



PLAY IT 
STRANGE

— FOLLOW US



@PLAYITSTRANGENZ
PLAYITSTRANGE.ORG.NZ

IMPACT
REPORT
2026



CEO MESSAGE	2
MEET THE TEAM	4
2026 HIGHLIGHTS	5
COMPETITION WINNERS 2026	6
SUPPORTING THE STUDIOS	9
MEET SOME ALUMNI	10
COMPETITION JUDGES	15
PERFORMANCES AND AIRPLAY	18
BEYOND THE STUDIO	20
OUT AND ABOUT IN SCHOOLS	21
PERFORMANCE SUMMARY	22
OUR SUPPORTERS	23
A PARENTS EXPERIENCE	24
2025 FINANCIALS	25

PLAY IT ●
STRANGE

EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION OF SONGWRITERS IN AOTEAROA

We support young New Zealanders on their
musical journey through songwriting,
performance and self-expression.

CEO MESSAGE

1,100 SONGWRITERS. ONE AMAZING YEAR.



KIA ORA KOUTOU

What a year it has been! Thanks to our community of supporters, and the hardest working little team in the business, we have again expanded our offerings to rangatahi this year. We were also awarded the 2026 Baysting Prize for Children's Champion by APRA AMCOS NZ, recognising the young people we support across Aotearoa through songwriting, performance, and self-expression.

Joining current team member, Platinum musician Paige, we completed our team this year with three-time Play It Strange alumni Lily Stiven and award-nominated Australian musician Bec Sandridge. Their authentic passion and drive for empowering and encouraging rangatahi has allowed us to have more tangible, genuine, and long-lasting impact on our community of songwriters than ever before.

This year we welcomed a record number of song submissions, with more than 1,100 young songwriters across 890 entries, sharing their voices, perspectives and kōrero with us - a 37% growth in entries in three years. 180 songs were chosen as finalists by our judges, all receiving a day in a professional studio to record their song, working alongside some of Aotearoa's most accomplished music engineers and producers. This learning journey is unique to Play It Strange. We provide the opportunities, connections and community that support the next generation of Aotearoa's artists to grow, develop and thrive. We also had 157 Album Art entries this year - after starting with only 22 entries when we launched the competition in 2022.

Beyond our competitions, we have expanded on pathways for our alumni, and are on track to have offered over 100 performance opportunities to our alumni by the end of the year. Almost all of these have been paid, demonstrating to our rangatahi that while they are personally gaining from the experience, they are also providing something of value to their audiences. Partnerships with the Pacific Music Awards Trust, APRA AMCOS NZ, Homegrown, Duco and Recorded Music NZ have enabled us to take alumni to industry events like the Aotearoa Music Awards, Homegrown, Pacific Music Awards and SYNTHONY in the Domain, giving rangatahi one-of-a-kind experiences to inspire them. We have also had two recent alumni on the red carpet at the awards evenings, interviewing nominees about songwriting.

GROWING**37%**GROWTH IN ENTRIES
IN 3 YEARS**RECORDING****180**FINALISTS SONGS
RECORDED
PROFESSIONALLY
IN 2026**PERFORMANCES****100+**OPPORTUNITIES
FOR ALUMNI TO
PERFORM IN 2026**INNOVATION****\$10K**FUNDRAISED FOR
2026 WAIATA MĀORI
COMPETITION

Our panel of 21 judges and mentors, including Bret McKenzie, Sam V, Boh Runga, Muroki, Ria Hall, Gin Wigmore, Melodownz, Jennie Skulander (Devilskin), Shaan Singh (Drax Project), Cassie Henderson, and of course our founder Mike Chunn, have all generously shared their time, expertise and wisdom with our young songwriters. Their industry experience, combined with warmth and genuine commitment to supporting rangatahi, makes them powerful role models. For many of our young people, seeing artists who reflect their identities, backgrounds and cultures provide tangible examples of what is possible and help them envision their own pathways in music. The judges' influence extends far beyond the competitions - they are truly inspiring the next generation of songwriters in Aotearoa.

However, this year hasn't been without its difficulties. In a challenging fundraising landscape, we have had to think outside the box to offer new ways to fundraise. Our Live at the Tuning Fork concert in August had Play It Strange's alumni and acclaimed artists generously perform. Between the concert, a raffle, and generous donors, we reached our target raising the \$10,000 needed to run our 2026 Waiata Māori Competition. This year we have also relied on the generosity of our partners, sponsors, and patrons who continue to show unwavering support to our mahi. We would like to especially thank the Lion Foundation and Wright Family Foundation. Without them, we simply could not do what we do.

We have ambitious goals to meet growing demand and reach more rangatahi than ever. We want to create more opportunities for young people to build confidence, skills, connection and resilience. If you share this vision and can support us in any way, we'd be incredibly grateful.

Thank you for all your support,

Ngā mihi nui,

Stephanie Brown

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Play It Strange Trust



MEET THE TEAM

Small but mighty.



Stephanie Brown
CEO



Paige Tapara
Marketing &
Operations Manager



Bec Sandridge
Events & Programmes
Coordinator



Lily Stiven
Competition Coordinator

Meet the team on the other side of those emails and Instagram DMs. This year, we welcomed two new additions to our small but mighty team!

Play It Strange alumni Lily Stiven, a three-time finalist, joined us in May, now coordinating the same competitions she once entered herself. Lily works with us three days a week when she's not writing songs or studying songwriting at SAE.

Australian independent artist, producer and songwriter Bec Sandridge completed our team in August, having mentored at and facilitated songwriting workshops in secondary schools throughout Australia. Bec also works with us three days a week.

Platinum musician Paige remains working with us two days a week outside of her music career, and Steph remains full-time.

Having such passionate songwriters all working in the music industry has an enormous positive impact on our rangatahi, enabling them to receive real time industry insights, advice and opportunities.



"Having once entered myself back in high school, it's so special to now be on the other side facilitating the same competitions that shaped my own journey in music. It's a full-circle moment!"

LILY STIVEN

Songs to Studios.

