunities for me in Australia, but my 'why' keeps me here. If we all just moved overseas, and every queer male artist left because they didn't feel accepted here, then there'd be no one here continuing to try and make a difference in that space."

England is talking about what it means to try and build visibly queer pop from New Zealand, and what it means to keep doing that in a culture he still feels can be wary of queer work that is "too bold and a bit too brave".

"I just came back from two months in Australia, and the difference over there is insane," he says. "Queer art over there is so celebrated and so backed. They're not afraid to take risks over there. It comes back to the same thing here in New Zealand, it always feels like I've got that barrier where people are like, 'Oh, we love what you're doing, but only to a certain extent.'"

While his music is playful, England's approach to career-building is serious. He talks about strategy constantly: release timing, charting, visibility, audience-building, and positioning. Even *I'm That Bitch* comes with a concept. He describes the EP as "a piss-take around ego" and the strange performance of self that the music industry requires.

That work seems to be paying off, slowly. Last year, "Real Talk", reworked into a drum and bass track with Tali, hit number three on the New Zealand charts after support from Georgie FM. It came alongside booking his first Melbourne gig, funding for the te reo Māori version of "Ego", and the sense that things were beginning to move.

"It was this week of little wins that felt like all this hard work was starting to pay off."

That may be the clearest description of artistic survival in New Zealand right now. The grind, the planning, the self-funding, and the daily decision to keep going anyway.

Or, as England puts it, with his typical honesty: "You can't be in it for the money."

I'm That Bitch is out now. For more information, visit ardonengland.com



WILD DUNEDIN GALA SHINES BRIGHT

Masks, glamour and generosity filled Wild Dunedin's Masquerade Gala, where more than 150 guests gathered in support of local conservation. Raising over \$15,000 for nature-focused organisations, the evening proved that protecting Otago's wild places can also be joyful, social and beautifully dressed.



Tūhura Otago Museum, 419 Great King Street, Dunedin.

PHOTOS | MICHAEL TRILLO



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2 x Double passes to & Juliet

Juliet is getting the last word. Fresh from its Auckland success, the Explora Journeys Season of & Juliet brings its fizzy, fabulous pop revolution to Christchurch's Isaac Theatre Royal from 30 May to 13 June. Created by Emmy-winning Schitt's Creek writer David West Read, this joyful remix of Shakespeare's classic is packed with Max Martin bangers, big laughs, queer-friendly sparkle, and a stellar Aotearoa cast. We have two double passes to the Saturday 30 May performance to give away.

PHOTO | HAGEN HOPKINS PHOTOGRAPHY

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Cooler weather calls for skincare that does more than sit pretty on the bathroom shelf. BOOST LAB's Essentials Bundle, valued at \$225, brings together a full lift-and-firm



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The Gift That Keeps on Giving

Angus McDougall helps you build a beauty wardrobe this Mother's Day



@angusmcdougallnz

This is the kind of gift that works far beyond Mother's Day. Birthdays, anniversaries, or simply when you want to give something that feels genuinely considered. A thoughtfully curated beauty edit will always land better than a last minute grab. It shows you've paid attention.

Instead of a one off spa voucher or something fleeting, I love the idea of creating a beauty wardrobe. Items she can return to daily, weekly, whenever she needs a little lift.

Start with the base. Choose something that reflects her aesthetic. A modern acrylic tray, a soft linen box, or a more elegant keepsake crate she can keep on her vanity. It should feel like her. Not just a vessel, but part of the experience. Then build it out with products that deliver, not just promise.

Skincare is where I'd begin. **BOOST LAB Pro-Lift Neck & Décolletage Cream** is non negotiable. It targets an area we all neglect, yet it's often the first to show signs of ageing. Lightweight, firming, and actually effective, it's the kind of product she'll use and notice. Pair it with **La Mer The Rejuvenating Eye Cream** for that quiet luxury moment. Rich, restorative, and undeniably indulgent, it turns a daily routine into something a little more special.

For complexion, the newly reformulated **Estée Lauder Double Wear Foundation** earns its place. This is a go to in my routine, and my mum's as well. Long wearing, flawless, and reliable, it's the kind of product you come back to time and time again when you want to feel polished without overthinking it.

Hair deserves attention too. The **ghd Fine Hair Thickener Spray** sits firmly in the quiet hero category. I use this myself, and it genuinely works, giving that fuller, thicker feel without weighing the hair down. It also smells so good, which never hurts.

Then layer in the finishing touches. A lipstick she doesn't have to think about, **MAC Cosmetics MACximal Silky Matte Lipstick** in Velvet Teddy is that universally flattering, wear anywhere shade. Add a scent she can switch between depending on her mood with the **AERIN Discovery Set**, five fragrances, five different versions of her.

And for a little glow boost, the **BOOST LAB 24k Gold Hydrogel Eye Masks** are a perfect add in. Quick, effective, and just indulgent enough to feel like a treat without requiring a full routine overhaul.

What makes this gift work is that it isn't about one big moment. It's about many small ones. A better hair day. Skin that feels a little more hydrated. A lipstick that pulls everything together before heading out the door.

Because sometimes the most thoughtful gift isn't something she uses once. It's something that becomes part of her.



Finding Your Fashion Frequency

Angus McDougall talks about finding your authentic aesthetic with stylist Lou Heller

I first met Lou Heller judging Fashion in the Field, where, among a sea of tulle, tailoring, and the occasional questionable fascinator, her eye for style was unmistakable. Not just what looked good, but what felt right. And that, as it turns out, is exactly where her philosophy begins.

In a world obsessed with trends, Lou isn't chasing them. In fact, she actively resists them.

"I don't really work with trends," she tells me. "It's a bit of a dangling carrot you can't catch." Instead, she focuses on something far more enduring: personal style. Not the polished, Pinterest version, but the real one. The quirks, the contradictions, the quiet confidence. "It's the voice, the weirdness, the loudness or softness. That's where your cool lives."

So how do you actually find it?

