A Microphone to the People: The Recordings of the Mobile Unit of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service, 1946-1948

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The Mobile Recording Unit, an initiative of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service, began work in 1946. Though intended to cover the small towns and rural districts of both North and South Islands, the Mobile Unit only recorded in three districts (Figure I) during its three-year span. These recordings of music and spoken contributions provide a remarkable archive of the immediate post-war years, although at the time only limited broadcasting use was made of them in radio programmes. The recordings document aspects of the language, musical activities, historical knowledge, Maori culture and community development in New Zealand at mid-century. They constitute an outstanding example of 'kiwi ingenuity', both in the development of recording and in the application of that technology in remote places to provide wider access to broadcasting. Subsequently they have been extensively used in language studies and in some musical research.[1] But the interpretation of these recordings requires an understanding of the purpose and perspective of the Mobile Unit.

In each town or country district the Mobile Unit would record some historical and other spoken material – perhaps a welcome from the mayor, the history of the district from a local historian or old identity, eyewitness accounts of great occasions – and also record the music of bands, choirs, other musical groups and individual performers. In Wanganui, the first town visited, memories were recorded of the arrival of the first Cobb and Co. coach, a fake gold rush, Bill Webb's World Sculling Championship 1903, the railway, Maori history, farming progress, the arrival of cinema, harbour development, and the activities of the Kelly Gang. The music recorded in Wanganui included bands, choirs, and other music groups, excerpts from an opera in rehearsal, a contribution from the Savage Club[2], and several individuals singing or playing piano or organ. This same pattern was followed in subsequent work in both North and South Islands.

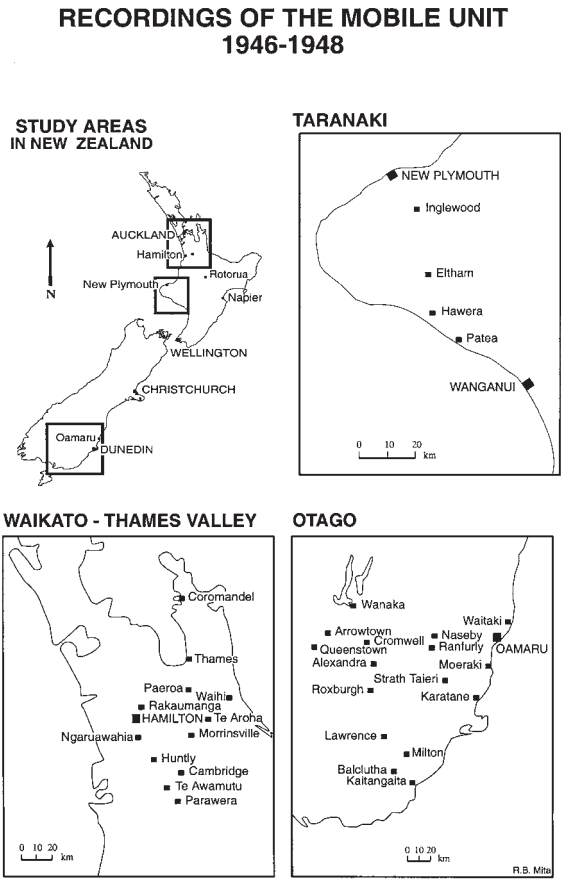

Figure I: Map of Mobile Unit recordings in New Zealand, 1946-1948.

Geoff Haggett, a later member of the Mobile Unit team, describes the typical approach:

> Usually the first people we would go and see would be the mayor and town clerk and from them we would get a list of people who were strong in say the Maori cultural field, we would find out about the local bands – brass bands and pipe bands – and the musical societies. We would get in touch with the education people to go and visit the schools because we used to record a lot of school choirs around the district. And then we would find out from these people so and so has lived here for 70 years, he would know what happened way back in the early days when they found gold or when they started cutting a road

> through here or when the river was bypassed. And from that we would get a list of a whole lot of people to go and see and would make our itinerary up from that.[3]

The Van and its Recordings

The Mobile Unit employed a recording van specially fitted with hydraulic jacks on its four corners so that the vehicle could be made level no matter the terrain. Inside the cab were two spirit levels, one each way, to measure the level. This was necessary for the operation of the recording disks.

Recording on the 16-inch acetate disks presented some inherent difficulties. As the recording was made, the steel recording needle removed a thin ribbon of acetate from the disk. This unwanted acetate, like a coiling snake, could wrap around, or clog up, the recording arm, interrupting the recording. If people climbed aboard the truck as a recording was being made this could also make the needle jump, ruining the recording. Other interruptions could be attributed to a fluctuating power source, or the fly governor getting sticky or dusty. The acetate disks were pliable at first and the technicians wore white cotton gloves so as not to leave finger prints in the soft acetate, but after some years the acetate became brittle and could easily break away from the aluminium, steel or glass base.

The microphones also imposed limitations on the recordings of the Mobile Unit. Although ribbon microphones were used in radio, they were not employed in the Mobile Unit. Instead, dynamic microphones, with limited frequency response, were used. The bass was reasonably good, but the treble weaker. This made male announcers and male singers sound more authoritative; women's voice were less well-recorded.

There were full auditioning, talkback and recording facilities. On the back of the truck were five drums of cable, enabling recordings to be made at considerable distances from the van. Up to four or five microphones could be used. Inside the van, apart from the speakers and equipment and the disk recorder, there was an operating desk and an interviewing table. The number of microphones allowed the music recordings and interviews to be balanced, though difficulties were encountered in some venues.

