

SONG
STARS
VOL 2
FEAT
WAREHU GRANT (HALF TIME)
THEIA/TE KAAHU

INTRODUCTION

**Kia ora koutou katoa, and welcome to
Songstarters Volume 2!**

I'm thrilled to be welcoming you to the second edition of the Songstarters zine, brought to you by the NZ Music Commission | Te Reo Reka o Aotearoa.

Writing lyrics is often a very personal experience, and it can feel really daunting to share your song with others.

But as one of our featured artists says, "Be brave and don't fear being different."

This issue we have two more incredible artists explaining how a waiata (song) of theirs came to be - **Theia** (who also performs as TE KAAHU, her te reo Māori project), and **Wairehu Grant** (aka te reo post-punk act Half/Time).

So thank you for picking up this zine and reading. I hope Theia and Wairehu's beautiful stories about creating their waiata helps you to feel inspired, and motivated to write more waiata of your own.

Happy songwriting!

Ngā mihi, Jess Bailey

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Thanks to Theia and Wairehu Grant

www.nzmusic.org.nz

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THEIA TE KAAHU



Theia makes unapologetic alt-pop, which pushes boundaries sonically and lyrically.

The singer and songwriter from New Zealand has been making waves since she first emerged in 2016 with her break-out hit 'Roam'. Amassing close to 15 million streams on Spotify alone and receiving commercial radio play in New Zealand, Australia and Asia, 'Roam' earned Theia a loyal fanbase across the globe. It also paved the way for her self-titled debut EP (2018); the NOT YOUR PRINCESS EP (2019) and tours in New Zealand and Australia.



Photo: Frances Carter

In early 2020, Theia upped the ante with the release of her high-energy mixtape 99% ANGEL, which drew praise from the likes of Billboard Magazine. She revealed the mixtape with a headlining slot at Sydney Mardi Gras' Heaps Gay party just weeks before the COVID pandemic was declared, sending her back to New Zealand for lockdown.

The album received a multitude of nominations in the Rolling Stone Awards, the NZ Music Awards (AMAs), the Silver Scrolls, the Waiata Māori Music Awards and the Student Radio Network Awards, and is a finalist for the 2023 Taite Music Prize.

With a string of shows and international travel thwarted, Theia took time out and focused on composing songs in te reo Māori. It led to her launching the side project TE KAAHU and its debut album 'Te Kaahu O Rangī', which was released to critical acclaim in 2022. The album received a multitude of nominations in the Rolling Stone Awards, the NZ Music Awards (AMAs), the Silver Scrolls, the Waiata Māori Music Awards and the Student Radio Network Awards.

In the second half of 2022, Theia toured TE KAAHU throughout New Zealand and also played two shows in Australia, while simultaneously writing new material for the debut Theia album.

Theia has now revealed the first singles from the album - the exquisite piano ballad 'Pray 4 Me' and the fast and furious alt-pop banger, 'Crucified By U'.

It all firms up Theia's reputation as a respected songwriter and performer and shines a light on her unwavering commitment to making music that challenges and confronts.

Theia's ability to seamlessly move between her two music projects, whilst continuing to reach audiences in both and deliver powerful music with depth is testament to her formidable talents. She is a true force and one of New Zealand's most compelling acts.



Theia

love,
Theia
xo

I was sold in the spring, i was
a little child
A demon released, they
wanted meek and mild
A misfit, this sickness, i
wanna die
Resist it, u did this
Eye for an eye
Don't pray for me
Or put me under ur spell
I'm just a girl
Living in a savage world
Living in a savage world
I got a tattoo when i was
eighteen
U thought that i was
possessed, u tried to change
me
Tie a rope in a noose just to
feel a little
Don't pray for me
Or put me under ur spell
I'm just a girl
Living in a savage world
Living in a savage world
U can sink ur teeth in
It's never gonna save me
Don't pray for me
Mother u didn't want me
But I'm still ur girl
Living in a savage world
Living in a savage world
Living in a savage world

Pray
4 Me

PRAY 4 ME

'Pray 4 Me' is the first song I wrote on my debut record (not out yet btw). It was never intended to be released as a single and it was certainly not the very first track I planned to reveal from this body of work. But after sitting on it for more than two years, pondering over the reasons I wrote it and then playing around with a bunch of production ideas and tweaking a few lyrics, I fell deeply in love with it and felt compelled to go out with this as the first single - even though it defies all the so-called industry rules about what makes a single a single (Is it radio friendly? Is it feel good and up-tempo? Blah blah blah).

