

Dennis Marsh MNZM

The 'Rodfather'



When Dennis came home from school complaining about being punished for using his native language, his father explained that it was important to accept the culture and language of the pakeha, that the future belonged to them and to succeed in their world he would need to understand its ways. Te Uhi (Hugh) Marsh was the foremost influence in his son's life and Dennis respected his wisdom and knowledge. Hugh and his wife Arohaina (born Otimi) could usually be found leading the sing-alongs, surrounded by adoring party goers. They were members of the *Ratana* faith and grandfather Otimi had played trumpet in the church band.

Dennis Te Uhi Marsh was born beneath the stars on the veranda of his grandmother's house in Te Kuiti on 22 February 1951. His mother reckoned that she never planned it that way, they were just too slow to get to the hospital. He is *Te Aroha* through his father and *Maniapoto/Tainui* through his mother, third in a family of 7 boys and 3 girls; Terry, Clare, Dennis, Pauline, Sam, Charlotte, Hana, Jan, Lou, and Po. Hugh Marsh worked as a shepherd and farm manager for the *Lands and Survey Department* so the family were constantly on the move as he finished one project and begun another. The first farm that Dennis remembers was about 15 miles from Taumaranui. He loved to help his father and would come home from school, jump on a horse and ride to find him. By the age of 8 he was able to drive whatever vehicles were around; tractor, cars or truck. At 10 he was the designated sober driver for his mum and dad when they went to parties. Later he learnt to fish and hunt, feeding the family and selling deer, boar or rabbits for money to give to his mum. His father arranged a salary for him to cover all the work he did on the farm which paid for his needs. Always busy, Dennis never got to know his younger siblings that well and later regretted this after he attended brother Jan's funeral.



Dennis attended *Ongarue, Waimiha, Ngakonui* and *Kuratau* primary schools then *Tongariro High School*, where he played rugby and hockey and became a well liked prefect but neglected his studies. He wanted to be a carver but couldn't get accepted for training at Rotorua so, after sitting *School Certificate* a number of times, he moved in 1969 into the *United Mission Maori Hostel* in Auckland and took up an apprenticeship as a builder and joiner. Here he excelled at rugby, volleyball and basketball and listened to records on the hostel's gramophone, falling in love with Elvis, Jim Reeves and Marty Robbins. He purchased his first guitar, joined the sing-alongs then he and some hostel friends formed a quartet and began playing at parties. When Prince Tui Teka returned to New Zealand in 1972 Dennis was taken by his showmanship.

After gaining his Trade Certificate in 1971 he found gainful employment as a builder and eventually formed his own gang contracting to do up old houses in Ponsonby. When he begun buying houses in 1990 to renovate himself he began to make serious money and purchased his first home in Otahuhu.

When evangelist Billy Graham visited New Zealand, Dennis and others from the hostel attended his meetings and were profoundly affected enough to change their lives dramatically, with his mates giving up swearing and alcohol. Dennis has been a teetotaler all his life! He joined *Youth For Christ* and later sung in their group *Living Bread* which toured Sydney, the Philippines and Singapore in 1979 then recorded an LP. He studied Theology at the *Henderson Bible College* for 3 years from 1976-78 and became an assistant youth minister at the *Maori Evangelical Fellowship Church* founding what became one of the largest youth groups in the country. He is still called to attend funerals as a celebrant.

One evening in 1984 Dennis was dragged along to the *Manurewa Country Music Club*, 'I walked in and there where all these Maoris playing in the band, that was the biggest appeal.' He became a regular, singing, playing drums in the band and later guitar and saxophone. He adjusted his repertoire to an older audience and started performing at senior citizens clubs and rest homes, then he began opening for more experienced acts and playing at private parties.

Dennis began attending regional Country and Western competitions and regrets having his first prize snatched away from him in 1985 when, having been incorrectly advised, he competed for two clubs in the same category. Nevertheless he ended up being the *Overall Winner* and from 1986-88 he won many more awards including the *Australasian Gospel Award* at Tamworth, Australia. In 1989 he won the Tauranga competitions which made him an entrant into the *New Zealand Country Music Entertainer of the Year* which he won.



That's when Dennis got serious about music. He released his first album, *For You*, recording the extra-special tunes that always received two ticks on his song list for audience reaction. *For You* was partially financed by his fans who were happy to pay for cassettes in advance. The rest he ended up selling at the *Otara Market* after being turned down by all the major record distributing companies. That first day he sold 23 tapes and has been visiting the local markets ever since. Eventually he approached *Ode Records* where Terence O'Neill-Joyce's wife, who had seen him at a concert, told her husband

he was fantastic. A few years later Terence suggested that another label would be better-resourced to take his career further so Dennis approached Morrie Smith at *BMG* then followed him to *Zomba Records*, *Rajon Music Group* and then finally to *Sony Records* in 2013.

Things were going really well when, in 1990, he started feeling exhausted and visited a doctor who diagnosed a heart problem and got him into hospital 2 days later for a replacement aorta heart valve operation. This was repeated in 2001 and in 2015 they gave him a metal valve which should not require replacing. Over the next four years he released six albums then in 1996 he recorded and mixed *Out Of Nashville* at the *RCA Studios* in Nashville in the mistaken belief that radio stations in New Zealand will play high quality productions recorded overseas using top backing musicians. Sadly this was not the case; nevertheless the album was nominated for the *Clear Music Awards*. His 1997 album *Faith*, with the *Yandall Sisters*, was nominated for a *Tui* twice.