Lou's approach is less rulebook, more daydream. "Go on an imaginary holiday in your mind," she says. "Walk into your dream stores, try everything on, and moodboard the life out of it." Somewhere in that fantasy, she insists, you'll uncover your "three words". Hers are "classic, bold, and fun". Not just how she dresses, but how she lives.

That grounding makes trends far less intimidating. Instead of overhauling your wardrobe every season, Lou suggests a slower, more considered approach. "Start small," she says. "Only bring something in if you can see yourself loving it in five years." It's a simple filter, but one that cuts through the noise of TikTok hauls and "must have" lists.

And when it comes to recreating those high fashion looks flooding your feed, a little discernment goes a long way. "Don't just buy something because of the energy someone else had in it," she says. "That's where regret comes in." Her advice is to shop around, trust your instincts, and, crucially, not settle for the first option.

It's a philosophy that extends to her love of mixing high and low. Luxury, she says,

works best when it's understated. "Non branded pieces always feel more elevated." High street, on the other hand, requires patience. Knowing where to invest and where to save is key, and not everything on the rack deserves a place in your wardrobe.

If you're looking for a bargain, Lou is firmly in the pre loved camp. Vintage and second hand shopping, she says, is where the magic happens, as long as you approach it with the right mindset. "Go in with a vision, but don't be too fixed. It's about playing, not controlling the outcome."

That same openness carries through to how she works with clients. Across identities, body types, and personal expressions, her starting point is always the same: imagination. "We strip away the noise and go to a place with no boundaries," she explains. "Everyone has insecurities and superpowers. My job is to help them see both."

Her styling shortcuts are refreshingly unfussy. A slight heel, a great jacket thrown over the shoulder, a touch of knitwear with leather. "Boom," as she puts it. Done.

The one rule she thinks we should all ignore is the constant push to buy into a new jean shape. "Learn your proportions," she says. "Don't listen to marketing. It's marketing!"

Right now, Lou is leaning into refinement over reinvention. Wearing what she



"I don't really work with trends. It's a bit of a dangling carrot you can't catch."

already owns, repeating outfits without apology, and chasing that elusive "full body yes". It's less about newness, more about clarity.

Because, in the end, great style isn't about having more. It's about knowing yourself well enough to need less.

As Lou puts it: "Great personal style is knowing yourself well enough to edit ruthlessly, and choosing pieces that feel as good as they look every single time."

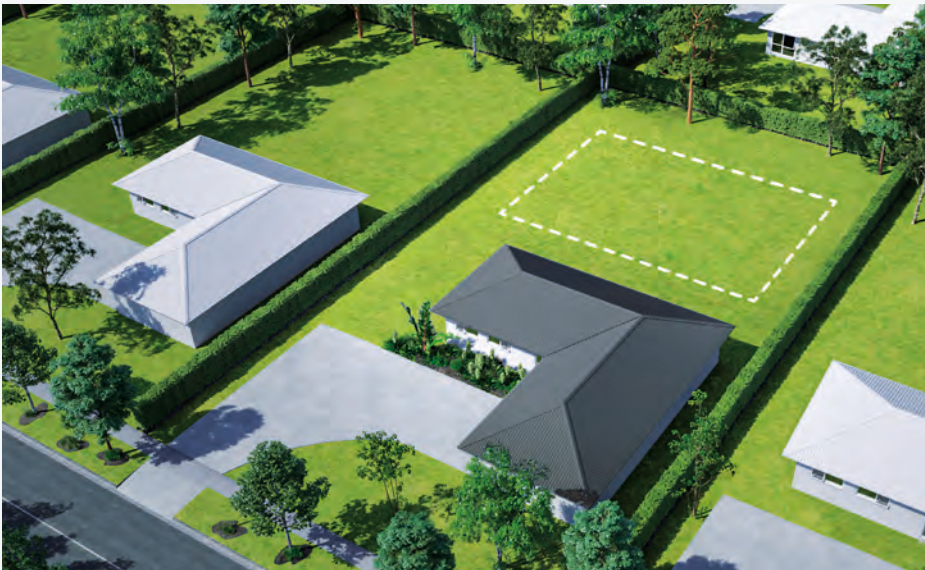
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We provide full transparency around costs, so you understand exactly what's involved in building a minor dwelling. This includes connection costs that many kitset or transportable options often exclude.



JOSH & LISA ON DESIGNING A HOME WITH EXTRA INCOME IN MIND

Josh and Lisa had long dreamed of creating and building a home of their own. When the chance came up to buy land in Coatesville, a place they love and where Lisa grew up, they knew it was an opportunity they didn't want to miss.

As part of their plans, they worked with GJ's to include a minor dwelling in the design. Lisa says the decision felt like an easy one from the start.

"We had a minor dwelling on our last property. And we always found it really easy to have tenants. We always had good tenants and good luck, and obviously the extra income was great. So, GJ's priced up the plans with and without the minor dwelling, and it just seemed like a no brainer to us to do it."



They decided to attach the minor dwelling to the main home, with the garage creating separation between the two while still keeping the space fully self contained. It's a smart option for anyone wanting to create an additional income stream.

Looking back, Josh and Lisa describe the experience as smooth and stress free.

"I would summarise the building process as worry free. Working with the team through this project was quite a lot of fun, actually. Everybody was very happy all the time. If there were any concerns that I had, I could just phone up and immediately get hold of somebody and talk about it and fix that straight away. There was nothing that was left for us to wonder about."



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RETURN OF THE RUMPUS ROOM

Like low-rise jeans, emotional avoidance and new Taylor versions on vinyl, some things simply refuse to die. The rumpus room, that once ruled suburban homes across Aotearoa, is officially having a comeback.

For years, we've been sold the idea that every room in the house should look like it's waiting for a real estate photographer to arrive. Neutral tones. Clean lines. A single sculptural chair nobody is allowed to sit on and a bowl of decorative objects that serve no purpose except to suggest the owner once visited a concept store in Grey Lynn. But the tide is turning. People are hungry for homes with actual personality again, and that means making room for joy, play and a little bit of visual drama.

