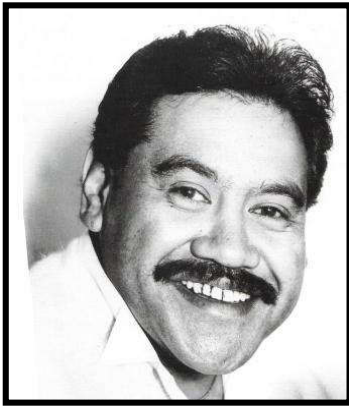


# Billy T James MBE

17 Jan 1949 - 7 August 1991

Maori is a language that is ideal for comedy because it has a lot of the sharp sounds such as 'K', which is regarded by comedy scholars as the key comedy sound. A chicken in a joke will always sound funnier than a fish.  
Matt Elliott



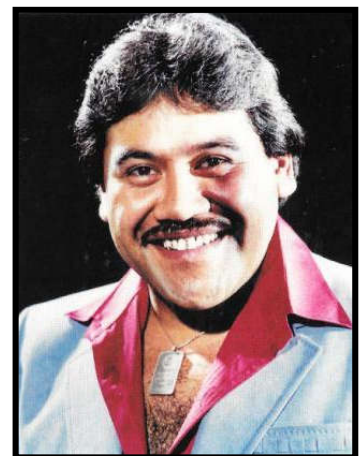
**William James Te Wehi Taitoko** was born on 17 January 1949, a day after Dalvanus Prime. Sally and Jimmy Smith of Karapiro Village already had a large family so they adopted him out under the traditional Maori custom of whangai. His new parents were Wiri (Bill) and Ruby Taitoko who lived in Leamington, south of Cambridge, where Wiri worked at the boiling down works. The family called him Te Wehi, meaning 'awesome'! His older sister Ngaire says that their parents were gifted musically and could play any instrument they were handed.

Te Wihi started school at *Leamington Primary* then when he was 11 the family moved to Whangarei where his father became foreman of the rendering plant there. He attended *Whangarei Intermediate* and *Whangarei Boys High* where he became known as 'William'. William discovered a talent for drawing and tattooed a swallow on his left hand between the thumb and first finger. He joined a rock band called *The Hangmen*, gigging at church socials, local halls and private parties but after six months they disbanded. William did well scholastically but failed school certificate twice, possibly due to recuperation in hospital after surgery on his hips, injured after a fall. He left in 1965 to take up a signwriting apprenticeship in Auckland. Finding that time in the Army counted towards his study time William enlisted and ended up at Waiuru painting tyre-pressure gauges on the back of trucks. Things got warmer when he was moved to *Papakura Camp* where he formed a band and performed mess shows.

He headed back to Whangarei and drove trucks for his father and joined a band called the *Quindells*, playing saxophone and guitar. Then back to Auckland, where he found a residency at the *Gluepot* in a band called *The Radars*, consisting of mainly blind musicians. He joined the *Tri-Ellis Band* at the *Great Northern Hotel* where he met a blond receptionist called Lynn Matthews and they married in October 1973. William set up a signwriting business called *Pink Pages* and did some part time driving for his father who now lived in Auckland. He played in *Princess Puti's* band, *Black Market*, until they folded, then he joined the *Georgia Showband* and toured with Bunny Walters.

In the summer of 1974 the *Maori Volcanics* employed him as a multi-instrumentalist and singer and they toured both islands culminating in a live recording at Wellington's *Broderbick Inn*. It was here that William's comedy began to come to the fore. In October 1975 William, Lynn and the *Volcanics* flew to Tahiti, Rarotonga and Vanuatu then did a 10 month residency in Sydney. A year later The *Volcanics* joined the *Music and Management Agency* to tour Britain and Germany with acts such as Tom Jones, Engelbert Humperdinct and Gilbert O'Sullivan. They visited Bermuda in 1977 on the way back to Sydney, then they parted ways; William headed to the Gold Coast and paired up with *Prince Tui Teka's Concert Party* as a solo act. Soon he rearranged his birth names and called himself 'Billy James' and begun appearing in some of Queensland's top clubs.

Returning to Auckland, Billy found a residency at *Oliver's Changing Times* and was signed to *Hega's Entertainment*. Peter Common who led the house band at *Trillo's*, *Dealer's Choice*, wrote Billy some musical arrangements and Billy began a strenuous series of one man shows.



He had appeared a few times on *The Ray Woolf TV Show* and when Tom Parkinson became head of Light Entertainment on TVNZ in 1980, Tom put together his dream show *Radio Times* recreating a 1940's live radio program. The first two series presented Billy, Laurie Dee, *The Yandall Sisters* and Craig Little. Carl Doy, Peter Commons and Bernie Allen worked on the musical arrangements. Billy won the *Pegasus Entertainer of the Year Award* which was presented to him by English comedian Dick Emery.

He narrated a album called *Diddikai*, a musical tale about gypsy children; supported Chubby Checker for a week at Trillo's then returned to front *Gladys Knight and the Pips*. In Dec he hosted an *Ascot Derby Night* at *Alexandra Park* which raised \$600 for the *VAC Building Fund*.