> In one case we had to borrow drapes from the local cinema and another time a vocalist was recorded singing to the accompaniment of a piano played in the next room.[4]

A constant problem for the Unit was the difficulty of finding suitable halls and pianos for recording purposes:

> The country halls are not, on the whole, suitable for recording, and we had to adopt many expedients to improve them . . . sometimes the final recording has been obtained only after crowding a choir of 40 into a

> small room designed for the comfort of not more than a dozen, with the piano wedged into the most convenient place. One orchestra in the North Island was recorded in a hall so small that the whole string section had to move every time the door was opened.[5]

The disks were an expensive item and no 'trial takes' were allowed; the performances and recordings impress today with the fluency and competence which is always displayed.

To Carry a Microphone to the People

Leo Fowler was in at the beginning of the Mobile Unit and became its chief officer and advocate. He describes the origin and purpose of the unit:

> Professor [Shelley, Director of Broadcasting] had the idea that the country was simply riddled with talent which never got an opportunity of getting near a microphone. In those days of course there were no X class stations and there were no recording units, there was very little opportunity for people in Taranaki and in the Waikato to get near a microphone, and the Professor had the idea that we could record the bands, the choirs, the school choirs and the thousands of individual artists who were just waiting to provide the Broadcasting Service with some new talent.[6]

Foundations for the establishment of the Mobile Unit were laid in two assignments, carried out by Leo Fowler for broadcasting in 1946, both requiring travel. The return of the Maori Battalion entailed ceremonies as the soldiers came back to their communities and the dead were mourned. Fowler recorded these in Wellington, Ngaruawahia and Kaikohe, travelling by plane to the Waikato and Northland locations. A further assignment was a commission to record for the BBC the stories of fifteen families from Northumbria who had settled in New Zealand:

> I said that to really get a representative list [of families] we would have to get a farmer and a miner as those were two of the basic industries among the Geordies. Prof [Shelley] as usual beetled his brow and said 'Where do you think you are going to get these people Mr Fowler' and I said 'Well, I'd have to go to Taranaki for a farmer and to Huntly for a miner'. Well I quite expected Prof to explode and I nearly collapsed when he agreed it was a very good idea. The milk in the coconut turned out to be that the professor had been playing around with the idea of a mobile recording unit and he thought if I went up to Taranaki and to Huntly I could do a little bit of a survey as to the possibilities of recordings which could be made in the country towns.[7]

Both of these assignments are catalogued within the Mobile Unit recordings, although they were not recorded by the unit itself.

Another of Leo Fowler's commissions was to make recordings in Rotorua for the BBC and the ABC in July 1948. These were intended as background for the broadcasts of the tour of King George VI, which did not eventuate.[8] The recordings of Maori cultural groups, and of a church service at Ohinemutu, are nevertheless catalogued with the Mobile Unit's work. Also included within the catalogue are recordings from a visiting warship, HMS *Indefatigable,* in 1945. Many aspects of life on board were captured by the unit: 'action stations'; 'the mess'; operational readiness; living conditions; accounts of engagements and descriptions of the ship. Another group of recordings of wartime interest was the 'mosquito network', in which troops talked to their families back home.

Just as the Mobile Unit was being planned and put into operation the recording unit which had been with the New Zealand troops in the Middle East returned (November 1945), and another was dispatched to Japan (May 1946) to report on the occupation and final stages of war. These war-time units had developed the role of war correspondent, describing the progress of the war from an uninvolved (though censor-controlled) position. They had also operated a personal message service for the troops to their families at home in New Zealand. Many attest to the importance for morale of these messages, which were broadcast in New Zealand programmes such as 'With the Boys Overseas' (Sunday morning, repeated Tuesday evening). Another planned function of the war-time units, the provision of relay news services for the troops, was abandoned for technical and censorship reasons. These units pioneered a new role for broadcasting, though one fraught with technical and other difficulties. The presence of radio at front lines, as an eyewitness, as well as the thrill to both public and servicemen of the personal messages from the front, confirmed broadcasting's position as a vital force in society.[9]

Mobile units were already familiar in Britain, and had had an additional role taking performances across the country and around the war zones. These were organised by ENSA (the Entertainment National Services Association), dubbed by comedian Tommy Trinder as 'Every Night Something Awful'. Performers included Gracie Fields and Lawrence Olivier in various music performances, plays and comedy.

A New Zealand mobile station, set up before the war, was station 5ZB, an initiative of the commercial arm of New Zealand broadcasting. The station's equipment was mounted in a railway carriage which visited 13 North Island centres in 1939.[10] It started in Rotorua and travelled through Hamilton, Whangarei, Te Kuiti, Taumaranui, New Plymouth, and Hawera. This mobile commercial radio station may have become a permanent feature but for the war-time amalgamation of commercial and non-commercial radio under

Shelley. At that point, commercial initiatives were moth-balled. Later 5ZB became the resident station at the Centennial Exhibition in Wellington.

Initiatives such as these were part of a general move for on-the-spot involvement, and they increased the expectation amongst the listening public of the ability of radio to be mobile – something to which radio advertisements of the pre-war decade also alluded. Sports events, concerts and church services were recorded in their place of origin. This was not a 'live' broadcast, but it was recorded in the church or sports ground, concert hall or other venue. It was not merely a studio report of the event. 'Actuality', both in war time and peace, established radio as the link between the public and the event; it located the broadcast on-the-spot, in the event itself.