1,100

INDIVIDUAL
SONGWriters

203

INDIVIDUAL
SCHOOLS ENTERED
OUR COMPETITIONS

180

FINALIST SONGS
RECORDED
PROFESSIONALLY

157

ALBUM ART
ENTRIES

50

SCHOOLS VISITED
ACROSS THE MOTU

Talking all things songwriting and navigating the music industry with over 1,500 students – bringing our competition judges to some schools too!

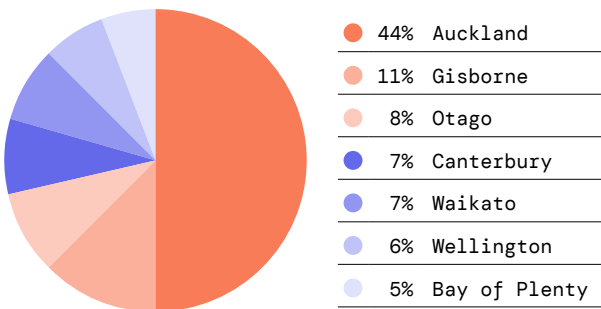
100+

PERFORMANCE
OPPORTUNITIES

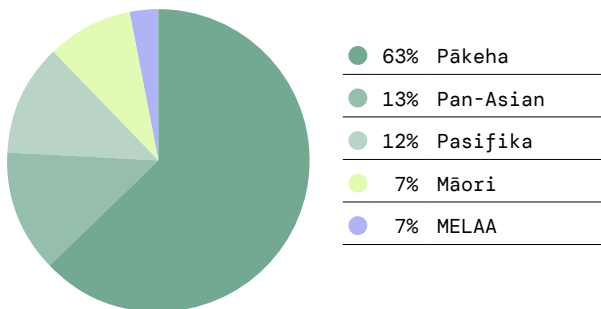
Provided to alumni by the end of the year!

Where did the songs come from this year?

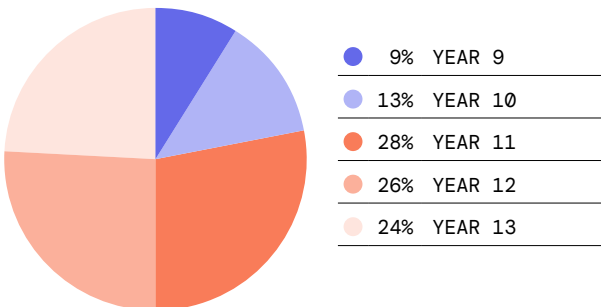
REGION



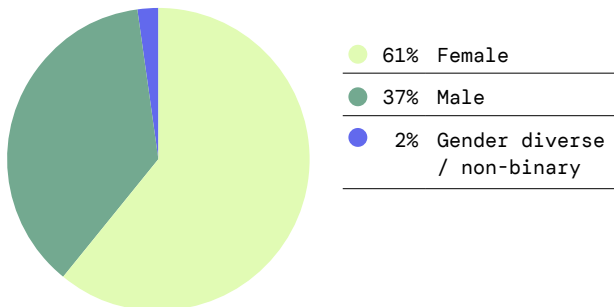
ETHNICITY



YEAR GROUP



GENDER



SONGWRITING COMPETITION WINNERS 2026

NATIONAL SONGWRITING COMPETITION 2026 YEAR 9-13

PRINCIPAL PARTNER



THE LION FOUNDATION

503

SONGS ENTERED

66

SONGS RECORDED

175

SCHOOLS REPRESENTED



1ST PLACE

'you, you, you'

MONIQUE MAGDADARO

HOBSONVILLE POINT SECONDARY SCHOOL

Steph and Bec surprised Monique at her school – sharing a video of judge Gin Wigmore announcing the news! Monique's prizes includes a \$10,000 recording, video and promotional package thanks to NZ On Air; a mentoring session with Gin Wigmore, a \$500 MusicWorks voucher, JBL BandBox Trio, an artist development session with SOLE Music Academy founder Sacha Vee, radio interviews and airplay, and performance opportunities.



"I absolutely fell in love with this song and am so happy it has won! 'You You You' has a great melody, gorgeous vocal delivery, lyrical content that feels very universal and from a lived experience, AND it is super catchy. I have had it on repeat, I love it so much! I can't wait to hear this song recorded professionally in the studio, and **I would love to work with this artist and co-write something together.**"

GIN WIGMORE – JUDGE



"I really loved the ideas in this song. I loved these melodies, very strong verse and chorus melodies. I also love that Monique has clearly demonstrated the sonic world in which this song lives in. The melodies alone really define the structure of this song. **I think she is a very strong songwriter and will go very far.**"

RIIKI REID – JUDGE

PEACE PROJECT 2026

PRINCIPAL PARTNER



171

SONGS ENTERED

60

SONGS RECORDED

104

SCHOOLS REPRESENTED



1ST PLACE

The Sun On The Hill

CAMERON BEATTIE

LONG BAY COLLEGE

No stranger to Play It Strange as a five time Play It Strange finalist already, this marks Cameron's first competition win. Cameron recorded his track at Roundhead Studios, working with composer, James Cullen, to create a backing arrangement with a quartet of musicians from Auckland Philharmonia's Learn & Participate programme. Cameron follows in the footsteps of older brother, Alex, who is also a Play It Strange alumni.



"I am so honoured to win the Peace Project songwriting competition. To be recognised by some of Aotearoa's top artists is such an incredible feeling and I am so grateful to them. **All the Play It Strange team have been so awesome and the opportunities they have provided me and so many others over the years means so much** and I am forever thankful to them."

CAMERON BEATTIE



"I was so excited to hear the meaningful and thought-provoking songs to come out of the Peace Project this year. I feel so lucky that through the Play It Strange competitions I can discover some incredible underground talent in Aotearoa. We've had some truly amazing entries come out of our Peace Project this year, it was very hard to judge. I can't wait for the world to hear from our finalists. With each song I listened to this year I was more blown away by the talent of our Rangatahi."

