

Hail to the Kingi: Behind the Creative Mind of the Taite Music Prize Winner



Troy Kingi

Troy Kingi doesn't create because he wants to - it's not a choice.

“I do it because I have to. It’s a therapeutic thing, I have to get that stuff out of my system or else I can’t think straight.”

It may be a necessity for Kingi but it’s also effective. His fourth and most recent album *Holy Colony Burning Acres*, has just earned him the 2020 Taite Music Prize, an award that puts creativity as its defining selection criteria.

In a stacked field including the likes of previous winners Lawrence Arabia and Aldous Harding and variety including L.A.B. and Beastwars, Kingi’s 70s-style deep roots/reggae contribution emerged victorious on Tuesday night.



Troy Kingi’s fourth and most recent album *Holy Colony Burning Acres*

“I still can’t believe it,” Kingi (Te Arawa/Ngāpuhi) remarks, “it’s very humbling, especially with the calibre of artists that I went up against, any one of them could

have won this. I've listened to every single one of their albums as well, I'm real big fans of most of them, so to take it out among that level of artistry is crazy.

"To get recognition for what I'm doing, considering it's the only reggae album I've made, probably the only reggae album I'll ever make, in this crazy thing of me doing 10 albums in 10 different genres, it feels nice. It feels really good."

If that's the first time you've heard of Kingi's ultra ambitious 10:10:10 series - yeah, intense right? Even for those who have been across it from the outset, it's still enough to raise an eyebrow. Spending a decade dropping a new album every year is a stretch for any artist, but when the type of music is changed up each time? It's hardly surprising to see him honoured for his creativity.

"It is refreshing and stops me from getting bored because I have a challenge in front of me, and it's cool knowing I have stuff to do for the next six years. But then, I could sit in something like *Shake That Skinny Ass All The Way to Zygertron* (his 2017 space-psychedelia offering) forever.

"But I think little specks of that flow into the next album, you get little bits of *Zygertron* in the reggae album, you might next get a bit of the reggae in the next one and so on."

Surely the same thing could have been achieved without broadcasting his ambitions to the world, essentially locking him in to a process he could have otherwise opted out of at any given stage? That's not Kingi's bag.

"It's a little bit of added pressure but it's also inspiring listening to stuff I normally wouldn't. After this one (his upcoming 2020 release), we're going to get into my folk album which is a genre I don't listen to - at all. It just gives me a new weapon in my arsenal for future songwriting."



Troy Kingi

That latest offering is due to be released at the end of this month - a goal made a little complicated and frustrating by a certain global pandemic.

On the album, Kingi muses “I don’t know what genre it is, it’s got a real blaxploitation vibe but most of the songs are about love, I suppose. I can’t wait to bring it out, I’m really happy with the songs. We’re a few days away from finishing the album, just need to get to level 2 so I can shoot down and start doing it.”

Titled *The Ghost of Freddie Cesar*, if the story behind the record is anything to go by, it’s set to be quite the ride.

Kingi explains, “it’s actually a covers album by a dude called Freddie Cesar, a singer that no one even knows who the hell he is.

“It’s a cassette tape I had in my possession that I got from my dad. About 15 years ago, dad actually went missing, he still hasn’t been found to this day, he’s disappeared off the face of this earth.

“Going through some of his stuff, I found this cassette, put it on and immediately remembered all of the songs from when I was little.

“Around the time he went missing, one of the therapeutic things for me was to write out these lyrics to this bootleg cassette tape,” Kingi recalls. “Come 2010-2011, I found this book with all the lyrics again but I couldn’t find the cassette tape. I started looking up this Freddie Cesar on the net, and there was nothing there.

“This album is kind of a memory covers album. I don’t even know if I’ve done them 100% correct, parts of the songs are just my own version of how the bridge would probably go. They’re my recollections of what the songs would be in conjunction with the lyric book I had.”

As that description shows, there’s no question that Kingi knows how to tell a story. An enigmatic and engaging personality in front of a microphone or in movies like *Mt Zion* and *Hunt For The Wilderpeople*, Kingi has a mastery of captivating your attention. It’s hard to pick a standout song in his albums, they seem interconnected - each one strengthened by the other.

“I think there’s an art in doing the order of the songs on your album,” Kingi nods. “it’s the way the artist wants you to hear them rather than you skip to your favourite songs, I feel they want to take you on a journey. That’s the way I’ve approached the last three albums and the way I’ll approach the rest.”

COVID-19 lockdown hasn’t been too far removed from Kingi’s usual choice of lifestyle - he’s only just ventured outside his front gate for the first time in seven weeks. “To be honest I’m at home most of the time anyway so the only frustrating thing is not being able to go out and gig really. I write my own stuff in a bubble anyway. It’s been a good time to think,” he opines.

“This lockdown has shown everyone what the most important things in life are. I don’t know when I’m going to get to gig again, might be the end of this year, might not be until next year. It just put everything into perspective, I’ve got five children. If music was to completely disappear, I wouldn’t be great but I think I’d be fine as long as I’ve got my family there.

“As far as the music goes, I’ll still create but it feels like the landscape of the music game has changed, it’s just a waiting game to see how it pans out.”

And it’s not like he doesn’t know what lies ahead. The whole ten albums in ten years thing is enough to keep anyone busy. Does he have a big finish planned?

“I feel like my last one is going to be kind of a Frank Sinatra, big band, me in a suit, sounding like James Bond theme songs thing - I think that’s a classy way to go out. But who knows, by then my mindset may have changed, I might end up doing, shit I don’t know, a techno album or something. We won’t know til we get there.”

Those questions are a fair way down the track, for now, Kingi can savour his title as New Zealand music's freshly crowned king of creativity,

"It lets me know I'm on the right track with what I'm doing. If I was never to win another award, that's cool, I've got a Taite now," Kingi laughs.