The broadcast of the final stages of war, including VE day, saw radio's first extended world-wide link and graphically established the actuality of radio. Continuous broadcast kept a listening nation in touch with events as they occurred. New Zealand listeners heard live Churchill's actual announcement of the cessation of hostilities and Germany's surrender. On VJ day the arrival of Japanese envoys on General MacArthur's warship to conclude the surrender was also described in a live broadcast.

Technology strove to keep pace with the desire for actuality. In one experiment, technicians attempted to make the first broadcast from a moving express train between Paekakariki and Levin. The train was rigged with a radio transmitter and aerial, and units were stationed at intervals along the track to pick up the signal. The actual commentary, from 'the footplate of the express', could be heard with good strength when the train was near one of the units, but it faded away as it passed on. 'In the background the receiving station heard the roar of the wheels and the wind, and the hiss of steam. [The interviewer] Harris then had a talk with both the engine-driver and the fireman'.[11] In the words of a contemporary report in the *New Zealand Listener:*

> 'Station 2ZB's technicians and the Railways department have thus shown that New Zealand train-travelers may expect, at some future date, to be able to pick up a telephone, dial a number and talk to friends as their train rushes through the countryside . . . whether it would be looked on as a blessing to some New Zealanders remains to be seen. One suspects that, for one thing, it would cancel out that happy feeling of escape which train travelers enjoy when leaving for a holiday. But the energetic business man of the future may hail it as the latest in time and money-savers.'

The disk-recording technology used in the Mobile Unit had been introduced to radio in 1935. Its impact had been immediate:

> The excitement and tension that had been present during live broadcasts were lost when recording began, but were replaced by a new level of professionalism in production standards.[12]

What the Mobile Unit achieved was a return to that original excitement by recording in out of the way and hitherto inaccessible places. As technology developed in the following decades, actuality became a mainstay of radio documentaries and news broadcasts. It became a cliché of later television broadcasts – the reporter shown in front of (a picture of) the Westminster Houses of Parliament, or a war torn scene in Bosnia, may have less access to information than the studio host, yet the fiction is maintained that they are closest to, and reporting, the real thing. Audiences are persuaded by on-the-spot visual evidence that the information is authoritative and up to the minute.

On radio, the long-running *Spectrum* documentaries continue to feature action-type broadcasting: riding a motor bike, taking a horse around a race track, being up in a glider. Recording with new battery-driven tape recorders, the early *Spectrum* of 1973 carried actuality further into 'real' life situations; by meeting and talking to people on the job. In each situation, pioneer broadcaster Hop Owen has noted, 'we met a group of people who had their own culture. Nowhere was this more apparent than with fairground, sideshow operators – the New Zealand equivalent of gypsies. [They had] their own society with a seasonal pattern.'[13]

The Mobile Unit and its war-time antecedents contributed to the growth of actuality – on-the-spot recording – which has come to be widely accepted in the media. With the Mobile Unit, the country districts for the first time contributed to the national airwaves; a person stood in a field, or at a works, or in a town, and described its history and significance. The authority and immediacy of this was a powerful new experience for listeners and participants. Geoff Haggett has described the close relation the country people had with the radio recording unit:

> When the programmes were produced it wasn't just . . . a programme about Morrinsville, about Te Aroha, about Coromandel or whatever . . . These people had seen us there doing it, we were part and parcel of it. We were right in there with them and we would go along to their schools and to their church halls and record things and on the marae and do things. We were something more visual than just someone going along with a small tape recorder in his hand, just one person . . . it was a new venture in those days, it was new to us, it was new to the people. [14]

He went on:

> I felt there was a rapport [with] the people in the towns and the settlements that we went to. And when we went out into the bush to

> see someone, to see a farmer, and we would drive out into the country and be in his own paddocks, his friends would come in from way out to see what was going on (he'd let them know) and we would all join in and have a discussion about it. I felt there was something there which made for what I call good country broadcasting.

Some of the music recordings have the same feeling of actuality present in the spoken recordings of the Mobile Unit. If a church choir performed in its own pews, with the familiar organ and acoustics of its own church, it gave a performance which was absolutely authentic to the established style of its performance. Some bands in their band room or citadel, pianists or organists at their own instrument, and school choirs recorded in the school hall, were also able to perform in customary manner in their own surroundings. They had not been moved to an unfamiliar studio to perform.

An interesting feature of the Mobile Unit's music recordings is just how far the 'actuality' goes. We do not hear a dance band playing for dance – though a very few play for recording. Maori ceremonial is not recorded – waiata are performed solo or by a group of singers rather than in an authentic outdoor performance on a marae. Similarly, we do not hear a congregation singing hymns during a service. Although the Mobile Unit must have been in place for dozens of Sunday church services they are not recorded. The music of hymns, which was one of the great 'folk' musics known by an overwhelming proportion of the population, was not recorded in church services but only in performances by choirs, bands or school groups. Only a few actuality recordings in music are attempted, such as a 'musical evening' in the town of Huntly[15] or a party for the Paeroa Hunt.[16] Sometimes the sounds of a church organ are heard playing while a church is described.

Actuality, however, was extensively used in histories and documentaries. In describing the Martha Gold Mine, Waihi, the interviewer talks of the bucket chain and it is recorded clanking past.[17] At Walker's Pig Factory in Hawera there is a description and sound of pig slaughtering,[18] and there are thermal sounds from Rotorua,[19] the sounds of a school (Waitaki Boys High School[20]), forestry sounds and a description of bird habits and song recorded in the bush. But the sounds of music are seldom linked to the Opera House or church or marae. This neglect of actuality in music recordings removes something of special interest for today's music historian. The music recordings provide a 'concert' version of a particular performance, one suited to radio broadcast.