Once a staple of 90s and early-2000s family homes, the rumpus room was where all the best things happened. Board games got heated. Teenagers flopped around watching DVDs. It was not a room concerned with elegance. It was all about the vibes.

One of the reasons the trend feels so right is that it taps into a wider craving for tactile, offline

fun. We are all, to some extent, exhausted by endless scrolling and the flattening sameness of digital life. The return of records, film cameras, vintage furniture and actual printed photographs all point to a desire for things that feel more hands-on and real. The rumpus room sits beautifully within that shift. It invites us back into shared experiences.

While the original rumpus rooms of our youth may have leaned 'practical', there's no reason the modern version can't be deeply stylish. This is where colour does the heavy lifting, and Resene has the palette to make the whole idea sing.

The foundation of any good rumpus room is atmosphere. You want it to feel cocooning, a little moody, somewhere that naturally encourages people to settle in and stay a while. Painting the walls in Resene Dark Slate is a brilliant place to start. It has those rich, charcoal undertones that instantly ground a



space, making it feel intimate and cinematic without becoming gloomy. It's dramatic, without being immature.

Darker walls also create the ideal backdrop for everything else you want to bring into the room: colour, texture, lighting and all those slightly eclectic details that make a space feel lived-in. Against Dark Slate, brighter accents really come alive. That's part of the charm of this particular look: it balances moodiness with mischief.

A perfect example is the use of playful wall décor, like oversized wooden letters, each painted in a different colour bringing a riot of personality to the room (like a small Pride Parade). It's bold, a bit cheeky and exactly the

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A mix of wood stains on walls in Resene Colour Enhance Japan Black and floors in Bleached Riverstone adds depth and character, creating a rumpus room that feels equal parts man cave, traditional pub and after-hours lounge.

kind of detail that stops the space from feeling too serious.

Because that's the danger with any moody interior, isn't it? It can all tip into "luxury waiting room" if you're not careful. The secret is contrast. If the walls are serving brooding sophistication, the accents need to flirt a little.

The floor is another chance to push the idea further. Too often, flooring is treated as purely functional. But a rumpus room is precisely the place to have a bit of fun with it. A painted checkerboard floor in Resene Blanc, Triple Blanc and Woodsmoke turns the entire room into a design statement. It's playful, graphic and just camp enough to double as a giant game board. In multi-use spaces, especially, those sorts of playful touches can transform the atmosphere from "spare room with a television" into something with an actual point of view.

Furniture is where you can begin softening and balancing the palette. A coffee table painted in Resene Duck Egg Blue lifts the scheme beautifully, adding freshness and lightness against the darker backdrop. A side table in Awaroa Bay keeps the mood cheerful and ties back to the brighter details elsewhere in the room. The interplay between these shades matters. Too much dark and the room becomes oppressive; too much brightness and you lose that cosy, cocooned effect.

Lighting, naturally, is crucial. A rumpus room should never feel overlit. Softer lighting creates

intimacy and makes the darker colours feel enveloping rather than flat. A lamp with a base painted in Resene Pavlova and a shade in Epitome adds warmth and a little softness, helping to diffuse the mood. Lamps are also kinder for movie nights, evening hangs and those long conversations that begin with one drink and somehow end in a full forensic analysis of Heated Rivalry.

Accessories are where the room gets to wink at you. A vase painted in Resene Big Stone adds a muted grey-blue note that works quietly in the background, while another in Fandango brings a sharper, livelier hit of colour. Bowls in Aoraki, coasters in Grenadier build a layered, personal look that feels collected rather than staged. This is not about matching everything within an inch of its life. It's about letting a room reveal your personality in pieces.

And then, of course, there's greenery. Planter painted in Resene Aoraki pops beautifully against Dark Slate, helping the space feel vibrant and alive. Plants soften all that moodiness and keep the room from veering into cave territory. Every dramatic interior needs something organic nearby, if only to reassure visitors that a human being lives there and not a beautifully dressed vampire.

The modern rumpus room is built for community. It's a place where teenagers can bring their mates, flatmates can collapse together after work, and adults can host with a

little less pressure and a lot more fun. Not every corner needs to prove its worth. Sometimes a room can just exist to make people feel good.

The return of the rumpus room isn't just a design trend. It's a small rebellion against boring spaces and overly curated living. And with the right palette, it's easy to create a space that feels stylish, affirming and unmistakably yours.

For paint, colour inspiration and all the DIY guidance to bring your own rumpus room to life, visit [Resene.co.nz](https://www.resene.co.nz).



PHOTOS | **BRYCE CARLETON**
PROJECTS | **ANNICK LARKIN & MEGAN HARRISON-TURNER**
CHECKERBOARD FLOOR DESIGN | **HANNAH TAPNER**

A STYLISH ESCAPE TO CALIFORNIA'S MOST BEAUTIFUL BEACH TOWN

Oliver Hall discovers Laguna Beach, Southern California's boho-chic coastal escape



Leaving the sprawl and spectacle of LAX and then Anaheim behind, the highways slim, the skies clear, and the landscape softens into gorse-covered hills and coastal peaks. We make the journey with Karmel Shuttle, who can take visitors directly to Laguna Beach from the airports, the city or Anaheim, and after days of Disney queues, door-to-door ease feels like its own kind of luxury. Then, suddenly, the Pacific appears and you understand why Laguna has held onto its Beach Boys-esque mythology for so long.

No high-rises. No hard edges. Just boho beach chic, bronzed couples playing volleyball on the sand, boutique stores selling handmade jewellery and summer dresses, and in every nook, galleries tucked between restaurants and palm trees. It is, frankly, what Takapuna and Auckland's East Coast Bays could be with a stronger commitment to good architecture.

We stay at **Casa Loma Beach Hotel** (@casalomabeachhotel), a super stylish, designed boutique hotel that prioritises comfort. It doesn't try to overwhelm you with resort grandeur. Instead, it seduces you quietly with impeccable interiors full of thoughtful details, sea views from every balcony, and the sound of waves crashing as you lie on your very comfortable bed.

