

The ballad of Joe Taihape



Where the mist goes slowly lifting up the valleys full of listening,
 Where the river cuts along beneath the snow,
 Cock your head towards the warbler with a sound like running water
 You'll hear the voice of old Taihape Joe.
 In the garage, at the bar, to the sound of ten guitars,
 When the party's gone too far you might just catch
 'Mong the boozers slowly boozing and the lovers self-amusing
 Smokin' Joe Taihape sliding out the back.

*Joe Taihape, Joe Taihape. Here's a toast to all your daddies.
 If you're doing nothing Monday drop on by.
 With a guitar in your hand you're the singer of the land.
 Joe Taihape, Joe Taihape. Yippe-ay!*

They say in Rangitikei (though the story's far from pretty)
 Joe crawled out a gumboot fully cooked.
 In Mangaweka bless 'er an immaculate conceptor
 Says the first she knew he bit her on the foot.
 In Wellington they frown, from Alexander Turnbull down,
 Say they have the papers and despite the talk
 Katherine Mansfield, so it seems (and the Thorndon first fifteen)
 At the moment have a case before the court.

Some say that he is whanau to a joker in Te Anau.
 In Parl'ament they don't know what t'reckin,
 Although it seems unusual there's a claim t'the tribunal,
 He's an article of Article the second.
 It's said in Timaru he was out of Phar Lap too,
 Pinetree, Cardy, every bleeding hua.
 Some say he is a legend (a ridiculous invention).
 Even Abel Tasman has him on the crew.

Whatever way he got here now he's here he's not a bother.
 And all we know for sure's no one's sure.
 He's a singer. He's a songer. He's a wanderer-a-longer,
 And for any sort'a sorrow he's a cure.
 If you hear him with the tui up the good ole Whanganui,
 If you find him playing out'a Doubtful sound,
 Tap you feet and nod your head and praise the Lord you're not quite dead
 However fat the ghosts spread all around.

*Joe Taihape, Joe Taihape. As a matter of a facty
 If you're doing nothing Tuesday drop on by.
 With a guitar in your hand you're the singer of the land.
 Joe Taihape, Joe Taihape. Tôru-wha!*

Glenn Colquhoun



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EXHIBITION
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 JULY 10-28TH

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NIGEL BROWN

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On the Origins of Joe Taihape

There are many stories regarding the origin of Joe Taihape. Only three seem plausible to me but I am no authority. The individual most likely to know for sure is Joe himself and he is famously reticent, not to mention unreliable.

The first theory suggests Joe Taihape is the product of an imagination, Nigel Brown's to be specific, who in painting him has rekindled the debate regarding his origins. Nigel Brown is an artist. He has a history of peopling his work with individuals who represent aspects of the New Zealand personality or who act as motifs for particular viewpoints. Through these he is able to essay and explore the national psyche. Over time these characters become layered with association and begin to act as a particular voice within a painting thus adding to its impact as surely as colour and composition. They are a form of language. It is possible that Joe Taihape is such a motif in the work of Nigel Brown and that he is in fact made up. This of course gives credit to the artist. He is a vulnerable character in the way that great artists often are and it is just as likely that Joe Taihape is the product of an unstable mind. Nigel Brown may be damaged. He may be projecting. He may be compensating for a lack of musical ability. Each of these is a reasonable explanation.

The second theory argues that Joe Taihape is a real person or at least the memory of a real person. His surname hints at an association with the Rangitikei town of the same name however many musicians take pseudonyms which disguise their identity and this may well be the case with Joe. Of course 'Joe' itself may also be an assumed name. Numerous sightings of Taihape throughout the country over many years also lend credence to the fact that he is a real person. While some of these may be the stuff of legend it is difficult to believe that all would be so. Reported sightings with Tasman, Cook, Te Rauparaha and Baxter up the Whanganui hint at a longevity which is difficult to accept. Multiple sightings at mutually exclusive locations over four centuries also give rise to the belief that Joe Taihape may be omnipresent, a type of spiritual being or patupaiarehe. To others he appears a ghost, a

traveller between the living and the dead, a restless soul in limbo, not light enough for heaven, not dark enough for hell.