The Director, and the People on the Job

Professor James Shelley, Director of Broadcasting, planned the Mobile Recording Unit in 1942, but its implementation was delayed by war-time

conditions until 1946. With the difficult economic conditions, including continuing petrol rationing after the war, it is surprising that the scheme proved possible even then, and that the Mobile Unit indeed got on the road.

A key person in the success of the Mobile Unit was Leo Fowler, its officer-in-charge and producer. The broadcasting work engaged in by Fowler just prior to the Unit's formation indicates that he was one of the most versatile and resourceful of broadcasters. He had joined broadcasting in 1936, aged 34, having been a 'clerk, bullock-driver, bushman, farmer, reporter, navvy, fisherman and coalminer'.[21] These experiences gave him many points of contact with those who contributed to the Mobile Unit recordings. He notes, for example, that when the unit recorded the documentary on the Huntly coal mine, 'It was quite a thrill for me to go back to the Renown mine, in charge of the MRU [mobile recording unit] exactly ten years to the month after I'd left it to start as an announcer at 1ZB'.[22] Fowler's passion for local history and his enthusiasm for Maori culture continued throughout his life. The materials he gathered in the Mobile Unit's travels contributed later to many historical articles and stories, a play ('The Taiaha and the Testament'), and then, in 1959, a novel, *Brown Conflict*.[23]

After Leo Fowler's years with the Mobile Unit he became director of the newly-established Samoan broadcasting service. Later he was posted to Gisborne as manager of station 2XG. Here the interests that had fueled the Mobile Unit continued – in archaeology and ethnology, local history and Maori affairs – and he became honorary secretary to the award-winning Waiherere Maori Club, the annual Maori Competitions, and Director of the Gisborne Museum between 1953-55. Leo Fowler was also instrumental at this time in establishing Maori radio, encouraging Bill Kerekere at the Gisborne station and providing a knowledgeable and supportive environment for Maori broadcasting.

Accompanying Leo Fowler on the Mobile Unit's first tour was Don Cameron, technician, who had been with the Pacific recording unit during the war, and Alf Sanft, an interviewer/announcer. R.G. Haggett was announcer for the second tour, though Sanft returned to that role for the third tour. Four other technicians worked at various times, including R.L. Miller who had been with the Broadcasting Unit in Italy and North Africa. The Mobile Unit team proved thoroughly professional in their management of these recordings. They are entirely unobtrusive as interviewers or recording technicians. The quality of their music recordings is consistent throughout. They show no signs of panic measures to avoid crescendo overload or other mismanagement of volume which might have been expected in such unfamiliar recording circumstances.

As it was his initiative, and was based in the head office in Wellington, Professor Shelley maintained a close watch on the Mobile Unit. From his appointment in 1936 Shelley had consistently seen radio as a democratic and cultural force. Many of his initiatives were aimed at educational enhancement and cultural improvement. Since his arrival in New Zealand in 1920, as Professor of Education at Canterbury University College, he had been deeply involved in Adult Education activities, a tireless and charismatic lecturer and organiser. Shelley's work in Canterbury during the 1920s seems to foreshadow the Mobile Unit of the Broadcasting Service in its concern to raise the standards of rural living: in 1925 the Box Scheme sent boxes of lecture notes, illustrations, and gramophone records around

Source: Sound Archives, Radio New Zealand

Mobile Recording Unit of the New Zealand Broadcasting Service. From left: Brian Casnett (technician), Leo Fowler (producer), Geoff Haggett (commentator), Dick Miller (technician).

rural communities where they were studied by tutorial groups. Box topics usually combined visual art, music and literature. The CAR program, begun in 1930, was a mobile library which visited small centres regularly.[24]

Amongst Shelley's outstanding achievements as Director of Broadcasting were the establishment of the National Orchestra and the fostering of radio drama. His promotion of high cultural objectives, and consequent neglect of new genres of entertainment and of commercial broadcasting when it came under his control, provide an important context for evaluating the Mobile Unit. It meant that popular music was largely ignored in favour of serious or classical music. The 'search for new talent' undertaken by the Mobile Unit was in line with Shelley's cultural agenda. This search was largely unsuccessful, and the broader positive features of the Unit, such as the archiving of the country's music, seem to have gone unrecognised as a result.

The Mobile Unit was to be soon overtaken by a further change in broadcasting policy, the establishment of regional stations, this going further to make radio available to smaller centres than one Mobile Unit could achieve. The change in broadcasting policy was reported in the 1946 *New Zealand Official Year-Book*:

> Up to the present broadcasting in New Zealand has been considered from the national aspect – that is, providing the best programmes available without much regard to the locality of artists or stations. The time is now considered opportune for the adoption of a supplementary policy – that of using radio as a local institution to serve as an instrument for developing the cultural life, artistic endeavour, and civic consciousness of towns and districts. The development plans therefore include provision for the establishment of a chain of low-powered local stations throughout the Dominion, outside the chief centres, which will to a considerable degree depend for their appeal upon local interest in the artists and their work, or the local significance of talks or relayed ceremonies . . .
>
> The development proposals include plans for orchestral, dramatic, and art development. The extended use of 'local' stations and mobile recording units working with educational authorities will provide a unifying instrument for the entire community, stimulating civic consciousness and cultural endeavour and embracing the interests of remote country districts.[25]

The Mobile Unit found itself out on a limb: its mobility was soon overtaken by the development of tape recorders and its opportunity to bring radio closer to country districts was to be in part superseded by the development of local stations.