Not counting the songs I've written for my TE KAAHU project, or co-written with others for their own projects, 'Pray 4 Me' is the first ballad I've written for Theia. My last mixtape - 99% Angel - was full throttle, in-your-face alt-pop. Nothing gentle about it. So, when my manager suggested in lockdown 2020 that I should do a Zoom writing session with an LA-based writer, Ben Wylen and write something completely different to the other stuff I'd been working on - 'maybe a piano ballad?', she suggested, I wasn't sure.

Not only had I never met Ben, I'd never written over Zoom, so I went into the session with trepidation and no expectations, other than the expectation that I would despise writing remotely in the age of Covid and that I'd face an uncertain future (because at the time no-one knew what the heck was coming next) sitting in my bedroom writing songs on my own. Which isn't at all bad - I've written many songs alone in my room. But human interaction in the writing process can be a less lonely place and if you get the pairing right, it's a truly rewarding experience. And so, my segue into my first lesson in 101 songwriting - sometimes when you push yourself out of your comfort zone, you stumble across something magic.



Going into the session, I knew what I wanted to write about and the first hour was spent as whakawhanaungatanga and just chatting a bit about ourselves. I immediately felt comfortable with Ben, which is no easy feat when you're 10,000km apart. But we got deep and meaningful quickly and as soon as we'd established that we were taking up my manager's challenge of writing a piano ballad. We got to first putting down melodies and structuring the song, me writing lyrics and Ben playing piano. I made my notes app shareable with Ben so that he could see what lyrics I was coming up with as we went and he'd make suggestions too. I'd freestyle melodies and experiment with mumble toplines structuring the waiata.

We wrote 'Pray 4 Me' in less than two hours. And that was that. For two years, I sat with this deeply personal song about being a Māori girl raised in a conservative Christian household and the struggles of pairing that world with the fiercely independent, sassy 'wahine maaia' that I was finding myself becoming. Below that is another lyrical layer of personal meaning and childhood trauma that belongs only to me. This layer I choose not to share publicly, because in all that I do creatively, I also believe it's important to hold some of it sacred.

The next phase of bringing 'Pray 4 Me' to life was probably the trickiest part of the process. And that's lesson #2 in 101 songwriting – Don't rush. Take your time. Perseverance may pay off. For so long, I wasn't sure how to make this little song, which was so far away from my normal alt-pop vibe, feel like mine. Lyrically it was so personal and so about me, it didn't feel right to give it to someone else to sing. So, I agonised over what sort of production it needed to feel like me.

Because it was written at the same time, I was writing my debut TE KAAHU album, which was this beautiful process of writing at home and then visiting Jol Mulholland in his studio when Covid permitted, experimenting with different



instruments and sounds, I knew that I wanted to apply the same principles to 'Pray 4 Me'. This is such a different way to how all my earlier Theia compositions had come together, which was pretty much sitting in a room with a producer at a computer and feeling the pressure to pump out a song in a day for fear of racking up astronomical studio costs.

I knew that I wanted the song to be vocally led and that everything else needed to take a back-seat to those vocals and lyrics. Again, pretty much the opposite to what I'd previously done with Theia, when production was so front and centre, you risked losing the power of the lyricism and vocal.

