

Frankie Stevens MNZM

Based on interviews by Murray Cammick and Bruce Sergeant.

Francis Donald McKechnie Stevenson was born in Wellington in 1950. He has six sisters and four other brothers; the youngest, Jon, also has had a successful singing career. Their Māori mother Mildred and four of her sisters were members of *the Ngāti Poneke* cultural group in Wellington and their father Robert (Bob) had sang with a big band in Scotland prior to World War II. He arrived in New Zealand in 1946 and jumped ship. Bob always insisted that the young and shy Frankie sing to entertain friends and family. In 1951 Frankie's uncle Joe Ward-Holmes had taken the first Maori showband to Australia and Europe. Called *The Māori Quartet*, they were also known as *The Brown Bombers* and *The New Zealanders*.

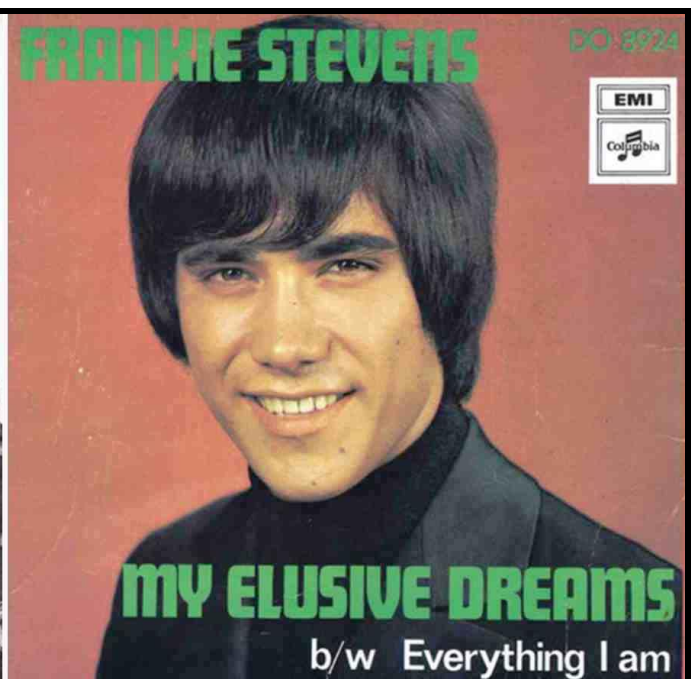
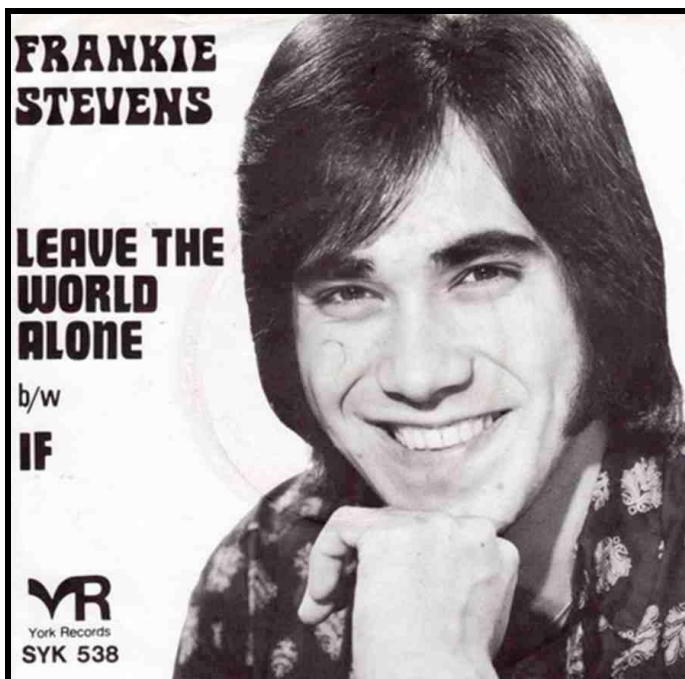