Music is Where You Find It

The Mobile Unit recorded an enormous quantity of music from the bands, orchestras, choirs, schools and individual performers of the districts visited. On the first tour, from Wanganui through Taranaki, over 150 individuals or groups were recorded. Most of these performers recorded more than one item, some as many as a dozen. The predominant musical activity was singing – vocal solos, duets and trios, church choirs, school choirs and choral groups. Two-thirds of the 150 recordings are by singers – one-third soloists, one-third choirs. The remaining third are instrumental recordings – pipe and brass bands, orchestras, piano and organ recordings and other instrumental soloists. Among the instrumental soloists, brass and woodwind instruments predominate, piano and organ are also important, but stringed instruments such as violin, viola and cello are very few in number. The predominance of vocal music over instrumental is also evident in the musical events such as the 'Competitions'.[26] These similarities, as well as the actual choice of repertoire in Mobile Unit recordings and the style of performance, lead to a view of the music as conservative; essentially it preserves an earlier era in New Zealand music.

Indeed, some of the Mobile Unit's dissatisfaction with the music recorded comes from the maintenance and ongoing popularity in country districts of music of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Perhaps the Mobile Unit expected a music more in line with the new music emerging in the main centres; music that was technically more proficient, which centred on instrumental performances (strings, piano), which obeyed new canons of taste. The Mobile Unit was primarily interested in a concert version of music – technically adept, and well-presented for concert and broadcast. Recordings were therefore restricted to 'serious' or 'classical' music. Only rarely is the lighter side of music recorded – a dance band, a show, or a popular entertainment. This focus accorded with the view of the Director of Broadcasting, James Shelley, and the standards established by him in the national YA stations.

What tended to be overlooked was that the community music, which the Mobile Unit was recording, was part of a social event in which all kinds of entertainment were involved, and in which local people performed in their own community. In making a recording for radio, such community music was frequently shorn of its social purpose – its social life. Thus the Mobile Unit's recording activities were caught between serious music and lighter music; between older styles and newer music; between community context and concert versions. Because of the demands of radio they recorded a concert version; because of Shelley's radio style they favoured serious music; because of the currents of new music they expressed dissatisfaction with the old.

The opinion of the Mobile Unit staff, then, was that the music recordings were of little long-term value to broadcasting. Although music had been the major focus of recording on the first tour, it assumed second place to the recording of oral histories on the second and third tours. In broadcasts, the recorded music was often used only as decorative or linking material. In Fowler's view:

> The quality of most of the musical material was very disappointing . . . We found very few outstanding artists, we found the material on the whole was just good enough to be used in local townships programmes [not good enough for more general broadcast].[27]

For archival purposes, the recordings themselves are of more value and interest now than perhaps they were in their day. Almost all the recordings provide interesting pointers to the style of singing and playing at the time, the preferred repertoire, and the ensembles or instruments that predominated in the music-making of the day. The historian coming to this material 50 years later finds a wealth of interest in it.

One Region of the Country Might Tell its Folkstory to Others

The variety of spoken contributions to the Mobile Unit was astounding: recollections of the origin of the frozen meat trade, the first thistle and the first rabbits seen in Otago, the Chinese use of opium, the discovery of gold in Thames, incidents of the Taranaki wars, Maori customs as seen by the settlers, aspects of Maori tradition, the first bicycle which frightened horses, the coming of electric power. Almost anything and everything could be touched upon in the somewhat rambling reminiscences and interviews of the Mobile Unit:

> [On the first recording tour] we gathered the material for 13 documentary programmes, of which the outstanding ones were a programme on the Port Scheme which the Wanganui Harbour Board were in the thick of at the time, a documentary on the oil refinery at New Plymouth and one on the battle of Wairareka, one on a knife factory at Manaia and one on a rennet factory at Eltham, a programme done by special command of Prof on the Feilding Agricultural High School, and a recital on the Square [piano] in New Plymouth.
>
> Twenty old people spoke on early history. It was mainly of course on the history of the district, some of it was recorded at first hand and some of it was second generation material. There was an old lady who knew Von Tempsky, had met Von Tempsky, and who had a visit after the Maori war from Von Tempsky's son and daughter. There were quite a number of old people whose fathers had taken part in the Taranaki

> War and who themselves remembered as children some of the incidents of those war time days. There was another old gentleman at Patea whose father had been in both the Crimea and the Maori wars . . .
>
> Many of the talks were used by Mr Hall quite apart from anything that was done with the Mobile Recording Unit. There was one old gentleman in Stratford, a Mr James Robson, he was then about 85 and he'd been born and brought up in the bush and he gave a series of talks on New Zealand birds and New Zealand trees which Mr Hall used quite extensively.[28]

In the oral history recordings the Mobile Unit team felt that they were in touch with the beginnings of New Zealand's European settlement. Here were eye witness accounts perhaps only one generation removed from the founding of modern New Zealand. Because many of their informants were of advanced age, the task of collecting the reminiscences was especially urgent.

As the Mobile Unit gained experience on their second and third tours, they came to give much more weight to the collecting of oral history. What had been an adjunct to musical performance on the first tour subsequently took precedence. As well as a greater number of recordings of oral history on the second and third tours, there was an enthusiasm for local histories and reminiscences. This can be seen from the letters of the Unit team and the programmes which resulted from the recording activities.