Together Jol and I worked on ideas for 'Pray 4 Me' over a matter of months. We'd get together and play around with a few ideas, I'd go home and then listen some more – usually driving around at night in the car listening to different versions. It was by chance that we ended up with the choir-like harmonies throughout. Initially the song ended with just this sweet 15-20 second choir harmony. I loved it where it was but then thought, let me hear it as the intro. Then gradually, I kept moving it along to the point where we had this haunting acapella intro leading into these ethereal harms, which for me capture the spiritual nature of what I'm singing about.

I love where we settled on with 'Pray 4 Me'. I know that it's not what people have come to expect from a Theia song. I know it's not your standard radio/streaming hit. But I'll leave you with my third and final lesson in 101 songwriting – Stay true to yourself. Write songs that mean something to you and don't cave to the pressure to turn them into something that just fits the popular or trending mould for now. Be brave and don't fear being different.

Xoxoxo Theia



WAIREHU GRANT HALF/TIME

Half/Time is a te ao Māori centred post-punk act started by Kirikiriroa based musician Wairehu Grant (Ngāti Maniapoto) in 2020. Originally a solo act utilising drum machines and samples along with guitar and shouty vocals, Half/Time has now evolved into a three-piece act featuring Tāmaki Makaurau based musicians and DIY legends Ciara Bernstein on drums, and Cee (Te Rarawa, Ngāti Kahu ki Whangaroa) on bass guitar and vocals.



The kaupapa of Half/Time is one born out of the intergenerational resilience of Māori in Aotearoa. The waiata they perform seek to honour the history of resistance within Māori culture, to speak to the struggles of the current age, and to imagine ways forward both as individuals and as part of a community. In May 2023 Half/Time will be heading off on their first set of international shows in the UK kicking off with a showcase at FOCUS Wales, an international music festival hosted in Wrexham.



Photo: Chris Davis

SCARY STORIES (TO TELL WHEN YOU'RE DARK)

COME FIND US OUT WHERE THE INDUSTRIAL WASTE
MEETS RURAL RELIGIOUS REAL-ESTATE
IN EVERY HOME, BETWEEN EVERY FLOORBOARD
AND IN EVERY SILENCE
YOU'LL FIND US THERE
OUR VOICES DISTANT, AND OUR WORDS SOUND DIFFERENT
BUT STILL THEY MAKE IT THROUGH

COME FIND US OUT BENEATH THE TIDE
TE ~~PERENGA~~ PERENGA WAIRUA
WHERE THE SPIRITS NEED NOT HIDE
OUT PAST TE IKA-A-MĀUI
TOWARDS THE WAITING ARMS OF HAWAIKII
BETWEEN EACH HEAVING BREATH OF TE PĀPATA
YOU'LL FIND US THERE
TE KORE, TE PŌ, TE AO MARAMA, TE AO WAIRUA
AROUND AND THEN BACK AGAIN

AND THOUGH OUR BONES ARE IN THESE WALLS } X 2
OUR HOMES ARE NOT OUR HOMES ANYMORE }

A DEAD TONGUE WRITHES NO MORE
EXCEPT WHEN IT DOES
IT WAKES EVERY TIME THAT WE SPEAK
EVERY TIME THAT WE SING, EVERY TIME THAT WE CALL
YES WE'RE IN THE CRACKS, WE'RE IN THE HALLS
WE'RE IN THE CORNERS OF YOUR EYES
AND WE'LL SEE YOU THERE, WE'LL SEE YOU THERE
WE'LL SEE YOU THERE

AND THOUGH OUR BONES ARE IN THESE WALLS } X 2
OUR HOMES ARE NOT OUR HOMES ANYMORE }


SCARY STORIES (to tell when you're dark)

The lyrics of 'Scary Stories' started out as a bunch of fragmented journal entries across several very tatty notebooks. There was one line in particular that I had been sitting on since before I started Half/Time back in 2020: "And though our bones are in these walls, our homes are not our homes anymore." Looking back through those notebooks I can see that I had scribbled that line down multiple times, clearly in the hopes that more lines would come to me so that I could flesh it out into a full song. At this point in time, I didn't have a melody in mind or even a general idea of how the song should sound, I just knew that I wanted to frame it around that line.