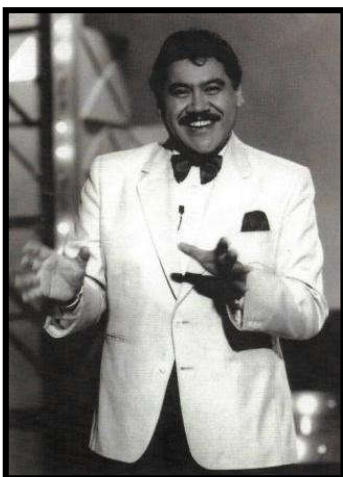
Parkinson produced the first *Billy T James Show* in 1981 with Laurie Dee and VAC *Benny* recipient Doug Aston. That same year the trio were invited to perform a sketch at the *Royal Variety Concert*, the same show that saw Howard Morrison sing his now famous version of *How Great Thou Art*. Billy invited Peter Common to be musical director on his tour of Australian clubs and they based themselves in Kings Cross, Sydney. They performed at the *Sydney Opera House* with Prince Tui Teke, Ricky May and Rhonda Bryers to raise money to build a marae there and recorded an album of covers called *Selections*; Billy designed the cover. It spent four weeks on the charts reaching number 23.

In 1981 he was declared *NEOA Entertainer of the Year*. In 1982 Billy was cast in a straight role in *The Protestors*, playing communist Bobby Watson. It was based on the land occupations of the time, *Bastion Point* and the *Raglan Golf Course*. The second season of *The Billy T James* show added a take-off of Māori news bulletin *Te Karere*, with Billy in his now famous black singlet, a yellow towel round his neck. He also took time off to be a judge on televisions *Star Quest*.



James won the *1984 Feltex Television Award for Best Entertainment* then starred in a one hour special called *Billy T James and Carter Edwards in Concert*. He appeared in *Came a Hot Friday*, the film adaption of Ronald Hugh Morrison's novel, his role as the Tainuia Kid winning him a *GOFTA Award*. Another honour was the *1984 NEOA Award for Entertainer of the Decade*. *The Billy T James Show* now had half the population of New Zealand tuning in, more than the *6 O'clock News*. He collaborated with cartoonist Chris Slane to create *The Billy T. James Real Hard-Case Book*.

The 1985 season of *The Billy T James* show underwent major changes. Dee and Aston were dropped and Peter Rowley became Billy's new partner. They also added the *Beginners Guide to....*, a take off on TV home handyman Bunny Rigold's DIY program. Billy recorded an album at Whangarei's *Pip's Nightclub*, called *Live at Pip's*, which made the charts at 33. For the 1985 Telethon Billy recorded *When a Child is Born* and a video was made to promote the *International Year of the Youth*. Then he made a Xmas record for *Radio Hauraki*, *I want to wish You a Maori Christmas*. Between 1985 and Billy's cardiac Mike Walker was Billy's Musical Director until Billy's illness forced him to retire in 1991.



He provided the voice of pie van owner Pāwai in the cartoon *Footrot Flats* and appeared as a dodgy pilot in the ski movie *The Leading Edge*. On the small screen Billy acted in *Rabbiters Rest* and played the gang leader on *Terry and the Gunrunners*. He also fronted a special on the *America's Cup* and was named by VAC Patron David Hartnell as one of New Zealand's best dressed males for two years running. During this period his name and likeness was used for the company *Billy T's Hangi Takeaways* with locations in Auckland.

*He set up his Dream Factory* in Fanshaw Street as an all-in-one production company and the first project was a situation comedy starring family man Billy as a DJ on small-town Waikato radio station *Cuz FM*, inspired partly by *The Cosby Show*. He was still working hard, touring and making commercials but Billy was having problems with the *IRD* and the stress was compounding his already serious health problems. After being awarded an *MBE* for services to entertainment in 1986, Billy received a number of death threats and moved from his Titirangi home out to the Muriwai Valley.

He'd suffered a few heart attacks but thought they were just indigestion until August 1988 when he had a cardiac arrest. After 3 weeks in hospital he was released with orders to lighten his workload but immediately went on tour as the narrator of the Australian production of *The Rocky Horror Show*. After the tour ended Billy suffered another heart attack and surgeons performed a quadruple bypass which

was not a success. When he was discovered to have diabetes it was decided that he would require a new heart. On 11 November 1989 Billy became New Zealand's 14<sup>th</sup> heart-transplant recipient. He was 38.

After spending five months recovering he returned to the stage with a variety spectacular at the *Aotea Centre* called *Billy T James, Alive and Giggling*. Howard Morrison appeared as a special guest. The new *Billy T. James Show* began airing on TV3 in July 1990 and ran to 26 episodes. In October the *VAC* presented him with the *Benny Award* which was accepted by Billy's wife, Lynn.

After a show at the THC Hotel in Waitangi in February 1991, he contracted a cold which seriously weakened his heart and doctors told him that they could do no more for him. Billy died on August 7 1991.



Billy's body was forcibly removed to *Turangawaeawe Marae* in Ngaruawahia against his wife's wishes and he is now buried on Taupiri Mountain next to his parents. A charity concert was held in the Town Hall to benefit Lynn and Billy's niece, Cherie.

Billy's handprints are in the *Walk of Fame* at Auckland's *Victoria Park Market* and his legacy lives on in the annual *Billy T. Comedy Awards*. In 2009 Matt Elliott's biography *Billy T* was published and Billy was voted the country's greatest comedian in a *New Zealand Listener* survey. In 2011, Peter Rowley toured his one man show *Billy T & Me* which combined his

memories of Billy with archival video footage.