Paper Work

An immense amount of the paper work devolved upon the Mobile Unit. The recordings were mostly arranged while the Unit was in a town, but there was a need for follow-up letters to arrange the broadcasting rights and clear up any misunderstandings concerning the amounts of payment. The recording log book indicates that the broadcasting rights for most group recordings were purchased for three guineas; the offer of payment accompanied a request for approval.

Almost invariably correspondents wanted to know when the programme would be broadcast – one Taupiri musician wanted to be sure it wouldn't be on a Wednesday evening when orchestral rehearsal were held. Another asked for a script of his recorded talk to be made and sent to him. And to some a special letter of thanks for recording was deemed appropriate, as in the following letter from Leo Fowler to a contributor, Mr Eccles of Dunedin[29]:

> 30th March 1949 . . .
>
> I think you will like the programme and feel that we have done justice to your grandfather, Johnnie Jones.

We have used your voice in one or two places in the programme, and I would like to express my personal gratitude for the time and trouble you devoted to assisting us with the programme, and for the material concerning your grandfather that you put at our disposal.

I shall be very pleased to have your comments on the programme when you have heard it.

I regret it was not possible for me to make a further call to see you before I left Otago, but the whole of our tour was conducted at the same pressure as you experienced in your brief contact with us.

I hope if you are in Wellington at any time you will call and see me at 2YA.

With kind regards to you and Mrs Eccles . . .

In a letter to Miss Brenda Bell of Shag Valley Station, Otago, Leo Fowler expressed his thanks for stories recorded and notes the dates on which the programmes will be broadcast. He shows his evident enthusiasm for the project:

6th April 1949

Dear Miss Bell

. . . I feel that you have to some extent a proprietary interest in these programmes as so much of the material arose from our midnight session of swapped reminiscences. Furthermore, you appear in the first four [Otago] programmes as star story teller, and I may say, in parenthesis, that your story of the first short-wave reception from the BBC has become a classic among those associated with the Palmerston programme in which it is used.

I am very sorry that I was unable to spend some time at Shag Valley Station on my return trip north, but am regarding it as a pleasure deferred.

Possibly you will be in Wellington at some time in the near future, and if so, and if you can possibly spare the time, I hope you will write off one evening to visit us, as I have very many more Otago stories to relate to you. Meanwhile however, most of them will appear in consecutive programmes of 'History and Harmony in Otago', though few of them are told in **your** inimitable style.

It may interest you to learn that I am at present engaged in making a Kotaite or Rorehope, or Patu, whichever you prefer, from the whale bone you gave me, and if it is not too much trouble, I should like at some time to have a note from you bearing out that this whale bone does indeed come from the Waihemo Hotel and that it originated in Johnnie Jones' Waikouaiti whaling station.

> I am finding the writing of these programmes intensely interesting and feel myself becoming more and more a genuine Otagan with each succeeding one.
>
> With many thanks for your hospitality, your first class stories and information, and above all for having imbued in me a deep sense of Otago's historical adventure. And with kinds regards to all at Shag Valley . . .

While the accuracy of the recording and broadcast may have concerned many of those who were discussing the history of their region or family, or the disputes and incidents that had occurred in every area, it was only the medical profession that demanded a written undertaking they be shown the version of the president's address which would be broadcast; this address must 'first of all [be] submitted to the Chairman of Council of the BMA (British Medical Association) for his approval. The importance of absolute accuracy in broadcasting such an address must be evident to you and a written undertaking is requested'. Such was the power of the medical profession that the written undertaking was given.

Other paper work was engendered by those who missed the broadcast and hoped a copy could be made of their song. The Mobile Unit also received much background information to musical performance in written form, some of it being sent to the unit after the recording had been made. The description of an instrument or the history of a musical group could have made useful background material in introducing recordings. Dick Te Tau of Karitane describes a group which the Mobile Unit recorded during 1948:

> Our present choir contains some of the original members of the choir formed just after the outbreak of World War I and conducted by my late mother Mrs Pani Te Tau.
>
> Besides the originals the remainder are all sons and daughters of the said originals. As you know besides my wife and myself I had three daughters and two sisters and their daughters in the choir.
>
> During World War I the choir and party did yeoman work for the Patriotic Funds all over Otago.
>
> After the war we assisted many religious Churches in the raising of funds for their particular needs. We pride ourselves that we have never refused to assist any church and we number many sincere friends among the Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, Salvation Army and others.
>
> We also help to entertain patients in Hospitals and Sanatoria.
>
> During World War II we helped to raise funds for Distress in London, Spitfire Fund, and all patriotic purposes and are still entertaining whenever required.

> One of my prized possessions is a scrapbook containing cuttings and notices of concerts and entertainments, letters of appreciation etc., since World War I.
>
> Hoping this information will help you, Kia ora,
>
> Yours etc. Dick Te Tau
> Karitane 24/1/49

A different kind of group was the British Music Group in Wanganui, which provided this descriptive note for their recordings. Their story provides an interesting profile of the setting up and operation of a music group of the time:

> The Wanganui Branch of the British Music Society was founded two years ago on the initiative of a group of ladies who had previously met regularly at one another's houses for practice to keep alive their early training in music and for enjoyment. A public meeting was held under the Chairmanship of His Worship the Mayor of the City and it was not long before we had 100 members. Today we have 250. The Society works in three groups: a piano group and a vocal and instrumental group who work on the lines of the original group, and a gramophone group. The Society also promotes regular concerts by outside artists and has recently taken the risk of engaging the Opera House for a concert by Lili Kraus – a concert that was a great success both musically and financially.
>
> The Society has one unique feature. Its patron Mr Gordon McBeth, besides being a practising musician of high standing, is a composer of merit and originality. Few of his works have been published but they are well known to musicians and some have been repeatedly given over the wireless. During the current season we devoted an evening to his works and three of the items have been chosen for reproduction in this programme[for the Mobile Unit]. They are a trio for piano (Miss Thea Collier), violin (Mrs Laurel Pekins) and cello (Mrs Edna Saunders); a song 'Christmas Hymn' (Miss Ethel Bralsford) and a piano solo 'Polonaise' (Miss Edith Smith).