Our room felt bohemian and minimalist, with a subtle Mexican–Aztec warmth to the design: all natural textures, clean lines and coastal ease. The hotel has direct beach access, a pool, and even boasts the impressive **Laguna Art Museum** (@lagunaartmuseum) as its next-door neighbour.

If Casa Loma is Laguna's relaxed, stylish side, then **Montage Laguna Beach** (@montagelaguna) is its grand cinematic close-up. No trip here feels complete without at least visiting The Montage, and lunch at their balcony restaurant, **The Loft**, is the perfect excuse.

When we arrive, the lobby has been dressed for Christmas with decorations from Christian Louboutin: glossy, glamorous, red-soled luxury translated into festive form. It's camp, polished and wildly expensive-looking, which is to say, very Laguna.

The Loft itself is all ocean air and quiet wealth. Young servers who look like tennis professionals glide around in crisp polo shirts. It has the effortless romance of fine dining on the Mediterranean coast, reimagined through a Cape Cod lens.

The food is exceptional, with smoky open flames charring fresh fish, but the setting is the star. From the balcony, waves crash beneath you while lunch stretches into the kind of afternoon you wish you could bottle.



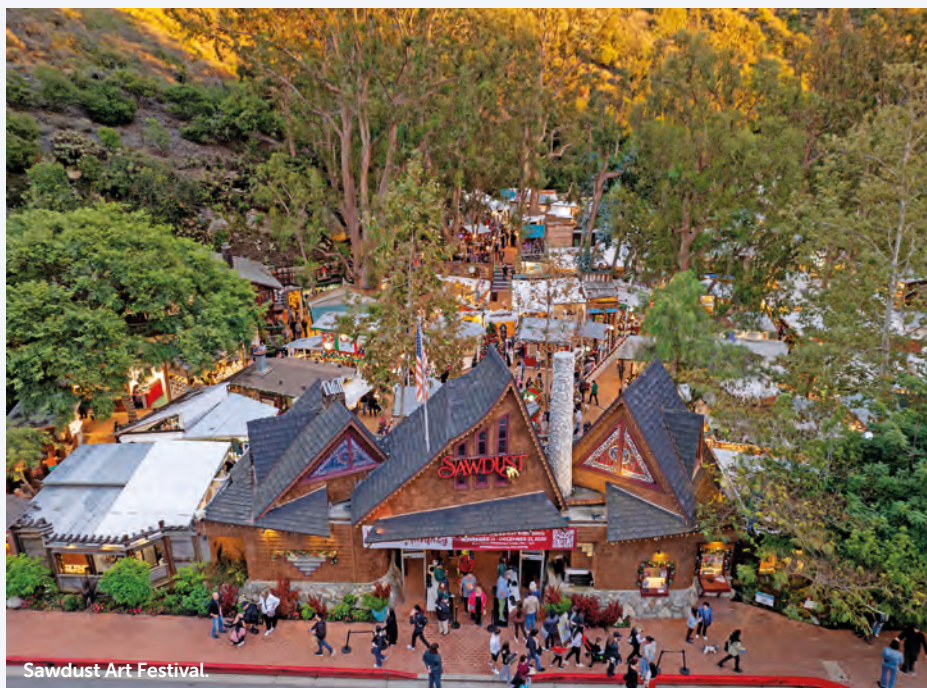
PHOTO | DANIEL SALCIUS

With full tummies, we walk it off across Victoria Beach and the little bays between Montage and Casa Loma. Each cove seems to have its own personality, with glittering waves stroking golden sand.

This is where Laguna becomes almost unfairly beautiful. The coastline unfolds in small, perfect reveals: a pocket of beach here, a rocky outcrop there, families paddling, couples sunbathing, children darting between towels and tide. It feels like you could spend days exploring these coves and still not quite be finished.

Passing Laguna's village centre, we take the town's pulse by visiting Forest Avenue, with its endless boutique stores and galleries that are dangerously browseable. At one point we overhear a woman exclaim to her friend, "I just love every store on this street, so let's go into all of them!"

TRAVEL



After a restful glass of wine on the balcony at Casa Loma, we stroll over to see the renowned sunset from Heisler Park, where couples have arrived with picnic blankets, the light turns golden, and the whole park settles into a serene hush.

Dinner at **Harvest at The Ranch** (@theranchlb) at Laguna Beach shows us another side of town entirely. Set away from the oceanfront glamour, The Ranch feels like California country club meets Texas ranch: rustic and charming, with touches of the Heated Rivalry cabin!

It is one of Laguna's oldest estates, and much of the produce is grown on the property, which makes sense the moment the food arrives. Everything tastes fresh, abundant and deeply cared for. The service could not have done more for us, and the portion sizes of the sublimely cooked steaks are wonderfully American! We would return in a heartbeat.

The next morning, **Rye Goods** (@ryegoods) bakery and cafe gives us yet another version of Laguna. Sitting among the boutique stores, it is fabulous: all fresh juice, excellent coffee, baked goods and activewear ambition.

The room is filled with professional young women, post-run, sending emails from their iPhones while sipping something green and virtuous. It immediately reminds me of the old MTV show Laguna Beach — except now the surf-obsessed teenagers have grown up, started thinking seriously about life after college, secured ambitious internships, launched business plans and developed excellent skincare routines.

It inspires us to be virtuous and we head up to Top of the World, Laguna's aptly named lookout, for a hike to get that post-breakfast glow.

As the shuttle arrives to pick us up, we conclude that Laguna Beach is not a place you simply

tick off. It is a place that makes you imagine another version of your life — one with more beach walks, better linen, longer lunches and a suspiciously productive morning juice habit.

Come for the coastline. Stay for the coves, the food, the galleries, the golden light and the feeling that Southern California might, just for a moment, be exactly as beautiful as it promised.

For more information, check out visitlagunabeach.com and @visitlaguna. For transfers, book through karmel.com. For flights, visit [United Airlines \(united.com\)](http://United Airlines (united.com)).