My first experience of Joe Taihape is consistent with this viewpoint. It occurred one Saturday night on Kapiti Island a few years ago when he possessed the body of Nigel Brown. He emerged then as a foil to the musical talents of Whirimako Black, Richard Nunns and Riki Gooch during a concert given for the local people. It may have been that these musicians gave rise to a rage of inadequacy in Brown. Perhaps they tapped a talent long considered dormant. More likely, the artist was a mindless vessel of the never-dead. Regardless there was a possession, a roar of release and finely nuanced movement which has over time become the unmistakable signature of Joe Taihape.

The third, and in some ways the most attractive theory, suggests that Joe Taihape is an emanation of the New Zealand landscape. This may be difficult to accept as landscape is often seen as something brute. This is a conceit. There are many who believe the landscape to be alive or at the very least the result of a particular life-force. If this is the case then Joe Taihape may well represent the condensation of all the longing in the New Zealand landscape into a discreet being. He may be a great roar of the land, a wry shake of the hips, a telling catch in the throat. Given that human beings are part of this landscape it is also possible that in a sense Joe is all of us burst into flame or willed into being, the word made flesh to dwell among us. Sometimes the only sensible response to the apprehension of what is beyond is to sing and perhaps Joe is this yearning given arms and legs and a beat up guitar slung over his shoulder.

Whatever the case may be he is among us. Cock your head, crane your neck, follow that bump in the middle of the night and he will be there, disappearing around the corner, the sound of a chord or a chorus or a low chuckle lingering in the air.

Glenn Colquhoun

Joe Taihape

This exhibition began from a workshop for an ongoing musical project on Kapiti Island in 2010. On the final day of the workshop some of the participants including Glenn Colquhoun, Whirimako Black, Richard Nunns and Riki Gooch gave powerful performances. What is a visual artist to do? I desperately picked up Whirimako's guitar and did an impromptu silent performance, calling myself Joe Taihape. While humorous at the time, I thought of it later on a more serious basis.

Later that year I painted a backdrop to accompany the musician Dudley Benson's New Zealand tour with the Dawn Chorus, beatboxer Hopey One and dance artist Cat Ruka. With Richard Nunns, these performers appear behind Joe in the large Joe Taihape painting. Nunns' taonga puoro opened Dudley's tour of New Zealand churches in 2008, so I'm fusing two events.

It's inspiring to be around musicians, and poets. They bring new respect for words and the sounds of instruments played - chant and vibration. As a painter I am usually locked in visual concentration which at its most intense is not that aware of outside noise or meaning as the hand moves the brush. Looking dominates over hearing. So it's a great change to be amongst people where you are caught up and taken out of yourself. Creativity affirmed in a shared group situation.

*I work in series in the sense that one painting often suggests another. It's a case of starting somewhere and following that urge to some diverse flowering. My beginnings for the guitarist are derived from Picasso's *The Old Guitarist* of 1903, which I've developed on my own terms and from my own*

identity. He becomes a kind of busker among simplicities like pots, sheds and the arc of the sun flaring. Picasso took his old man from the street and turned him into something universal; I'm after that local-cum-world dimension in my own modest way. For me, I'm not concerned that Picasso was last century but rather that he is going to be a trigger to my own discoveries right now. Guitars can be very elaborate and complex or wonderfully plain and timeless. A human wraps themselves around them. A painter on the other hand has a stick with hairs on the end held at arms length.

In my childhood my father, R. F. Brown, played a guitar and sang Hank Snow songs repeatedly until my mother and us boys would cry 'Enough! Get rid of the thing!' and the guitar would disappear - only until another would surface when we least expected it. All I remember fondly is the twang of sentimentality mixed with pipe smoke.

The work of various guitarists such as Bob Dylan, Manitas De Plata, The Beatles, Hendrix, Joan Baez and most recently New Zealander Tiny Ruins, have all had a presence in my life. They've also had a remarkable effect in terms of comfort and nourishment: emotion and messages for all on a grand scale, often boiling down to simple hopes and dreams powerfully expressed in sounds human or instrumental. They possibly keep the world turning.

My Joe is unashamedly a painting that is rather elusive musically. Maybe it's just the wood and strings of an idea.

Nigel Brown

