



# MT VICTORIA

Historical Society News

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*Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays*

## Wellington Heritage Festival

Despite the weather doing its best to interrupt our guided walks, we ran two 'Hidden Corners of Mt Victoria'. The public walk was oversubscribed, as we collected interested passers-by (one now a member!).

The walk for members went from being oversubscribed to smaller numbers on the day. We did stand under our umbrellas for a few minutes but, once the shower had passed, it turned out to be great weather for a stroll. We finished with afternoon tea at David Lee's very hidden 1875 house, in Elizabeth Street, where he gave a fascinating talk about the house and his work on it – and we enjoyed his now-famous scones.



## New logo

We're pleased to report that, at last, we're making progress on developing a new logo. We have selected a designer and are so far very pleased with our choice. It's early stages, and we haven't got anything to share with you yet, but we're pretty excited about the direction we're heading in. We hope to share our proposed new logo with you early in the new year and will look forward to your feedback.

## New committee

Following the AGM, the MVHS committee remains the same; that is Joanna Newman Convenor, Jane O'Loughlin Secretary, Margaret Earle Treasurer, Alan Olliver and Rosemary Bromley committee members.

## Mt Victoria Recording Pioneer

At our AGM in September, we were treated to a multi-media presentation about the life and work of Alan Dunnage. Rosemary Bromley interviewed his daughter, Annette Dunnage-Roy, and interspersed the conversation with music, video and photographs. Now she has written up the story so that members who couldn't be there can enjoy it, and so that this story is recorded for posterity.

Alan Dunnage is described as a New Zealand recording pioneer by Chris Bourke in his book, *Blue Smoke: the lost dawn of New Zealand popular music 1918-1964*. Much of Dunnage's involvement in the music industry occurred when he lived in Mt Victoria in a recording studio he set up at 19-21 Elizabeth St.



## Mt Victoria Recording Pioneer

Born in 1916, Alan Dunnage grew up on a farm in Katikati. When his father died he took over the farm, but during the difficult days of the depression had to abandon it. He then made his way to Wellington and started an apprenticeship at the Radio Corporation of NZ (Radio Corp). This business had been set up by a Russian emigre, William Marks (Markov) in 1929. Marks used his electrical engineering qualifications to develop radios for domestic use. Soon after the first NZ radio programme was made in 1921 people clamoured to be able to bring the world's news and a variety of music into their home.

In 1933 Marks moved his business into large premises at 80-84 Courtenay Place. In 1937 Radio Corp set up Columbus Radio Centres in various parts of New Zealand to sell the radios and radiograms they made under the brand name *Columbus*. Alan Dunnage found a niche in this burgeoning industry and had the capacity to thrive in its midst.

Radio Corp also wanted to provide their customers with records to play on their appliances, but all records then had to be imported, and the British company HMV held fast to their distribution rights. It wasn't until after WWII that New Zealand set about developing its own recording industry.



Source: Sonic Recording Studios Ltd

Before then, musicians wanting to record had to travel to Sydney where there were recording studios and pressing plants to mass produce the records. Direct-to-disk recordings were made in NZ, but the finished product was only viable for a short time and not able to be mass produced.

By 1948, however, Radio Corp had sorted out a viable recording process and set up a recording studio at 262 Wakefield St. Under the record label *Tanza*, the following year they processed the first record wholly New Zealand made: *Blue Smoke* was written by Ruru Karaitiana, sung by Pixie Williams, and recorded, pressed and released in Wellington.

After witnessing, indeed no doubt contributing to, this ground-breaking industry Alan Dunnage left Radio Corp, and set up his *Island Bay Recording Studio* at 223 Clyde St, Island Bay. He also ran a shop there selling electrical appliances. Musicians would come to him to make demo tapes in the hope of these being accepted by record companies for mass production.

In the early fifties country music was very popular in New Zealand. A young Maori singer, Johnny Cooper, identified with the music of Gene Autry, an American actor known as the *Singing Cowboy*. Cooper became known as the *Maori Cowboy* and made his first recording at Alan Dunnage's studio in 1950 singing Gene Autry's song *Too Late*. HMV recognised Cooper's talent and popularity and signed him up for further recordings. In 1955 rock'n'roll was becoming a sensation in the US. HMV wanted to cash in on this craze and directed Cooper to record Bill Haley's *Rock Around the Clock* at Dunnage's studio. This was the first recording of a rock'n'roll song made in New Zealand.