PAIGE – JUDGE

JUNIOR SONGWRITING COMPETITION 2026 YEAR 9-11

SUPPORTED BY



concord
music publishing



GENEROUS
PATRONS

176

SONGS
ENTERED

45

SONGS
RECORDED

81

SCHOOLS
REPRESENTED



1ST PLACE

Pay Later

LUKE VAN WYK

ROLLESTON COLLEGE

When Steph arrived at Luke's school his music teacher had told him she was a guest wanting a tour of the music department – so he was extra surprised when the visit was to tell him he'd won! Luke's artist name is '104', and he independently released his debut EP 'hi' at just 10 years old.



"**PAY LATER** is about the price of consumerism - it's like an ad break in my album 'Consumer Effect' so it sounds flashy and polished like a real commercial, but the lyrics are about the greed of capitalism and what you actually end up paying for it."

LUKE VAN WYK



"This is insanely good. I am beyond impressed! Incredible. Without a doubt this song should win."

FRANKIE VENTER – JUDGE



"**This track is one of the highest level production, international ideas I've ever heard in a Play it Strange track.** And there are lots of outstanding tracks. I am really, really impressed by this act and will definitely be following them!"

CHRIS CHETLAND – KOG STUDIOS

WAIATA MĀORI COMPETITION 2026

SUPPORTED BY



40

SONGS
ENTERED

9

SONGS
RECORDED

22

SCHOOLS
REPRESENTED



1ST PLACE

Pōmārie / Say Goodnight

MEADOW MIA

HAMILTON GIRLS' HIGH SCHOOL

Meadow's winning waiata blends English and te reo Māori and was written during a difficult period marked by burnout and sadness. Pōmārie explores comfort, rest, and the idea that "problems don't last forever... life goes on".

Meadow, who was born in Arizona, USA and raised in Hamilton, said she had felt disconnected from her Māori heritage for years, so the recognition was meaningful.

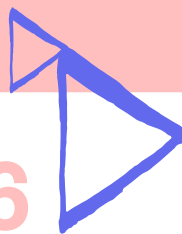


"I was blown away by the number of incredible waiata entered this year, which made choosing the finalists a seriously tough job. If you didn't get through this time, kua e māharahara, don't be discouraged. Kia kaha, kia māia, and keep writing and sharing your unique voice."

NOEMA TE HAU III – JUDGE 2026

STRANGE ART ALBUM ART COMPETITION

2026



157
ENTRIES

4
WINNERS

Strange Art Competition is a creative album art competition open to year 9-13 students. These four winning artworks are the album covers for this years songwriting competition albums.



● NATIONAL SONGWRITING COMPETITION

Stereo in Hills

ROSA FYFE

LOGAN PARK HIGH SCHOOL



● PEACE PROJECT

Fear Haunts Us All

DAISY COLLINS

LOGAN PARK HIGH SCHOOL



● JUNIOR SONGWRITING COMPETITION

Fractured

PYPER GREER

TAIERI COLLEGE



● WAIATA COMPETITION

Untitled

LUCY DELAHUNTY-VERSTEEGH

KAPITI COLLEGE

SUPPORTING THE STUDIOS

Our 180 finalists from across the motu have been recording their songs with over 35 producers in professional studios up and down the country.

35+
PRODUCERS /
STUDIOS

TĀMAKI MAKĀURAU AUCKLAND

Big Fan	Studio91 (MoDre Brown)
Big Pop	Old North Studios
Christian Tjandrawinata	Parachute
Crescendo	Roundhead
Dan Martin	The Lab
Depot	Tom Broome
Edy on the Beat	Emily Wheatcroft-Snape
Joel Jones	

TAURANGA

Studio 11b
Clint Murphy
Scott Braid

WAIKATO

Scott Seabright
The Porch

TARANAKI

Rhythm Ace Studios

TAIRĀWHITI GISBORNE

Jol Mulholland
Iwasa Pohatu

TE PAPAIOEA PALMERSTON NORTH

The Stomach

TE WHANGANUI-A-TARA WELLINGTON

Surgery Studios
The Armoury
Tiny Triumph

WHAKATŪ NELSON

Studio 7010

WĀNAKA

Mirrors Audio (Hawea)

ŌTAUHAHI CHRISTCHURCH

Brookside Audio
Orange Studios
Sole Music Academy
Emily C Browning

ŌTEPOTI DUNEDIN

Abby Wolfe Studios
University of Otago

WAIHŌPAI INVERCARGILL

Music South

CAMERON BEATTIE

●	2026 – WINNER – ‘THE SUN ON THE HILL’
●	2026 – FINALIST – ‘(IT WAS NEVER) YOU AND I’
●	2025 – FINALIST – ‘I STILL LOVE YOU EVERYDAY’
●	2025 – FINALIST – ‘THE BARRIER’
●	2024 – FINALIST – ‘ADDICTED’
●	2022 – FINALIST – ‘TODAY, CHANGES’
●	2022 – FINALIST – ‘WHO NEEDS YOU’



Cameron is a multi-instrumentalist inspired by 70s rock, funk, pop, and soul.

Cameron often performs as a solo artist playing piano or guitar and singing. As a solo artist, he has played all around Auckland at venues such as Auckland Town Hall, Kāhui St Davids, Bruce Mason Centre, among many others. Through Play It Strange, Cameron has had the opportunity to play some of these venues as well as attend many concerts, soundchecks, and many studio sessions. Play It Strange opportunities have provided Cameron the chance to meet Aotearoa music legends such as Neil Finn, Bic Runga, and Bret McKenzie.

This year, Play It Strange hosted a fundraiser concert at Tuning Fork for the Waiata Māori songwriting competition with Cameron performing alongside artists Paige, Nat Hutton, Rebel Reid, Salem Mahia, and Nikau Grace. This opportunity allowed Cameron to gain incredible performance experience and meet some of Aotearoa's most promising and exciting rising artists.



“Play It Strange has invariably changed my life and has given me the confidence and opportunity to pursue music as a lifelong career. Recording seven of my original songs in professional studios has allowed me to meet people I would never have had the chance to otherwise and has had such a profound effect on who I am as a person. I cannot overstate the importance of Play It Strange for me personally and I will always be deeply grateful for all of the wonderful opportunities that it has provided me with.”