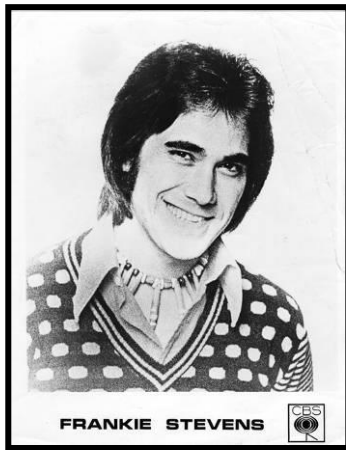
At the age of thirteen Francis was the lead singer of the *Heretaunga College* school band. The *Southern Auroras* consisted of; Martin Hope on lead guitar, Les Gruebner on bass, Jim McEwan on drums and Wayne Mason on rhythm guitar. The band went on to become the *Fourmyula* and recorded *Nature*.

Leaving college at 16, Frankie moved to Sydney to replace Peter Nelson who was leaving his group *Peter Nelson and the Castaways* to become a solo artist. Renamed *The Castaways* they scored a residency at the *Prince Albert Club* and released a number of singles for *EMI Australia* before returning to New Zealand in 1968.

'We got gigs based on the reputation of *Peter Nelson And The Castaways* and did all the rock and roll shows; *Bandstand*, *In Melbourne Tonight*, and the *Tonight Show* in Sydney with Don Lane', recalled Frankie. 'I also did those TV game shows based on American programs such as *The Dating Game*. Then we did a New Zealand tour that was absolutely crazy. We packed out every venue – screaming girls. Then in 1969 we all agreed the band had come to an end. We just lost interest'.

Frankie became a solo artist and Doug Henderson, *The Castaways'* bass player, became Stevens' manager. The first song Frankie released for *Columbia* was *My Elusive Dreams* which reached number 5 on *the National New Zealand* chart in March 1970 and stayed there for eight weeks. It received a *Gold Disc* in 1970.

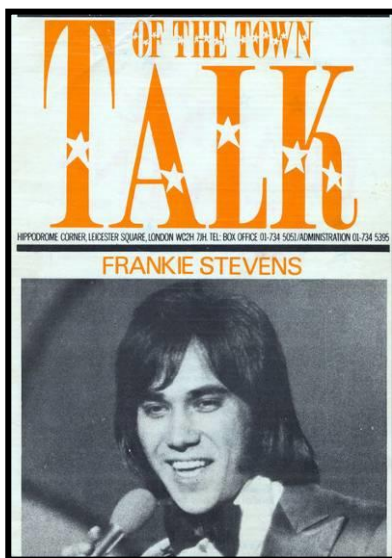




Eric Jury, who ran a venue in Sydney called the *Associated Motor Club*, had sponsored John Rowles to go to London; he fronted up with \$2,000 to help Frankie get there. Before he left, Frankie and his teenage girlfriend Margaret Ward tied the knot. He and Doug Henderson moved to London in early 1970 and seven months later Margaret joined them.

The early days were difficult. Gordon Mills, who managed Jones and Engelbert Humperdinck, had a recording company and a booking agency. 'We went and saw him and he put me under contract to record an album but he never released it! Apparently, his thinking was that there were enough guys with that kind of voice in the market, so he held it back for a year and a half then leased us back the tapes and cut the contract.' That was a common practice back then.

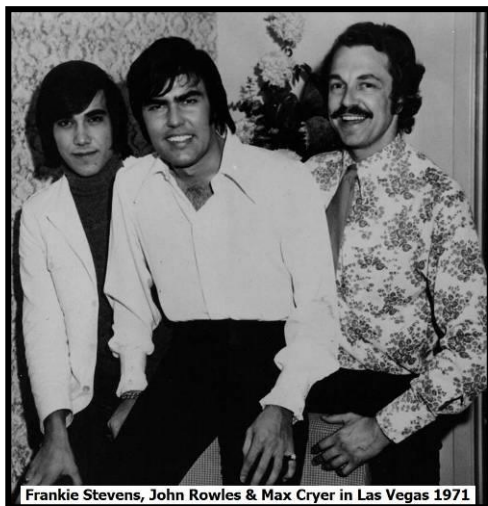
Frankie contacted John Rowles, whose manager Peter Gormley also looked after Cliff Richard. 'Gormley was interested in managing me but turned it down in the end because John and I were too similar – two good-looking young Māori boys with powerful voices.