TIME YOUR VISIT

Laguna Beach's creative heart beats loudest at the **Sawdust Art Festival** (@sawdustartfestival), the town's iconic outdoor celebration of local art, craft and community. Set beneath the eucalyptus trees in Laguna Canyon, the festival brings together more than 180 Laguna Beach artists, with handmade work, live music, and the kind of

sun-dappled, sawdust-underfoot atmosphere that feels completely unique to this town.

In June, Sawdust begins its 60th season. What began as a small creative gathering has become one of Southern California's defining cultural experiences — and perhaps the clearest expression of Laguna's bohemian soul.

CONSERVATION AT THE HEART: DR ADAM NAYLOR AND THE WORK BEHIND *WILD HEROES*

*Auckland Zoo senior veterinarian Dr Adam Naylor takes **Oliver Hall** behind the scenes to show the work that goes into urgent wildlife care, rehabilitation, and the conservation of endangered species*

When Dr Adam Naylor has to postpone our interview because an albatross and an endangered bittern have just arrived as emergency patients, it feels less like bad timing and more like a perfect introduction to his diverse job.

AUCKLAND ZOO × YOUR EX

His day can turn in a moment. Routine health checks and scheduled procedures give way to urgent calls from the Department of Conservation, or to the arrival of native wildlife in serious trouble. The unpredictability is built into the role, and so is the sense that Auckland Zoo's veterinary team is doing far more than many people might realise.

That is part of what makes the new season of *Wild Heroes* feel so timely. The Three series follows the day-to-day work of Auckland Zoo. "The cameras are with us quite a lot," Naylor says. "You see a really good spectrum of cases, and whether that's us doing fieldwork or zoo work, they've been there following us through a lot of those really big stories."

What interests Naylor most is the chance to show the scale of the work that happens beyond public view. Visitors to Auckland Zoo can watch procedures from the vet hospital gallery, but that is only a snapshot. "You don't see all the rehabilitation that happens behind the scenes, and then all the work that goes into getting an animal released again," he says. "What's great about the series is it really shows the amount of work that everybody puts in, not just by the vets, but by the nursing staff and keepers, to get an animal back to the wild, and the role we play with conservation partners throughout Aotearoa and beyond."

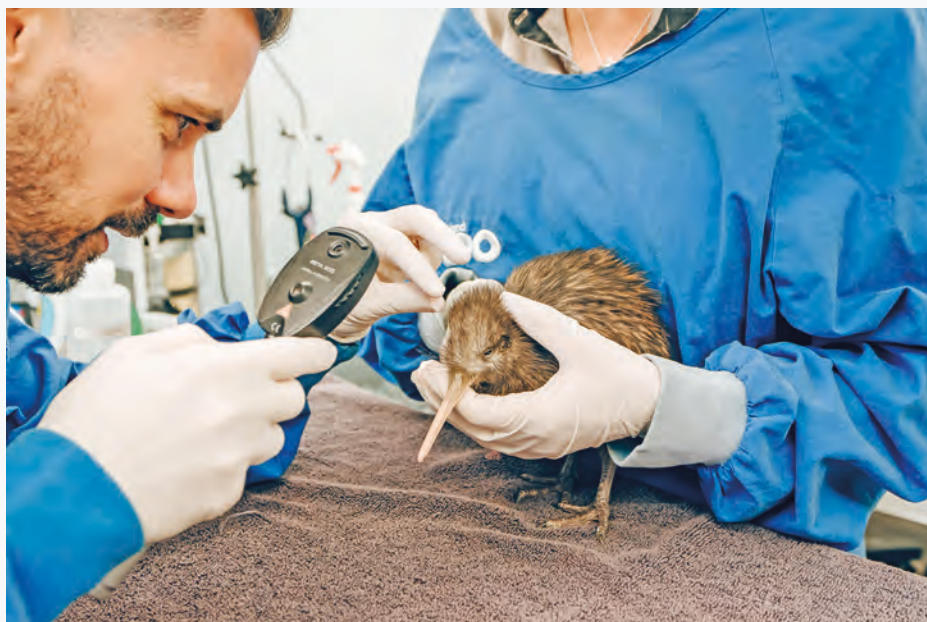
In Naylor's view, this is what makes good modern zoos so vital. If animals are kept in human care, he believes that must be matched by meaningful conservation work, knowledge sharing, and real contributions to species recovery. It is one of the reasons Auckland Zoo appealed to him after years of specialist work in the UK and the United States. He had heard its reputation before arriving, and what he found here matched it. "We're really lucky to have such a good zoo, doing such impactful, important conservation work all the time."

That work reaches well beyond the zoo grounds. Keepers and veterinary staff are involved in conservation projects in the field, often supporting DOC with endangered species. "New Zealand has some amazing wildlife, but also a huge amount of that wildlife is on the brink," he says. "Anything that we can do to help stop those declines is just so important."

This year, one of the biggest commitments for the zoo's veterinary team has been kākāpō. Naylor recently spent time on Whenua Hou (Codfish Island), off the coast of Rakiura, helping with chicks during the breeding season.

The breadth of his job is hard to overstate. Zoo and wildlife medicine is its own specialty, but as Naylor points out, it may also be the broadest one there is. "Every non-domestic animal is what we do," he says. "So that can be everything from fish and invertebrates up to rhinos and albatrosses and everything in between," Naylor says.

The wildlife cases, brought in by the likes of DOC, tend to be the toughest. Many animals arrive after major trauma or prolonged illness.



They are often in bad shape by the time they reach the hospital, and the standards for successful treatment can be unforgiving. "If we've got a wing fracture on a bird, if we're going to fix that fracture, it has to be perfect, because that bird has got to be releasable," Naylor says. That is especially true for seabirds. "For an albatross, it's got to soar thousands of miles."

Even once the immediate injury is addressed, the hospital itself can present challenges. Some species are simply not built for human care, even temporarily. "Things like the seabirds have evolved in environments which don't have a lot of fungus, and so they're very prone to getting fungal pneumonia when you bring them inland and you put them in a hospital," he explains. Albatrosses, which spend most of their lives flying or sitting on open water, can also develop painful sores on their feet in human care. "There's lots of things that make some species harder than others."