The collections of the Mobile Unit cannot therefore be considered purely aural; a written script was sometimes made by those who were requested to relate the history of their district or their music group or instrument. These written versions were collected by the Mobile Unit and used in creating the programmes.

The catalogues of the Unit recordings, especially those concerning local history, remain an important resource and there have been several attempts at cataloguing – a card index and a book catalogue exist as well as the original recording notes. An updated computer catalogue is in preparation.[30]

Source: National Archives, Making New Zealand Collection, ATL C 23401

An advertisement published in the New Zealand Listener, 1940. From the 1930s technology allowed recordings or broadcasts to be made in a great variety of places – churches, sports fields concert halls, theatres, parliament and from important occasions. Radio could put its listeners in touch with events as they occurred. This was futher shown in broadcasts from the troops at the battlefield and direct broadcasts during the negotiations to end the war. The Mobile Unit was another manifestation of this ideal in broadcasting.

The provision of a comprehensive catalogue has proved difficult because of the wide ranging nature of the recordings; many interviews and other contributions cover a wide spectrum of interesting features.

Maori

The Mobile Unit expected to collect Maori music and Maori spoken contributions along with its other recordings. From the outset this meant contacting a separate group of specialists and attending different locations, Maori settlements, for recordings. Fowler reports that Maori were not always keen to make such recordings for the Mobile Unit.

In Ngaruawahia Leo Fowler called on his previous acquaintanceship with leaders like Princess Te Puea, who in turn persuaded several old Maori speakers to record for the unit. In Taiporowhenui, Hawera, Fowler acquired a range of Maori music which aptly caught the community preoccupations: the pan-Maori organisation the King Movement, the return of the Maori Battalion, land issues, and traditional pieces. One song is a poi from Parihaka which had been composed to discourage Maori from volunteering for the Boer War.

History or Harmony

The dilemma for the Mobile Unit was that while the recordings of music, the primary aim of their tours, appeared repetitive and barely of broadcast quality, the oral histories seemed fascinating. Perhaps in danger of being lost through the passage of time, they excited interest both in the recording team and in the locality from which they came. They were part of a growing sense of the history of the country, a sense which had been fuelled by the 1940 Centennial.

When radio programmes were made from the Mobile Unit's recordings, they more easily incorporated the local histories as evidence of a distinctive locality than the music, the music appearing much the same whatever the areas visited. Leo Fowler describes the dilemma in a memo setting out ideas for a Historical Unit for broadcasting:

> During the first tour of the [Mobile] Unit through Taranaki, the gathering of historical records was merely a tentative sideline to the major purpose of making a recorded survey of the musical activities of rural centres. Only 19 interviews were recorded.
>
> In 1947, in the course of the Thames Valley – Waikato tour, encouraged by the reception accorded to the few historical insets in the main Taranaki programme, much more consideration was given to the collection of historical data in each district, and 55 old identities were interviewed and recorded.
>
> The programmes in this series were broadcast under the heading 'History and Harmony in New Zealand Towns', and the reports received back from various sources showed that the historical content of these programmes was widely appreciated.
>
> By the time these first two tours had been concluded it was also evident that the general level of music recorded was, at best, one of mediocrity, whereas it was equally obvious that we were laying the foundation of an extremely valuable historical library.
>
> During the third major tour, that of Otago province, the emphasis definitely shifted to the pursuit of history rather than of music, and

> many places were visited where there was little or no music, but where excellent historical data was available. One hundred and twenty seven people were interviewed and recorded and some at least of the historical materials gathered was of a nature that I do not think is paralleled in any other form.[31]

With hindsight it might be suggested that the contemporary evaluation both undervalued the music recordings and, to an extent, overvalued the oral histories.

As earlier indicated, recording frequently separated music from its context. Most musical items were presented at social gatherings. The entertainment included dance and spoken items. These social gatherings were community events. Recording removed the personalities and context from the music. The musical sound was separated from the personalities and the communities, which to a certain extent had given it life and meaning. In the course of broadcasting, this could have been mitigated to some extent by programmes on influential musicians or musical groups which elaborated on their activities and showed the kind of events where they performed. At least one recording of the Mobile Unit, 'A Huntly Musical Evening',[32] seems to have had this approach in mind.

Today, the oral histories might be viewed less enthusiastically than they were at the time of recording. Many are scripted talks, so the informal cadences of speech and thought are denied to listeners. While some factual material can be gleaned, it is the attitudes of the time and the experiences of the contributors which would be more greatly valued if given free rein. Other oral histories are interesting reminiscences of important and significant events, but they often ramble over many topics and are in the realm of a 'folk stories'. Told and retold perhaps a generation after the eye witness, they are often several tellings removed from their origin.