CAMERON BEATTIE



SALEM MĀHIA

●	2026 - FINALIST - 'A SONG ABOUT FLOWERS'
●	2026 - FINALIST - 'HEART OF STONE'
●	2025 - WINNER - 'A GIRL NAMED ABIGAIL'
●	2025 - FINALIST - 'A SYMPTOM OF MAN'S FAILURE'
●	2025 - FINALIST - 'KA PŌ, KA AO, KA AWATEA'
●	2024 - FINALIST - 'A FALSE DISPOSITION'
●	2023 - FINALIST - 'DRIFT BY'



“Play It Strange has completely changed my music career. It's opened me up to so many new experiences and I have met so many incredible people who will impact my career exponentially. I owe so much to Play It Strange and their entire team for giving me as many opportunities as they have.”

SALEM MĀHIA

Salem is a multi-instrumentalist and has done a lot for a 17 year old artist.

Salem mainly plays by himself, playing guitar and piano while he sings. He was lead singer and guitarist in his former Neo-Pop/Soul band "IWI". While being a part of Play It Strange Salem has performed at many venues such as Big Fan, The Tuning Fork and Auckland Art Gallery. He has also recorded an album as a solo project with Play It Strange judge Noema Te Hau III and Finn Mclellan on mixing, with some of his classmates from singing and playing alongside him.

Through Play It Strange, Salem worked with JBL earlier in the year to promote their Bandbox Trio, and has performed at many Play it Strange gigs and shows.



ANABELLE TUATO'O



●	2026 – FINALIST – 'TE KOHU'
●	2026 – FINALIST – 'OVER THINKING'
●	2026 – FINALIST – 'NEVER FELT THIS WAY BEFORE' FT LOUIE COMPTON
●	2025 – FINALIST – 'I CAN'T STOP THE RIVER'
●	2024 – FINALIST – 'HOARDER'

Alofau is a musician and songwriter who performs solo, as well as in a jazz duo and a series of pop-up bands including a wāhine Māori band called TEINA. For the 2026 Play It Strange showcase performance, Alofau will be joined by Ngā Nanekōti, who she met at the Play It Strange Matariki Songwriting Workshop earlier this year and love jamming together.

With Play It Strange she performed at a Youthtown event in 2024, attended Matariki Waiata workshops in 2025 and 2026, as well as both years' Annual Showcase workshops. Through Play It Strange, Anabelle was inspired by attending Bic Runga's soundcheck, and had the amazing experience of being a guest artist on 95bFM for Fancy New Band in 2025. Being a finalist with Play It Strange allowed her to record 4 times at Roundhead Studios and once at Big Fan, with, to quote Anabelle, "stunningly good sound engineers."

●
"Coming from Te Tai Tokerau, experiences like the ones I have gained through Play It Strange have made me realise how much bigger the world of music is. Play It Strange is way more than a series of competitions, it's a support network and the ongoing welcome and opportunities that I see continuing to be offered to alumni are amazing. Without Play It Strange I would never have met such talented and generous people or had the opportunities to ask people about how they make a life for themselves in music."

ANABELLE TUATO'O / ALOFAU



Charles is multi-talented and his artist projects span many genres. As a soloist, 'En Passant', Charles raps while often playing piano. He is one half of Lev0l Y, a rap and EDM duo, and is co-vocalist in the 7-piece Polynesian/ Asian metal-hiphop band Top Shelf. Through Play It Strange, Charles has performed on stage at Spark Arena with Top Shelf, on stage at Big Fan and Kahui St Davids as Lev0l Y, and attended many concerts and backstage concert soundchecks.

Earlier this year Charles was part of our Music Month collaboration with JBL, and has represented Play It Strange on the red carpet this year at both the Aotearoa Music Awards and Pacific Music Awards, bringing his natural charm, energy and interviewing skills to conversations with some of Aotearoa's biggest music stars. Charles began studying music at Auckland University earlier this year.

CHARLES LIA

- 2025 - FINALIST - 'CAST ME AWAY'
- 2023 - FINALIST - 'KING'S PERSPECTIVE'
- 2023 - FINALIST - 'READ THE LETTER'



SIENNA FITZGERALD

- 2026 - FINALIST - 'CLARITY'
- 2026 - FINALIST - 'LIKE LOVE FORBIDS'
- 2025 - WINNER - 'SWEETNESS'
- 2025 - FINALIST - 'LET IT DRIVE'
- 2024 - FINALIST - 'WHAT PEOPLE WANT'
- 2024 - FINALIST - 'THE WIRE'



"Play It Strange has changed my life for the better. It has given me an outlet for my songwriting and opportunities that I could never have imagined. I am so grateful for all they have done and the amazing motivation they provide these high school kids with, it is a truly amazing organisation."

SIENNA FITZGERALD

Sienna is a solo artist whose songwriting leans into indie-folk pop. She combines meaningful lyricism and acoustic accompaniment to create impactful music.

Through Play It Strange she has had professional recording studio experience 6 times in 3 years, performed on stage at the Tuning Fork, Kāhui St David's church, and attended events and soundchecks for the Aotearoa Music Awards and Homegrown Festival. Through coming first in the Junior Competition in 2025, she was given amazing opportunities like radio play on bFm, a masterclass with Louis Baker and multiple interviews to help her boost engagement around the country.

COMPETITION JUDGES 2026

Meet the Judges.

We are immensely privileged to have our songwriting competitions judged by some of the most respected and talented artists in Aotearoa's music industry. Every single submission is listened to by multiple judges, offering their expertise and insights to uncover the next generation of music legends.



Mike Chunn CNZM

Founder of Play It Strange and legendary musician and former Split Enz member. For the past 23 years, Mike has listened to every single Play It Strange submission – over 8,000 songs.



Gin Wigmore

A household name for over a decade, Gin Wigmore has released four albums to critical acclaim, with her first album release 'Holy Smoke' currently certified 4x Platinum and her second 'Gravel & Wine' 2x Platinum. Her hit "Oh My" took over airwaves across Aotearoa and was certified Gold after 10 weeks on the NZ charts.



Bret McKenzie

Bret McKenzie is a Grammy and Academy Award winning artist most well known for his band Flight of the Conchords and their TV show that brought huge international success. Bret released his solo album Songs Without Jokes in 2022 and recently wrote music for A Minecraft Movie.