Naylor is compassionate but unsentimental about what follows. Not every patient can recover. Sometimes euthanasia is the only humane choice. "It's always sad when that's the outcome," he says. "But I think for us vets, there's also the reality that if it didn't get found by a member of the public and brought to us by DOC, then that animal would just be out in the wild and it would just starve to death." Seen through that lens, he adds, euthanasia can still



be "a positive outcome" because suffering has been prevented.

It is the kind of clarity that comes from experience, and Naylor's has been hard-earned. He graduated from the Royal Veterinary College in London in 2007 and built his career through increasingly specialised roles in exotic animal practice, wildlife medicine, and zoological health. He worked in the US and UK before passing specialist board exams in both Europe and America. He remembers that period with a laugh now, calling it "horrendous years of cramming for these awful exams in two places!"

What he has found in Auckland, though, goes beyond professional fulfilment. He speaks warmly about the city and its sense of community. He has been learning te reo Māori, something he tells us was inspired by colleagues at the zoo, and describes as part of a larger commitment to Aotearoa.

He is similarly positive about the queer community he has found, both in Auckland and in zoo culture more broadly. He describes zoos as often attracting left-leaning people and creating safe and welcoming places for queer staff. At Auckland Zoo, Pride is part of the calendar, and that spirit of inclusion has helped make the wider city feel like home.

As we conclude our interview, Naylor acknowledges that veterinary medicine is famously competitive, and he knows how easy it is for young people to be told that their dream job is unrealistic. His advice to them is simple. "Don't give up on it," he says. "If you're really passionate about something, you absolutely can do it!" He tells us with a smile that he was once told by a teacher he was not smart enough to become a vet. Season Four of *Wild Heroes* proves otherwise!

New episodes of *Wild Heroes* are screening on Three at 7 pm every Sunday, and all seasons can be streamed at threenow.co.nz

CREATURE COMFORTS

MICHAEL HEPHER: AUCKLAND ZOO'S UNGULATE EXPERT STILL LOOKS UP AT GIRAFFES IN AWE

*Michael 'Heff' Hepher
reveals the science, hard
work and wonder behind
modern zookeeping*

ARTICLE | OLIVER HALL

CREATURE COMFORTS

Michael Heffer has worked with giraffes for years, but he still talks about them like someone seeing them for the first time.

“They are so delicate,” he says, describing them as “gentle giants” and marvelling at the simple fact they exist at all. “They don’t look real! We’ve got Billy, who’s over five metres tall, you’re like, how has this thing come to be?”

That sense of wonder runs through everything Heff says. It is there when he talks about giraffes, when he talks about rhinos, and even when he explains the word ungulate with the enthusiasm of someone who genuinely loves getting into the details.

“An ungulate means a hooved mammal,” he explains. “So you get odd-toed ungulates like rhino and even-toed ungulates like giraffe.”

As Auckland Zoo’s ungulates team leader, Heff looks after both those species, along with zebra, antelope and ostriches. It is a job built around observation, care and a huge amount of physical work.

“We deal with all the hay and straw. Rhinos need 25 kilograms of hay a day to keep them going.” Rhinos, he explains, are “purely hay-based”, while giraffes need vast amounts of browse, with “20 bundles of leafy matter every single day” put up for them to strip, chew and forage through.

That attention to natural behaviour is central to how Heff sees a modern zoo. “Conservation and an evidence-based science of care approach is at the heart of good zoos today, and Auckland Zoo is amazing for this.” He describes the animals at the zoo as “ambassadors for their wild counterparts”, and says that for visitors, the chance to encounter them up close can be transformative.

“You want to see habitats that instigate natural behaviours,” he tells us, looking up at the orangutans traversing aerial pathways during our walk around. “How can you not be fascinated and inspired by them?”

Heff describes himself as “a bit of a zoo geek”, and the label seems fair. He has visited countless zoos around the world, often using those trips to meet other keepers and build connections across the industry. “It’s a hugely close-knit community,” he says. “I’d always message and meet up with a zookeeper or curator, and chat about ideas we were having and what they were up to.”

That international network is not just social. It is essential. Zoos are constantly working together around breeding, genetics and animal transfers. “We have to in the industry when we’re moving animals around to keep genetics good,” he explains.

Heff moved to Auckland in January 2025 for this “dream role” with the Ungulates team.



Before arriving here, he had already built a career around zoo biology, giraffe care and conservation, including university research focused on giraffe nutrition, work with nearly 40 giraffes across five collections, and involvement in international giraffe best-practice work. He has also contributed to rhino conservation projects in Indonesia and a bison reintroduction project in Azerbaijan.

But it is giraffes that light him up most. “One day I would love to go and work with GCF, the Giraffe Conservation Foundation,” he admits.

What interests him is the research still to be done around them. “They weren’t a massively studied animal,” he says. “They call it the silent extinction, because numbers were going down. You’d heard elephants were endangered and there was risk to them, but no one knew that giraffes were the same.” In some giraffe populations, he says, there were “fewer of them than elephants”.

But if giraffes are the dream, rhinos are where some of the hardest parts of the job come into focus.

Heff’s story in Season 4 of Three’s *Wild Heroes* centres on Zambezi, Auckland Zoo’s 36-year-old rhino, who was humanely euthanised last December after a long decline caused by periodontal disease. “There’s only so much, after a while, that you can do,” Heff says. “We started noticing that he was dropping food, his weight was slowly declining.”

What followed was an intensive, deeply scientific effort to understand exactly how Zambezi was coping, which included monitoring chewing and collecting and analysing rhino poo.

“One of our team, called Georgie, self-classifies as ‘the poo queen,’” he says. “It’s very Jurassic Park.” By measuring the hay in Zambezi’s dung over a year and a half, the team could see when he was no longer chewing properly. “So with that, we could see that it was time, and the vets obviously make that call.”

The impact on the team was significant. “It’s huge,” he says of losing an animal like Zambezi. “He was such a legend.” But Heff also speaks about legacy. Zambezi has fathered three calves, and his genetics remain important in the regional rhino population. “It is a big hole that he leaves,” he says, but with Zambezi’s eldest female offspring Nyah being transferred to an Australian zoo for breeding, Heff notes, “this is a new dawn for rhinos in the area.”

