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Out of the shadows

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Out of the shadows

Te Matatini offered a chance to reflect on past and present, and how Taranaki and Aotearoa have changed, writes Rachel Buchanan.

On concert nights, we kept the kitchen windows open. As soon as the singing stopped, Dad rubbed his thighs and leapt up. Shoes on, jersey on, pixie hat on, I followed him up Gover St and across Rogan, his knee-high white socks twin lighthouses in the dark. To our left, the empty racecourse. To our right, the track that would take us through the bush on the eastern edge of Pukekura Park to a back entrance at the Bowl of Brooklands, where we could sneak in past the stage and see the second half for free, high on naughtiness.

Roy Orbison, Glen Campbell, Split Enz, the bowl hosted many of the greats in the 1970s, as well as military tattoo-style events that involved a lot of bagpipes. My favourite!

One time, we saw the last act of *Tiki and the Things That Go Bump* and a neon taniwha swam across the manky duck pond in front of the stage.

From February 25 until March 1, the biannual kapa haka festival, Te Matatini, was also at the Bowl of Brooklands, and this time, there was no need to scurry about in the shadows. My sister had bought our tickets months in advance and I'd flown from Te Whenua Moemoeā (Australia) with my husband.

For three epic days, the bowl held us in her green hands. The performers in the 55 rōpū who made the finals woke Pukekura with their acknowledgments of the hosts, Te Kāhui Maunga, and their exquisite tributes to those who have passed on, most notably Kīngi Tūheitia. The air was golden, and that wasn't just because of the non-stop sunshine.

As the chair of Te Matatini, Tā Herewini Tanetoa Parata, told Radio NZ's Julian Wilcox on finals day, "I am feeling over the moon because all the groups that have performed here in the last four days, they have expressed their identity, where they come from, and they've been happy. Really happy. You can see it on their faces and you can feel it."

When my sister and I were children in New Plymouth, folk dancing was the thing at school. The Gay Gordons was a big one. I also did ballroom, Latin American and disco at Gladstone's Dance Academy in Blagdon.

Although some of our classmates at St Joseph's and, later, Sacred Heart were from eminent Parihaka



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Happy place: Te Kapa Haka o Ngāti Whakaue (Te Arawa) were crowned overall winner at Te Matatini 2025.

whānau, the waiata curriculum at school began with *Tūtira Mai Ngā Iwi* and ended with *Oma Rāpeti*. That was it. Two songs.

The closest I got to kapa haka as a kid was being cast as Dorothy in the New Plymouth Operatic Society's production of *The Wizard of Oz*. We sang. We moved. We wore costumes. Perhaps singing in church counts?

As for whakapapa, we had "Māori blood" along with "Scottish blood", "Irish blood", "Jewish blood" and "English blood". That's how people talked back then, like bodies were beakers.

Pukekura Park was our playground. Cricket, red rowboats, a dainty ice-cream kiosk, monkeys in a cage, waterfalls, fountains and ponds – the place was a bastion for all things British. It seemed so natural, pleasant and permanent, but before the wars and confiscations of the 19th century – battles that encompassed the land where the bowl sits – another kind of life flourished here, and it had nothing to do with England or English.

For those precious days of Te Matatini, past and present joined and Pukekura was a happy place for Māori people. It was a Māori place, a Te Ātiawa place, a Ngāti Te Whiti place. We belonged. If only Dad had lived to see it. ■

Dr Rachel Buchanan is the 2025 Judith Binney fellow and author of three books on Taranaki, including Te Motunui Epa.

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