Tom Scott

From Home Brew to @Peace, Average Rap Band, and Avantdale Bowling Club, Tom Scott is an era-defining Aotearoa hip-hop artist. His work has been shortlisted for the Taite Music Prize six times (a record) and he's won Best Rap Album with Home Brew and Album of the Year with Avantdale Bowling Club.



Kaylee Bell

Kaylee Bell is the Most Streamed Female Country Artist in Australasia, has charted on the US billboard and won major international awards and multiple AMA's. She supported Ed Sheeran on his sold-out stadium shows, before releasing her #1 hit "Boots N All."



Deva Mahal

A multi-year APRA Silver Scroll finalist, Grammy-winning collaborator, and performer at the 2021 Biden/Harris inauguration, Deva's music is powerful, purposeful, and impossible to forget. Deva has played legendary stages from Carnegie Hall to SXSW and the Montreal Jazz Festival.



**Shaan Singh
(Drax Project)**

Shaan Singh is the lead singer and saxophonist for one of Aotearoa's biggest bands, Drax Project. Their triple-platinum smash hit "Woke Up Late" has been streamed over 100 million times and with countless AMA's under their belt, the band have also opened for huge acts such as Ed Sheeran, Lorde, Christina Aguilera and Camila Cabello.



Boh Runga

Iconic Aotearoa singer-songwriter, and both the frontwoman and guitarist of hit band stellar* and a successful solo artist. The band have scored chart-topping songs and won multiple Aotearoa Music Awards, helping shape kiwi pop in the 2000s and inspiring artists ever since.



Jordyn with a Why

Winner of Best Female Artist at the 2023 Waiata Māori Awards, the 2024 APRA Maioha Award for her waiata “He Rei Niho,” and Best Pacific Music Album at the 2025 Pacific Music Awards Jordyn with a Why is an artist with a mission to share waiata reo with the world and has had 8 songs hit the NZ Top 20 Charts!



**Jennie Skulander
(Devilskin)**

Jennie Skulander is the lead singer of metal band Devilskin, who have scored 4 #1 albums – one of which went platinum – and was awarded Best Rock Artist (2017) and People's Choice (2025) at the Aotearoa Music Awards.



Cassie Henderson

In 2025 Cassie reached the finals of The Voice Australia, won an AMA for Best Pop Artist, and had two long-running #1 radio singles in NZ. She has headlined national tours, played major festivals, and supported international acts across Australia and NZ.



Noema Te Hau III

Noema is a proud Ngāti Porou, award-winning artist, producer, songwriter and musician. He's worked with top Kiwi artists like Paige, Alayna, Troy Kingi, Kaylee Bell, Anna Coddington and MOHI, and received the APRA Silver Scroll in 2024 and APRA Maioha Award.



Sam V

Pacific R&B artist Sam V has won Back-to-Back-to-Back-to-Back Best R&B-Soul Artist awards at the Pacific Music Awards in 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025. A noted singer, songwriter and performer, Sam V's captivating vocal execution and musicality continues to distinguish himself as a trailblazer and pioneer of Pacific R&B in the national and global landscapes.



Ria Hall

Ria is a blazing force in Aotearoa music, with a #1 record, an APRA Silver Scroll win, and multiple NZ chart-topping hits. Her music tackles both political and personal stories, cementing her as one of Aotearoa's most powerful voices.



Melodownz

Avondale MC, rapper and poet Melodownz started his career in his West Auckland bedroom, composing reggae-tinged hip hop rhymes and raps inspired by his Samoan/Pākehā upbringing and community. Melodownz was awarded Most Promising Artist at the 2019 Pacific Music Awards and nominated for Breakthrough Artist of the Year at the 2020 Aotearoa Music Awards.



RIIKI REID

Ria is a blazing force in Aotearoa music, with a #1 record, an APRA Silver Scroll win, and multiple NZ chart-topping hits. Her music tackles both political and personal stories, cementing her as one of Aotearoa's most powerful voices.



EDYONTHEBEAT

Edy is a music producer, mix engineer, artist manager and content creator that you might recognise from his TikTok live streams, which have gained him over 358K followers on socials and surpassing 2M+ monthly content engagements across his platforms. His popular studio sessions have earned interactions from Timbaland, Charlie Puth, Ty Dolla \$ign, Kehlani, Brandy, Jessie Reyez and Tone Stith to name a few.



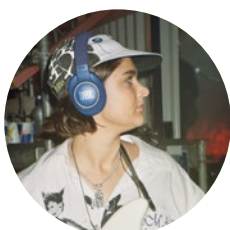
Frankie Venter

A Play It Strange alumni from 2022, Frankie received a personal invite by Coldplay to open two sold-out Eden Park shows and wrapped up 2025 with a 12-date nationwide tour. She recently toured the USA, announced her first international festival in Sydney, and is set to headline a 7-show tour across Aotearoa. Frankie was also nominated for Best Pop Artist at the 2025 AMA's.



Paige

Paige is an award-winning Platinum singer-songwriter. Tāmaki Makaurau. Alongside being awarded 'Best Māori Female Solo Artist' at the 2021 Waiata Māori Music Awards, Paige has been nominated for twelve Aotearoa Music Awards, including Single of the Year in 2026. With over 80 million streams to her name, Paige also works with us at Play It Strange as our Operations & Marketing Manager.



**Nat Hutton
(There's A Tuesday)**

Nat is the front-woman and songwriter of Ōtautahi-born indie band There's A Tuesday, who have played international headline shows and supported artists like Conan Gray, BENEE, Spacey Jane, Julia Jacklin and The Beths. The band have been APRA Silver Scroll Top 5 finalists twice, nominated for Breakthrough Artist of the Year at the 2022 AMA's and Single of the Year in 2026. Nat joined us at school visits across the motu this year!



Muroki

With over 50 million streams to his name, Muroki was the first artist signed to BENEE's label Olive records. Muroki has been praised by Elton John, performed at Aotearoa's biggest music festivals, toured Australia and performed in LA and Berlin. An award-winning platinum artist, he's collaborated with LEISURE, RIIKI REID and BENEE, and is one of NZ's most exciting artists.