For all the emotional intensity of the work, Heff still speaks about zookeeping with real joy. “It’s like a hobby that I get paid for,” he says. “I have to pinch myself. I do what I love, and I get paid to do this.”

He is honest, too, that the glamour wears thin when Auckland weather kicks in. “The rainy days are the ones where I’m wet through to my underwear as I carry hay bales around,” he laughs.

But even on the wet days, Heff is still happy to come to work. “It is really good for your mental health to walk around this place,” he says. “We’re working in a green space in the middle of Auckland, surrounded by the most amazing animals. It’s a privilege.”

For more information on Auckland Zoo, visit aucklandzoo.co.nz and follow @aucklandzoo on social media.

WHY I CHOSE TO COME OUT AT 76

For most of his life, Bill Costello lived behind what he calls a mask.

Born and raised in Whanganui, Bill knew he was gay as a teenager, but the world around him made that truth feel dangerous. When he was young, his mother noticed how close he and a male friend were becoming and threatened to expose him to his employer and cut him off from the family if he acted on his feelings. At a time when being gay could cost someone their job, their place in their family, and their standing in the community, fear settled in early and stayed there.

So Bill did what many men of his generation felt they had to do: he built a life that looked acceptable from the outside.

He married a woman who knew he was gay, and together they committed to a marriage and family. They had a daughter, later adopted two more children, and became deeply involved in church life. Bill gave up his passion for performing musical theatre, and for 47 years, he stayed faithful to his wife and committed to the family they built together.

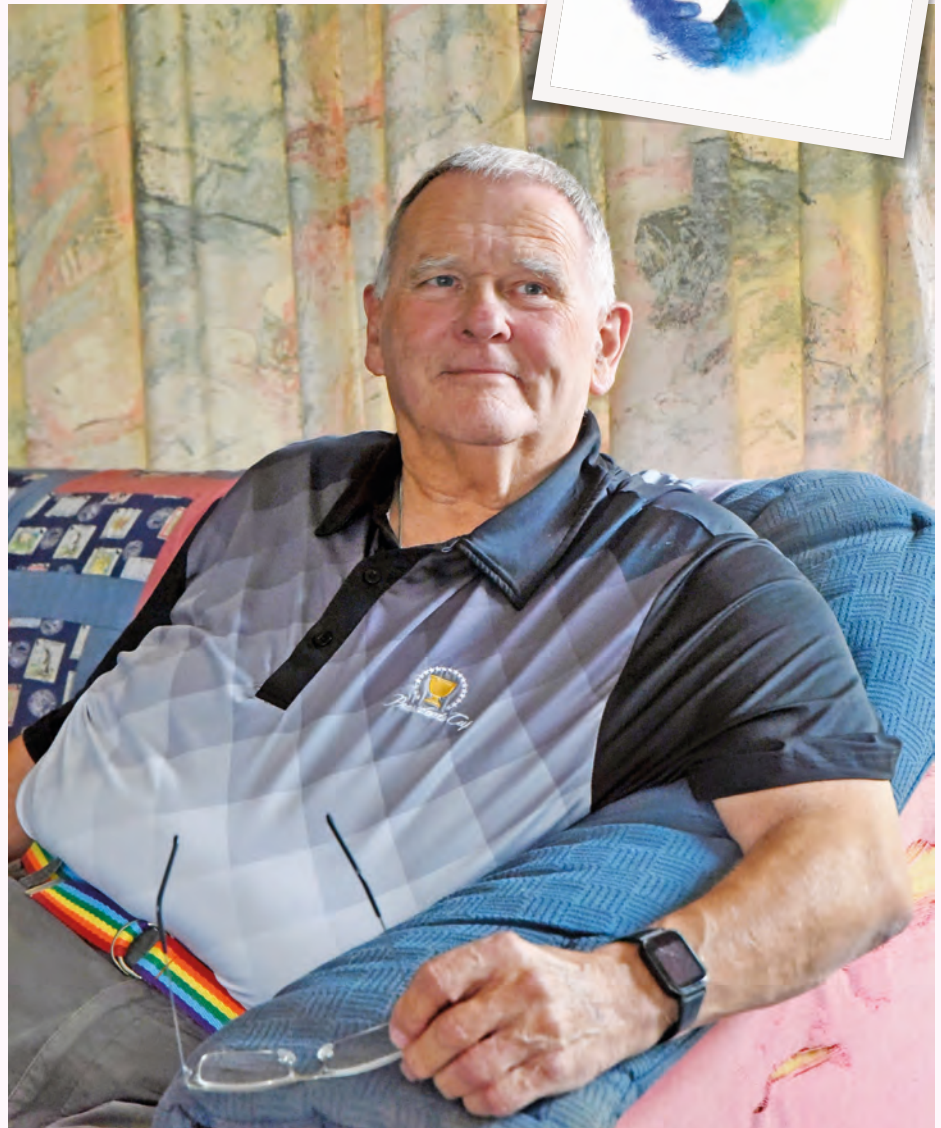
Looking back, Bill speaks with remarkable honesty about the cost of all those decades spent hiding. A mask glued to his face, performing a version of himself to others to keep the truth at bay. Even as the world changed, through gay liberation, the AIDS crisis, civil unions, and marriage equality, Bill tells us the fear remained. His mother's threats never left him, and neither did the church's condemnation of homosexuality.

When his wife died, Bill was in his 70s and confronting not only grief, but his true self. He had already penned an autobiography, but left out "the gay side" entirely. That omission began to trouble him. If he was going to tell his story, why was he still editing himself out of it?

"I'm sick of wearing this mask," he remembers thinking. "I've worn it for 75 years. I just want to be me."

That realisation became the turning point. Bill began writing a new book, one that finally told the whole truth. But before getting it published, he decided his family needed to hear it from him first. Rather than tell each person separately and risk the story being retold and distorted, he sent one message to the whole family on a group chat.