Stevens entered the popular TV talent quest *Opportunity Knocks* and won six times, but on the seventh week he was knocked out by a piano player Bobby Crush. The TV exposure led to live work including appearances in Ireland and Scotland, more TV shows (*Top of the Pops*, and *Stars on Sunday*.) and two single releases on *Yorkshire Television's* own label *York Records*. Frankie sang at both *The Palladium* and *Albert Hall* and is the only New Zealander to do a 5 week season at the world famous *Talk of the Town*.

Frankie collaborated with two of the best songwriters in Britain, Les Reed and Barry Mason, who wrote *Delilah* and *The Last Waltz*. Throughout the 1970s they chose Stevens to travel to international song competitions to sing their compositions. He also sang demo versions of their songs.

In 1973 he travelled to Venezuela to compete in the capital city's *Caracus Festival*. The song, released in Venezuela as *Hace Un Año*, won the *Bronze Prize* but was not released in the UK. Mid-year he travelled to Bulgaria to sing a David Gates composition *If* at the *Golden Orpheus Song Festival*. It won first prize. Stevens also appeared in his own TV special in Bulgaria, viewed by an estimated audience of 50 million, plus local TV shows in many countries. He won a *Silver Prize* at the *2nd Tokyo Music Festival* and a *Bronze Medal* at the *Spanish Song Festival*.



'In 1971 Doug Henderson read in the paper that they were auditioning for a male lead for Tessie O'Shea's *London Music Hall Variety Show* at the *Sand's Hotel* in Las Vegas. We'd always wanted to go to the States so I auditioned at a theatre in Piccadilly and got the role. They flew me out to Los Angeles and we rehearsed there for a week or two then opened in Vegas.' The gig was originally for five weeks but it eventually turned into a 32 week season.

While working Las Vegas he met up with two other Kiwis also playing the town. John Rowles, who opened for Connie Stevens at *The Flamingo*, and Max Cryer playing at the *Union Plaza Hotel*. 'We all got together on John Rowles' opening night then they came and watched me at the *Sands*. My show later moved to the *MGM Grand Hotel*, at that time the largest hotel in the

world.

Sammy Davis Jr. once invited the headliners in our show to his wedding anniversary party in a private room, off the *Copa Room*. I had my 21st birthday while working Las Vegas.'



Frankie found a new manager Charles Mather who had discovered the *Māori Hi-Five* in Wellington in 1959. Mather became their on-the-road manager and travelled with them until he settled in Las Vegas as a music artist agent. He also managed cabaret singer Lovelace Watkins. Charles thought arranged for Frankie to work with *The Māori Hi-Five* after Solly Pohatu left the group. Stevens joined them at the *Nassau Beach Hotel* in the Bahamas for six months. They changed their name to *Mary And The Māoris* then appeared at the *Sheraton Hotel* in Puerto Rico for five months.

While waiting for his American green card Frankie put together a trio and played at the old *MGM Grand Hotel* in Las Vegas for two months. He regularly returned to London to continue his recording career and represent UK songwriters in a string of international song festivals.