1:1



Mentoring Sessions

All our competition winners received 1:1 mentoring sessions with one of our esteemed judges:

MONIQUE MAGDADARO & GIN WIGMORE



CAMERON BEATTIE & BRET MCKENZIE



LUKE VAN WYK & MELODOWNZ



MEADOW MIA & BRET MCKENZIE



PERFORMANCES AND AIRPLAY

Studios to Stage.

From a landmark new train station to the streets of K Road, Play It Strange alumni have been out in the community this year, performing, earning and growing as artists. We are on track to have facilitated 100 paid performance opportunities for rangatahi by the end of 2026! A fundraising concert at The Tuning Fork also hit its \$10,000 goal for our 2026 Waiata Māori Competition, helping support more young songwriters in Aotearoa.

Karanga-a-Hape Station Open Day, Launch Day & K Road's First Thursdays

Thousands of visitors flocked to Central Auckland for a first glimpse of the new Karanga-a-Hape train station, with Play It Strange alumni helping set the scene with 16 performances, including a set from Salem Māhia, winner of our 2026 National Songwriting Competition. 14 alumni then performed at the CRL launch day!

Since August, First Thursdays on K Road has transformed the street into a vibrant monthly celebration of music, culture and community. Our incredible alumni have been part of the action, with 6 alumni taking to the streets every month to share their music with the public and bring K Road to life.

These paid performance opportunities give young artists more than a stage - they provide a chance to earn income from their music, grow in confidence, sharpen their live performance skills and gain valuable professional experience in the industry.

**BLAKE
LEWIS**



**AVISHI
JAIN**



**MILO
JONES**



**BELLA
GRAHAM**



**LUKE
SHAW**



**REBEL
REID**

Play It Strange: LIVE at the Tuning Fork

We held a one-night-only fundraising concert, "Play It Strange: Live at The Tuning Fork" in August, to raise funds for our 2026 Waiata Māori Competition.

Thanks to a combination our ticket sales, merchandise sales, generous donations and raffles we hit our fundraising goal of \$10,000!

The evening featured intimate performances from acclaimed Aotearoa artists Paige, Nat Hutton (There's A Tuesday), and Play It Strange alumni Nikau Grace and Rebel Reid, alongside fellow alumni Lily Stiven, Salem Māhia and Cameron Beattie.

"This was a celebration of what happens when somebody gives a young songwriter a microphone, a stage and, perhaps most importantly, somebody who believes in them. It was about showing what can happen when young people are given somewhere to start. This wasn't just a concert. It was an investment in the next generation of Aotearoa songwriters."

PAUL MARSHALL, MUSIC JOURNALIST

Shortland Street Partnership

Building upon our partnership with New Zealand's longest running soap, for the second year in a row all music featured on the show is from Play It Strange alumni. Shortland Street receives over 2.75 million streams worldwide each year and provides an amazing platform for our rangatahi to showcase their authentic voices and talents, and support this iconic show to tell their stories.

One student even had her song featured on her 16th birthday!



Radioplay!

From airplay to interviews, Play It Strange artists have been making waves on radio across Aotearoa! Junior Competition winner Luke Van Wyk even had his winning rap track played on Flava Drive after a day of mentorship with MELODOWNZ!



**LUKE
VAN WYK &
MELODOWNZ
@ FLAVA**

Behind the Music.

We want rangatahi to dream big. Giving them opportunities to attend some of Aotearoa's biggest music events allows them to experience the industry from an entirely different perspective. They get to see the many different career pathways within music, learn how major events come together, and gain confidence by seeing how established artists approach their own soundchecks and performances. Ngā mihi nui to BurgerFuel for making sure our rangatahi never go hungry at our events and outings!

Aotearoa Music Awards

Alumni attending the Aotearoa Music Awards soundcheck and event night. Alumni Alaska and Charles were also interviewing celebrities on the red carpet on behalf of Play It Strange!

SYNTHONY in the Domain

Our friends at Duco invited 25 students to the SYNTHONY in the Domain soundcheck, heading up on the stage for a Q&A with the composer, before attending the festival the following day.

Homegrown in Hamilton

For the first time this year, we took 30 Play It Strange alumni to the Jim Beam Homegrown soundchecks in Hamilton! A highlight for the students was chatting to Six60 after their rehearsal.

Pacific Music Awards

Not only did our alumni attend the Pacific Music Awards soundcheck and concert, but three alumni from Southern Cross Campus performed at the PMA Finalist Announcement earlier in the year. Charles and Alaska were back on the blue carpet interviewing celebs once again!

Pōneke Songwriting Workshop

In March, 14 Play It Strange entrants from schools across Pōneke spent the day with Oscar, Grammy and Academy Award-winning songwriter, Bret McKenzie in a songwriting workshop. They ran through songwriting exercises to build their skills and then all wrote a song called "Summer doesn't feel like summer anymore" together – all about the experience of living in Wellington!



1. Pacific Music Awards
2. Homegrown in Hamilton
3. Pōneke Songwriting Workshop

OUT & ABOUT IN SCHOOLS

From Northland to Dunedin



“Bella had a wonderful time and really enjoyed meeting the artists and listening to the sound check. It was great for her to have the opportunity to see what can be possible for singer/songwriters in Aotearoa New Zealand. I call it “hope you can touch” - it can feel like performing in public is a big impossible thing, especially as a teenager, but being able to get a sense of it up close was so valuable for broadening her horizons, and giving a sense of what might be possible in the future.”

PARENT OF ALUMNI



“Thank you so much again for this experience. It was sooooo motivating for me to see the time and effort that goes into these performances. It's great to see support for emerging artists in such a real and meaningful way, so this was a really valuable experience for me.

Being able to watch these artists behind the scenes - seeing the imperfections and the work that goes into their performance was really motivating and made everything feel more achievable you know. It reminded me how much dedication it takes to reach that level, and now I genuinely feel I can keep pushing toward performing on stages like Homegrown one day.”