The response was painful.



Some family members felt shocked and betrayed. Some stood up for him. A few responded with Bible verses. The fallout was immediate, emotional, and deeply difficult. But even in the middle of that upheaval, Bill knew there was no going back. He had done it. The truth was finally out.

Bill describes a liberating sense of freedom in being open now, particularly returning to his local theatre community, where his openness has been met with warmth, support, and acceptance. After decades of silence, Bill is finally speaking with his full voice.

His advice to others who may also be older and still closeted is simple: "Don't wait any longer. Take that mask off and be who you're meant to be!"

Coming out at 76 did not magically fix everything for Bill. It caused hurt, conflict, and misunderstanding. But it also gave him something he had been denied for most of his life: the chance to live honestly.

For younger queer people, it can be hard to imagine a lifetime spent hiding in plain sight. But Bill's story is a reminder that coming out is never governed by one timetable, and that authenticity can still matter just as much in your 70s as it does in your twenties.

Bill assures us, "It is never too late to be your true self."

Bill's book, *Removing the Mask, My Journey to Freedom*, is available on Amazon.

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PINK SHIRT DAY'S ROOTS MUST STAY VISIBLE

Pink Shirt Day is now widely recognised as a national call to stand against bullying, but for Shaun Robinson, Chief Executive of the Mental Health Foundation, it is crucial that people do not lose sight of where that kaupapa began



Shaun Robinson.

As Aotearoa prepares to mark Pink Shirt Day 2026 on Friday 15 May, Robinson says the day's connection to solidarity against homophobic bullying remains as important as ever.

"It's important to honour the whakapapa of Pink Shirt Day as a school community response to homophobic bullying. Members of the rainbow community still experience higher rates of bullying and disproportionate negative impacts on their mental health, so it's vital to keep that highly visible. We can't stop homophobic and transphobic bullying without creating environments where bullying can't thrive. Environments that celebrate diversity and cultivate kindness and inclusion."

For Robinson, that means Pink Shirt Day should be about more than one day. It should also be a reminder that meaningful anti-bullying work is ongoing and collective.

A big part of that is encouraging people to be Upstanders rather than bystanders when they witness bullying. Robinson says even small actions can make a real difference.

"Being an Upstander means taking positive action when you see bullying taking place. The first is to awhi, or support, the person being bullied - stand beside them and let them know you have their back. If it's safe to do so, you can intervene and interrupt the bullying. It can be hard to speak up in the moment, but saying something like 'that's not okay' can make a huge difference."

Asked whether Aotearoa is making genuine progress on inclusion, Robinson says there are reasons for hope, but also cause for concern. While more schools and workplaces are embracing inclusion in meaningful ways, he says public debate and political rhetoric can still undermine that progress.

"When there is a backlash against inclusion, it is a sign that there has been progress and some people aren't comfortable with that. So that means we have to keep advocating and promoting inclusion even harder."

That same conversation extends beyond schools and into the workplace, where bullying remains an issue. Robinson says employers need to understand that the impact is not just personal, but financial too.

"Bullying is bad for business. It costs employers in NZ \$1.3 billion each year. A business with a culture of kindness, inclusion and celebration of diversity will have happier staff who will be more productive. A staff member who feels marginalised and unsafe due to bullying simply can't give their best and is not likely to stay in an organisation if they have an option to leave. There are real costs involved in internal conflict, lower productivity, absenteeism and turnover."

Robinson says organisations also need to be better at recognising the quieter, less visible forms of bullying and exclusion that many rainbow people experience. Harm is not always loud or obvious, and workplaces need tools to identify it early and respond properly.

Asking staff anonymously via surveys, providing training around offensive and unwanted behaviour, and supporting rainbow staff networks are all part of that work, he says.

For queer young people who may be experiencing bullying this Pink Shirt Day, Robinson's message is one of reassurance, support, and affirmation.

"Number one: you are a lovable and beautiful human! There are people who care about you and what you are going through. If you feel you are being bullied, talk to a teacher or senior student you trust - Pink Shirt Day isn't just about dressing in pink for a day, it's also about year-round positive action. Get support from Rainbow Youth or Youthline, and look at the Mental Health Foundation's Pink Shirt Day website for advice and support. And kia kaha. Be strong. You're worth it."

The 2026 Pink Shirt Day collection of T-shirts and merchandise is available online and in all Cotton On and Typo stores across Aotearoa until 17 May, or until sold out.

Pink Shirt Day 2026 will be celebrated on Friday 15 May. For more information or to access free resources, visit pinkshirtday.org.nz

TEND × YOUR EX



Dr. Mataroria Lyndon.

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have several GPs with an interest in hauora Māori and rainbow health, which helps ensure care is delivered in a way that meets your needs. You can filter by this interest on our website, tend.nz, on our 'Clinicians' page.

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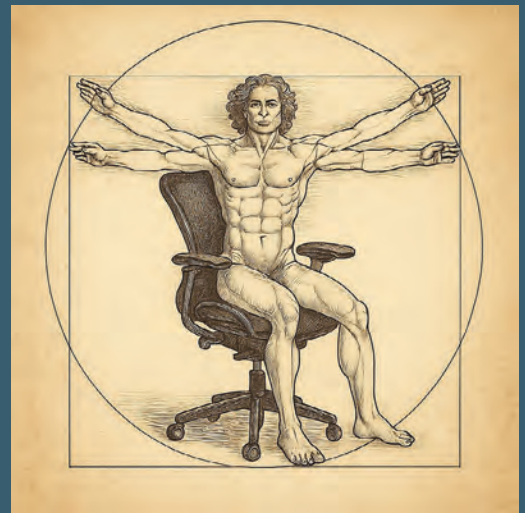
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Eagle Bar
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PHOTOS | JASMIN SHEIKH

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Talk about wild.

Local iwi, community volunteers, scientists
and zookeepers have spent hundreds of hours
radio-tracking nationally critical pekapeka.

Watch more on Wild Heroes – Three and ThreeNow



Photo: Grant Maslowski

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