He formed his first *Dennis Marsh Band* from members of his *Manurewa Country Club* in 1990 including Brian Thompson (Rhythm Guitar), Richard Diaz (Drums), Alf Williams (Lead), Tom Paul (Bass), Joe Haami (keyboard/trumpet/saxophone) and Ben Tawhiti (Steel Guitar). Later Robbie Katipa Jnr joined them as lead/rhythm guitarist. Keith Leggett became his agent and *Hegan's Entertainment Agency* also found them work with Billy T. James and Ray Woolf.



Dennis retired from building in 2000 after his second heart operation and while recouping was asked by *Radio Waatea* if he would like to fill in a few days as DJ with their *Country Drive Time Show*. He was there for two years and in a matter of months he rated as their top DJ. In 2002 Ben Tawhiti and Dennis were invited to film a TV musical series, *Maumahara*. He has also had small parts on a couple of TV shows and has done several ads. From 2012-13 Dennis co-hosted a *Māori Television* country music showcase series, *My Country Song* with Saelyn Guyton. This was followed by a compilation album, *The Best of My Country Song* and a live album, *My Country Song – The Showcase Concert*.



He was a headliner at the *Golden Guitar Awards* at Gore in 1999 then he returned in 2011 to be awarded *Country Music Legend* and inducted into the *Golden Guitar Awards Hands of Fame*. His handprints were set in concrete outside the *Gore Country Music Club*. That same year he was awarded a star on the *Boulevard of Dreams* in Orewa. In 2019 he performed in a gala charity event to raise funds to move the stars across the road onto a council reserve by the beach. Dennis is also an honorary member of the *Bay of Islands Country Rock Festival*, he's performed there so often. He received a Rotary Award in 2016 and in 2019 he was granted the *Te Mata o te Ariki Special Award* and the *VAC Benny Award*.

Between 2007 and 2013 he won a raft of Awards including: Best *Selling Country Album*, *Best Overseas Artist*, *Best Country Male Artist* (three times), *Country Music Legend* and the *2009 VAC Top Male Vocalist Award*. His albums have sold well; out of 30 released, 11 have gone Gold and 5 went Platinum. To date he has sold over 300,000, making him one of the 10 top sellers in NZ. In 2011 *Maori Songbook* charted as the 2nd best selling NZ album (beaten by Six60) and 9th best selling international album.

Dennis did not write any of the songs that he successfully recorded. Some are iconic must-do's such as *10 Guitars* and *My Way*. Others are penned by his Kiwi mates; *We'll have a Maori Hangi Tonight* (Lance Kiwi & Jack Haimoana), *Somewhere in New Zealand Tonight* (Glen Moffatt), *Rose Can I Share a Bed With You* (Peter Posa), *Land of the Long White Cloud* (Dave Guillemont), the beautiful *Songs of Home* (Eddie Low) and *Before I Say Goodbye* by Yvonne Marsh.

Since first performing at the inaugural *Norfolk Island Country Music Festival* in 1994 Dennis has returned many times; in 2013 he was chosen as a headline act and became the face on a Norfolk Island stamp to commemorate the 20th year of the festival. He also headlined the *Australasian Variety Spectacular* that year and toured New Zealand's North Island with Eddie Low. He was a resident performer at *LaValla*, a small state of the art theatre in Tuakau township, from 2014 until its closure in 2017 and regularly sang at Jim and Chris Banner's tiny theatre in Kaiaua.



He's performed for heaps of New Zealand organisations over the years including; *Kidney Kids*, *Koru Care*, *SPCA*, *Heart Foundation*, *RSA*, *IHC*, *Lions*, *Rotary* and *NZ Vietnam Veterans*. He's been the Patron of the *NZ Country Music Association* since 1999.

In 2003 the success of his album *Out of New Zealand* prompted a promoter to organise the *Out of NZ* tour throughout the North Island. Then followed Robyn Alexander's *Highway of Legends* tour in 2008 and *That's Country* in 2012. Since 2015 he has worked and toured with Brendon Dugan.



Dennis met Pauline Teohaere when he was twenty and they married in 1972. In 1983 they adopted Pauline's niece, Melissa. After 18 years the marriage faltered with Dennis blaming himself for rarely being home, choosing work over family. When he met Yvonne Dixon at the *Tamworth Country Music Festival* in 1989 she was a member of the *Franklin Country Music Club*, played an awesome electric bass and had organisational abilities that were too good to be true. Love conquered all and they married in 1997 then soon began organising a very successful *10 by 10 Concert* at the *Founder's Theatre* in Hamilton to celebrate 10 years since his heart operation, the release of 10 albums, 10 years since he was named *Entertainer of the Year* plus it was held in the 10th month of 2010. The theatre was packed to capacity and Dennis received no less than 4 standing ovations, one when he was presented with his first two gold albums for *For You* and *Your Choice*. Dennis still describes it as his 'best show ever.'

His hobby is fishing and he is very good at it, rarely arriving home without his full quota of snapper; 'always snapper, anything else goes straight back,' he says. Dennis reckons that it's his lucky *Lakota* cap, named after his granddaughter and an American Indian tribe, that gives him such amazing luck but some say he is a fish whisperer; all his mates call him the 'Rodfather'. When the going gets tough, the tough go fishing, eh Dennis!



Dennis says that success is a journey not a destination and he is still hard working and committed to this journey. He's a genuinely nice guy and deserves all of the accolades he has received. His fan club has over 1,500 members and imagine if New Zealand media had played his records and videos as they did for Howard Morrison and Billy T. James; he would be a knighted Kiwi icon by now.