ALUMNI ZAC MCLEAN

Our team and competition judges have visited almost 50 schools and more than 1,500 students across Aotearoa this year, connecting with rangatahi, sharing conversations about songwriting, breaking into the music industry, and getting your music out there.

Perhaps more importantly, we have had the chance to engage with rangatahi who weren't aware of the opportunities Play It Strange could offer them. Others didn't have the confidence to enter one of our songwriting competitions until we visited. Many students felt empowered to enter after a visit, including Dornia who went on to win third place in our Junior Songwriting Competition!

From Kerikeri High School in Northland, down to Taieri College in Dunedin, a Play It Strange team member (and performer in their own right) has been accompanied by judges including Sam V, Nat Hutton and Noema Te Hau III, on a mission to spark creativity!



“Kia ora e hoa, was a very special visit, your artists were just so engaging with our Rangatahi, genuine in their rationale of pathways through music. And the icing on the cake was their outstanding live performances (walking the walk).”

MUSIC TEACHER
ONEHUNGA HIGH SCHOOL



Nat Hutton at Westlake Girls

PERFORMANCE SUMMARY

PLAY IT STRANGE PERFORMANCE TRACKER

COMPETITIONS, SONGS & RECORDINGS		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
NATIONAL COMP. YEAR 9-13	SONGS ENTERED	220	270	284	320	317	376	356	352	374	383	474	503
	SONGS AWARDED	45	50	64	45	60	54	91	75	60	63	74	66
PEACE PROJECT	SONGS ENTERED	36	43	44	66	76	162	120	125	132	160	194	171
	SONGS AWARDED	2	2	2	2	5	5	8	11	44	45	65	60
JUNIOR COMP. YEAR 9-11	SONGS ENTERED	-	-	-	-	-	63	144	142	146	161	182	176
	SONGS AWARDED	-	-	-	-	-	20	49	65	44	45	65	45
PREVIOUS COMPETITIONS	SONGS ENTERED	19	29	39	32	36	53	-	-	-	-	-	-
	SONGS AWARDED	1	1	1	1	1	5	4	-	-	-	-	-
WAIATA MĀORI COMPETITION	WAIATA ENTERED					29	-	-	-	-	18	26	40
	WAIATA AWARDED					3	-	-	-	-	6	5	9
TOTAL SONGS WRITTEN AND ENTERED		275	342	367	418	429	654	620	619	652	722	876	890
TOTAL SONGS AWARDED		48	53	67	48	69	81	155	151	148	159	209	180
STRANGE ART COMPETITION	TOTAL ENTERED								22	41	66	108	156
	TOTAL WINNERS								1	1	4	4	4



“To all the amazing people at Play It Strange, I just wanted to say how grateful I am but also how grateful all the other people I know who have entered one of the competitions are. Your amazing work does not go unrecognised and it is truly life changing. I have been so blessed to be able to place in the Peace Project and experience an amazing studio opportunity. Thank you guys so much for all you do.”

2026 COMPETITION FINALIST



“Play It Strange has opened up so many opportunities and experiences for me that I will be forever grateful for. I think about it all the time where I wouldn’t be if the funders weren’t there to support this incredible organisation. So lucky we are.”

2026 COMPETITION FINALIST



THANK YOU!

OUR SUPPORTERS

PRINCIPAL PARTNERS



PARTNERS



SUPPORTERS



SUPPORTERS IN KIND



FRIENDS OF PLAY IT STRANGE



PATRONS

Grant & Sandra Biggar
Paul & Liz Blackwell
Lindsay Cowley
Neil & Sharon Finn
Andrew Ferrier &

Danielle Guitard
Terry & Jo Gould
Sonja & Glenn Hawkins
Jane Haines
Greg Hinton

Peter Macky
Bill Moran
Nancie Plested
Anthony Quirk

David Richwhite
Matt & Leigh Williams
Fran Wyborn

A PARENTS EXPERIENCE



“To say that Play It Strange is life-changing for some young people is not an exaggeration. I have nothing but praise for the organisation.

The opportunities that have come about because of Play It Strange include some unbelievable moments for our family: like recording in professional studios on multiple occasions with the same audio engineers utilised by the best in the industry; meeting some of New Zealand's biggest music names during sound checks, at the studios, or at the Music Awards; having the chance to perform at the Town Hall at the national showcase; attending workshops with experts in the industry; and receiving the opportunity to enter multiple times a year to refine their song-writing skills. They have both had paid gigs through Play It Strange, as well. They have also received free tickets to at least 7 shows and sound checks.

As the winner of this year's Peace Song competition, Cameron was given fantastic prizes, such as getting to work with members of the Auckland Philharmonia, having mentoring sessions with Sacha Vee and Bret McKenzie, being gifted Music Works vouchers, and a brilliant JBL speaker. These have been incredibly appreciated. There is no way for us to know the monetary value of all these experiences, but we suspect it would be somewhere between \$15,000–\$20,000 across the 8 recording sessions so far and the other memorable events. And the truth is, we could never have done that for them. These opportunities were actually priceless.

But most of all, what Play It Strange has done is help them to see that they are good enough to pursue music as a career. It has helped them to see that this is a realistic prospect for them both.

Music is a scary industry for those outside it. Play It Strange opened the door so that we can see it is full of the most interesting, determined, team-oriented, creative people, and that my boys belong there.

To Stephanie, Mike, and all the beautiful staff we have encountered through Play It Strange over the years, please accept our most sincere thanks. To those who have sponsored Play It Strange, I extend my heartfelt thanks. You are all making a bigger difference in the lives of others than you can know.”