Most of the Half/Time tracks started out in much the same way. I would come up with one line that I really liked and couldn't let go of, scribble it down usually at some random time of night, then I would try build around it as a foundation. It wasn't until sometime in 2022 that I started to notice other notebook entries which seemed to fit alongside that initial line, such as the opening line: "Come find us out where the industrial waste meets rural religious real-estate" followed soon after by the opening line of the second verse: "Come find us out beneath the tide, Te Rerenga Wairua where the spirits need not hide."

What started to emerge from these lines as they slotted together was a ghost story, a distinctly Māori ghost story. This story was intertwined with my own personal journey of retracing my whakapapa, primarily my ancestors of Ngāti Maniapoto, which brought me inevitably to those who stood in defence of our homelands at the battle of Ōrākau in 1864. This battle consisted of 300 Māori men and women defending an unfinished pā site against over 1400 well-armed colonial soldiers.






Prior to 'Scary Stories' I had already written one other song about this event with my friend and now Half/Time's bass player Cee, a song simply titled: 'Ōrākau'. This initial track was written from my own perspective as a descendent of those who stood at Ōrākau and was centred around reminding myself who and where I come from. With 'Scary Stories' I wanted to do something slightly different, to write a song instead from the perspective of my tūpuna (ancestors) and to imagine what they might say to me, or perhaps what they may have already said to me.

At multiple points in my life my Mum has told me about the house we lived in when I was born. It was a small farmhouse just on the outskirts of Parawera just a short distance from Ōrākau. According to Mum a lot of weird things would happen in that house, and little baby Wairehu would occasionally point, stare and cry at particular corners of the house. Mum said there was always something about the way my eyes would lock onto particular spots in certain rooms, like I saw something or someone there. These stories used to creep me out when I was younger, but in recent years after learning more about the history of this whenua (land) I've started to reframe some of these memories. What if the ghosts in that house weren't there to scare me and were there instead to simply let me and my whānau know what had happened there. This line of thought was what guided me through the rest of the writing process for 'Scary Stories'.

In terms of the sound of this waiata I wanted to make something along the lines of a twisted story driven blues song. I've always been on a bit of a mission to find the ugliest sounding guitar chords possible and incorporate them in songs to build tension, and that was how I landed on the first chord for the intro and verse sections. I started



messing around with different inversions of a B chord, trying to find something that sounded vaguely menacing and suited the overall intent of the song. I find this process a lot like what I described earlier with starting lyrics from a single phrase, things often just start to fall into place once you have these central pillars propping everything up. From these starting points I started to think about how the musical elements could enhance certain lines in the lyrics. It made a lot of sense to have the "and though are bones are in these walls" line as a chorus section with big choppy chords, whereas the verse sections were a bit floatier to leave space for the words to be heard. Overall I knew I wanted the whole song to gradually build up and come to a huge sounding finale.

The full name of the song is a bit tongue in cheek. On one hand it's a reference to the classic book series 'Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark', on the other it's a bit of a play on the concept of telling a story which seems frightening at a surface level but has a deeper intention behind it. I went to great lengths to make both the music and lyrics of the track fit a particular mood, but the stories I've shared here about Ōrākau, my tūpuna and our first family home are what truly make this song for me. In setting out to write a song from the standpoint of those who came before me I feel that I've engaged in a kind of intergenerational collaboration. Which feels pretty spooky I guess...

*Ngā manaakitanga,
Wairehu Grant*

Tips: Keep a notepad or your phone's notes app handy whenever possible, and anytime you think of a phrase or even just a couple words that you like the sound of, write them down. Don't worry too much about forming a whole song right of the bat. After a period of doing this look over all the lines that you have, do any of these fit together? Does one spark any other ideas? What sort of musical sounds come to mind looking at these words? Be patient and something will happen.

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