The oral histories stand, at the head of a long line of local history and documentary programmes, as one of the most distinctive activities of New Zealand radio. In their time, the Mobile Unit recordings were a pioneering effort in involving radio with New Zealand society. Their public relations value was high. The Mobile Unit was a popular rallying point for small towns and rural communities. The real gain was not to have taken a microphone to the people, but to have brought the people into a closer relationship with radio. People performed for it and heard playback recordings, a few were broadcast over radio; the communities heard their town's and district's history described and their old identities honoured. The outcome was an enhanced view of the value of radio and an increased expectation of the ways in which it might serve the community.

Yet, curiously, the value of the Mobile Unit recordings today is principally as a window into the music. While the search for new talent was not

particularly successful, Leo Fowler saw another importance for the music recording activities:

> I think the public relations value was enormous. It was a thrill for each community to find that the Broadcasting Service was going out to meet the people and to give them an opportunity of making a contribution and in addition we found that bandmasters and choirmasters and teachers found the playbacks invaluable in pointing out errors. After you'd recorded a band up till about 11 o'clock at night you got a bit tired of spending another hour playing back the material, but I'm quite sure that it did a great deal for improving the standards of band and choral music. I've often heard a choir master or a bandmaster say 'I've been telling that joker for years – now he'll believe it'. And 'that joker', or in the case of choirs 'that woman', was one of those people who would do an uncalled for solo or who would sing a certain note out of tune and the only way they could ever be made to believe that they did so was when they recognised themselves on the record and there would be quiet titter from the people around them and they'd go away blushing and hanging their heads and we hope would not do the same thing in future.[33]

Conclusion

Development of community involvement in radio was perhaps the strongest achievement of the Mobile Unit. The access that country people gained to the medium provided a strong demonstration of broadcasting's new potential. Coupled with the development of actuality and the considerable increase in recording and interviewing skill, the activities of the Mobile Unit had far-reaching effects.

In respect of the original objectives, however, no outstanding musical talent was found, and a great number of the recordings made were never played on radio. Typically, a single documentary-type programme was made about each of the towns visited. This included some description of the place and the mention of some local history (possibly from the recordings of old identities), interspersed with musical items.[34]

The present value of the recordings as an archives, especially in the field of musical performance, is greater when informed by an understanding of the viewpoints of both the Mobile Unit and the New Zealand Broadcasting Service in making this extensive record of communities. Such knowledge allows greater appreciation of both the versatility of the recording techniques for the time and the limitations of the recordings in presenting an understanding of the communities and their music.

1 Dr Elizabeth Gordon and colleagues at Canterbury University have used the Mobile Unit recordings in linguistic work; Allan Thomas has written an account of music in Hawera, Taranaki, from the music recordings.
2 Allan Thomas, 'The Savage Clubs: A Spirit of "Bohemian" Comradeship', *Turnbull Library Record,* vol. 31, 1998, pp.43-62.
3 Geoff Haggett, oral history, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives/Nga Taonga Korero.
4 Leo Fowler, 'Music in the Outback; New Programmes from the Mobile Unit', *New Zealand Listener*, 25 March, 1948, p.8.
5 Ibid.
6 Leo Fowler, oral history, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives/Nga Taonga Korero.
7 Ibid.
8 Leo Fowler collection, Alexander Turnbull Library, Box 6/5 77-014.
9 Patrick Day, *The Radio Years: A History of Broadcasting in New Zealand,* vol. 1, Auckland, 1994, pp.249-282.
10 Ibid., pp.253-254.
11 *New Zealand Listener,* 6 June, 1947.
12 Day, op. cit., 1994, p.251.
13 Hop Owen, *A Thousand Programmes of Spectrum*, National Programme, Radio New Zealand, 26 March 1998.
14 Geoff Haggett, oral history, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives/Nga Taonga Korero.
15 Mobile Recording Unit catalogue, number 445.
16 Ibid., number 411.
17 Ibid., numbers 429-430.
18 Ibid., number 69.
19 Ibid., number 1216.
20 Ibid., number 912.
21 G.C. Petersen (ed), *Who's Who,* 10th edn, Wellington, 1971, pp.148-149.
22 Leo Fowler collection Alexander Turnbull Library, Box 6/5 77-014.
23 Ibid.
24 Ian Carter, *Gadfly: the Life and Times of James Shelley,* Auckland, 1993, pp.131-166.
25 J. Gilchrist, *The New Zealand Official Year-book*, Wellington, 1946, pp.700-701.
26 Allan Thomas, 'The Competitions: A Century of Music Making in New Zealand', *Music In New Zealand,* forthcoming.
27 Leo Fowler, oral history, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives/Nga Taonga Korero.
28 Ibid.
29 The following letters and documents are in the Mobile Recording Unit Files of Radio New Zealand Archives, uncatalogued.
30 The original catalogue had taken two typists a full year to compile and this had been completed before Leo Fowler left for Samoa. But on his return much of the supporting documentation had been destroyed. (Comment from the Leo Fowler papers, Alexander Turnbull Library).
31 Leo Fowler discussion paper, unsigned and undated, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives/ Nga Taonga Korero.
32 Mobile Recording Unit catalogue, number 445.
33 Leo Fowler, discussion paper, Radio New Zealand Sound Archives/Nga Taonga Korero.
34 In the town of Hawera, Taranaki, 87 music recordings were made during the Mobile Unit's first tour, of which only 11 were broadcast in the programme about the town. In subsequent tours the Mobile Unit recorded fewer musical performances.