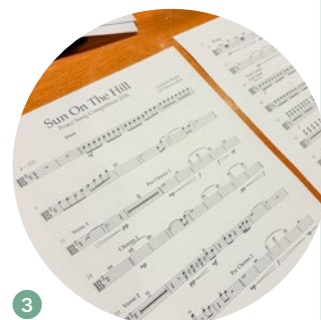
MIRANDA (MOTHER OF ALUMNI)



1



2

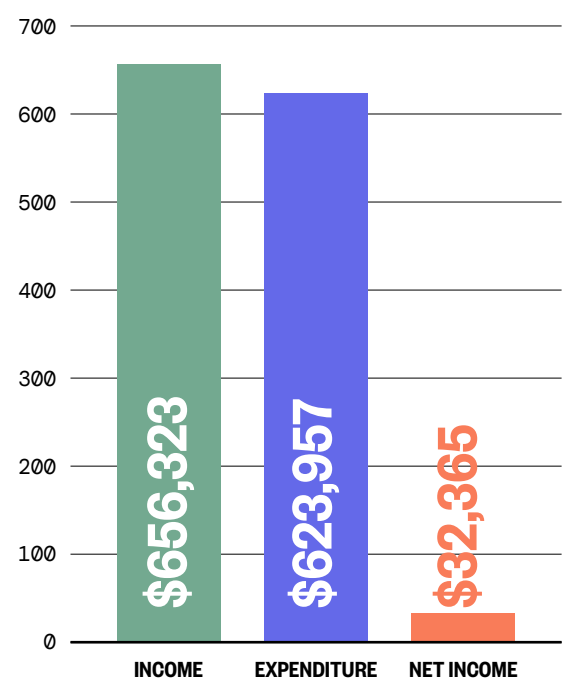


3

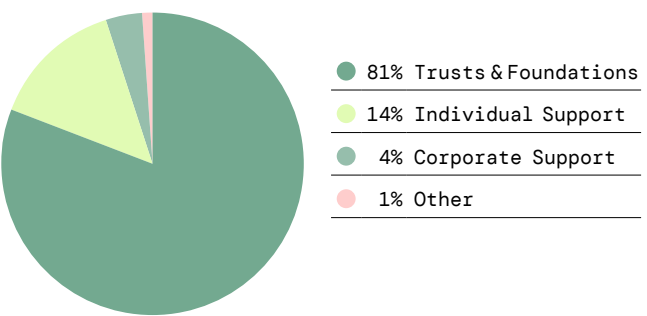
1. Cameron performing at Play It Strange: LIVE at The Tuning Fork
2. Cameron recording his winning song at Roundhead Studios.
3. Cameron worked with composer James Cullen as part of “Sun on the hill” winning Peace Project; and was accompanied by a quarter of philharmonic musicians thanks to our partnership with Auckland Philharmonic.

2025 FINANCES

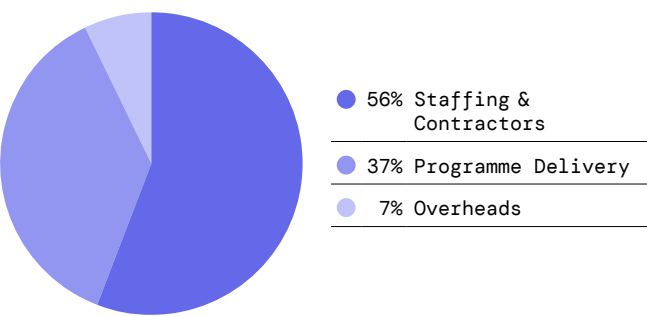
FINANCIAL SUMMARY



WHERE OUR INCOME COMES FROM



WHERE OUR MONEY GOES



EXPENSES BREAKDOWN

Thanks to the lovely team at APRA AMCOS NZ kindly providing office space free of charge and other generous organisations providing services to us at no charge also, Play It Strange has been able to reduce our expenses down to predominantly only staffing, contractor and competition recording costs.

**PLEASE HELP US SHAPE
THE FUTURE OF MUSIC IN
AOTEAROA.**

To donate, scan the QR code.
Request an invoice by emailing
info@PlayItStrange.org.nz

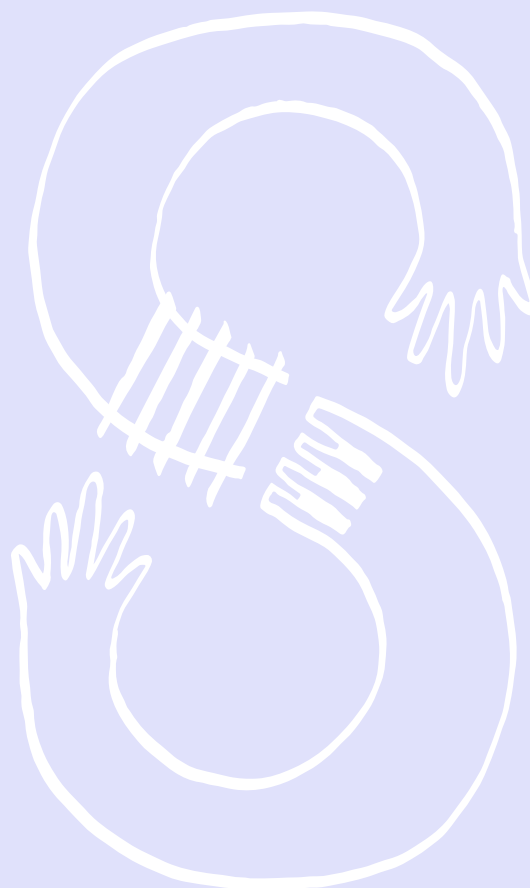


SUPPORT US

At Play It Strange, we believe in the power of music to transform lives. Our mission is to support and encourage young New Zealand songwriters to write, record, and perform their own songs. We know our mahi provides meaningful pathways into music while fostering creativity, confidence, wellbeing and self-expression.

Our programmes reach students from diverse backgrounds across Aotearoa, including many who would otherwise have limited access to professional music opportunities. By removing barriers to participation and celebrating original songwriting, Play It Strange gives young people a platform to tell their stories, develop their talents and build lasting connections within New Zealand's music community.

To do so, we rely on the generous support of individuals, organisations, and the community.



WAYS YOU CAN SUPPORT PLAY IT STRANGE

**DONATE
THROUGH
OUR WEBSITE**

**BECOME
A PATRON**

**COMMERCIAL
PARTNERSHIPS**

**PERFORMANCE
OPPORTUNITIES
FOR ALUMNI**

**IN-KIND
SUPPORT**

Please head to our website or email info@playitstrange.org.nz to find out more.

**PLAY IT
STRANGE**

 **PLAYITSTRANGE.ORG.NZ**