Soon after the success of this recording Dunnage outgrew his studio in Island Bay. He purchased the conjoined houses at 19 and 21 Elizabeth St (built in 1902) and set about merging the ground floors of each into the *Sonic Recording Studios*.

Sand was poured down into the wall cavities for sound proofing so that passing traffic noise would not mar the recordings, especially the clatter of trams rumbling past. Annette has supplied the following description of her father's studio:

*The ground floors in both 19 and 21 Elizabeth St were gutted and the dividing firewall removed, but strong supported beams were inserted. The kitchen, dining and lounge area at the rear became the studio.*

Elizabeth St houses before renovation  
Source: Dunnage family

*A large burgundy coloured Turkish rug was lain on the matai floor and heavy full-length velvet burgundy curtains were hung halfway across the studio. These could be pulled to make a smaller area for more intimate recordings, solo instruments, voice-overs etc. Pinex tiles were attached to the ceiling to absorb sound, and during recordings Pinex sheets were placed over the windows. The kitchen of No 19 was available for clients to make coffee or tea, and the kitchen of No 21 was set up for a drum room. The studio had a full-sized Steinway grand piano.*



Alan Dunnage in Sonic Recording Studios c. 1985  
Peter Aagaard Photographer

*The front room of No 19 served as a storage room for the musicians' gear, while the front section of No 21 became the Control room and my father's office. The old sash windows looking out onto the street in No 21 were replaced by the rectangular double-glazed one still visible today.*

*The control room also had a heavy double-glazed window looking inside into the studio where Alan could indicate cues to the musicians. In the control room he had two or three tape decks set up including eight track recording decks. Beside the control room he had his cutting disc area, which was a block of concrete nestled down into the actual ground under the floor boards, somewhere around 4 feet in height above the floor level and 4 feet square. On top of this was the cutting deck which had a diamond needle. This cut the grooves into the blank disc.*

*The swarf (this is the shavings from the disc made by the diamond) was highly flammable. NO ONE was allowed to smoke in that area, but they did in the studio (which I hated because of the smell, but most musicians did smoke). Beside the cutting deck was floor to ceiling shelving where he stored his library of sounds, such as rooster crows, footsteps and many other sounds he used for shows and advertising. The office was my dad's personal area where he built new equipment for the studio and did repairs, plus did his accounts and labelling of records.*

Annette remembers many celebrities coming to record in her father's studio, though she was mostly confined to the family's living quarters in the floor above. A young Bruno Lawrence, in the 60's known principally as a talented drummer, came as part of a band. Stefan Brown recorded a No 1-Hit *Big Norm* (referring to the prime minister of the day, Norman Kirk). Others included Ken Avery, a highly respected jazz musician and song writer, and even the *Hogsnot Rupert* band. Celebrities other than musicians also visited *Sonic Studios*, including the well-known actress Dorothy McKegg, who came to record advertisements. In the early days of Selwyn Toogood's show *It's in the Bag* Alan modified a station wagon to travel around with him to record his programme in various towns.

People also came to benefit from Dunnage's intricate knowledge of the recording process. Douglas Lilburn, now regarded as the composer who established a truly New Zealand approach to classical composition, visited in the 1960's. He was aware that avant garde composers overseas were exploring electronic means to channel their creativity, and so he wanted to establish an electronic music studio at Victoria University. Annette remembers him as a rather austere man in serious conversation with her father about what might be best to order for his studio. Alan also had an important role installing the recording equipment in the new studios of Broadcasting House when it was constructed in 1963.

Alan Dunnage continued to live and work in his Mt Victoria residence until he became seriously ill and died in 1987. The story of his transition from farmer to popular music advocate and recording innovator certainly has a ring of a New Zealander adopting the renowned "number 8 wire" approach to progress.

Another facet of this man, perhaps unexpected in someone so involved in the popular music scene of the time, was his concurrent involvement with the Kent Terrace Presbyterian Church. He served there as an elder for many years, and Annette fondly recalled her young days singing in the church choir.

*MVHS is most grateful to Annette Dunnage-Roy for sharing her memories of her father and his work. In preparing my interview with Annette for the 2023 AGM, and when writing this article I appreciated the information available in Chris Bourke's book *Blue Smoke: the Lost Dawn of New Zealand Popular Music 1918-1964* (Auckland: AUP, 2010).*

By Rosemary Bromley