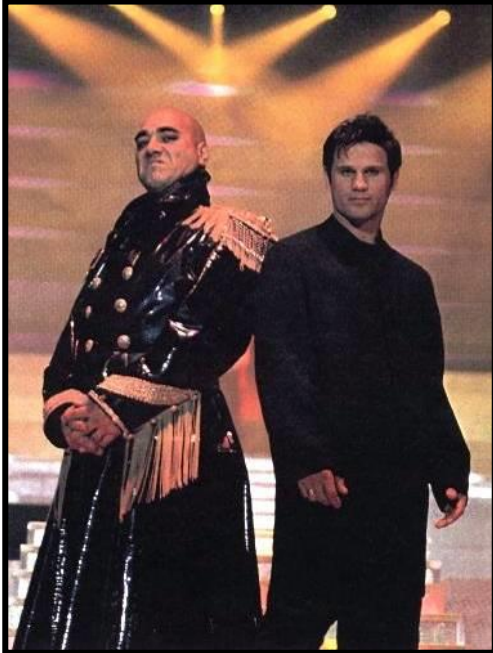
Frankie signed a 3 year contract with *CBS Records* in London in 1974 and toured the top venues in Great Britain and the Continent, as far north as Scandinavia. He appeared on television musical specials with artists such as Petula Clark, *Morecambe and Wise*, and Cilla Black. Frankie toured Japan's major cities, opening the first half of Shirley Bassey's show.

In 1976 Stevens got a phone call from John Rowles. 'I was in London at the time and Johnny called me. He had a bad throat, couldn't talk properly and was having a real struggle singing. He asked me if I'd come out and do the room while he got himself back into shape. I used his band and his dancers and slotted in some different songs. I put on a pretty good show for him. Two shows a night – a dinner show and the cocktail show – six nights a week at the *Royal Hawaiian Hotel's Monarch Room*, one of the best rooms in the world. If you opened up the outside doors into the verandah area it could seat 800 people.'

'I did the show until John got better, then I went back to London. Meanwhile John had a falling out with the management of the *Royal Hawaiian* and they called me and said they were not going to renew Mr. Rowles' contract and they'd like to offer me a three-year contract. I said to them that I was certainly interested but I wanted to talk to John first. John said, "Go for it!" so I went over and did seven months a year in Hawaii from 1976-81.'

While there he played Kevin Wilson in the 1979 TV series *Hawaii Five-0* and Russian spy Restov in *M Station: Hawaii*, a 1980 *CBS Movie of the Week*. During the Hawaiian off-season he performed in Europe, mainland USA and Canada.

In 1981 he returned home to Wellington with his family, wanting his London born daughters Amanda and Taryn to be brought up in a stable and safe environment. He purchased *Chips Nightclub* which morphed into a disco-orientated club where Stevens performed DJ duties, did a bit of bouncer work and sung a song or two. In his spare time he fronted his own series for *TVNZ* as well as visiting Japan, Australia, and the USA.



In 1994 Frankie toured with the New Zealand production of *Jesus Christ Superstar* in the role of the High Priest *Caiaphas*. He then joined the Australian tour with his younger brother Jon Stevens, who played the role of Judas. Returning home he toured with Sir Howard Morrison.

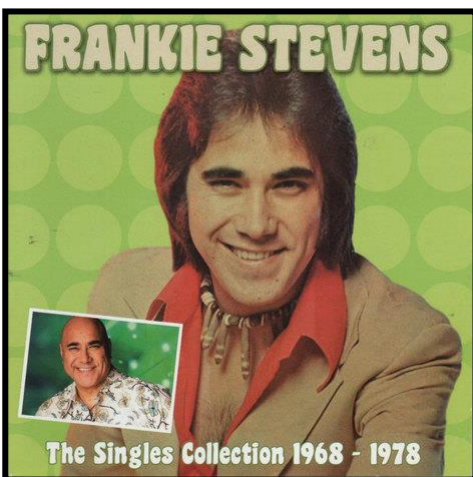
From 1998-2013 Frankie appeared at the *Coca Cola Christmas in The Park*. He also emceed the *1998 Christmas Lotto Draw* and that year was invited to join the *New Zealand Millennium Office* as their events coordinator for the millennium celebrations.

Stevens has emceed the *Miss New Zealand Show* on four separate occasions as well as the Governor General's *Waitangi Day Celebrations* at Government House.

He has event managed or been involved with many large and small events such as *Aotearoa National Maori Rugby League Tournament*, and the *Queenstown Air New Zealand Winter Festival*. Frankie works with *Avenues Event Management*, one of

New Zealand's top events management companies.

In 2003 Frankie appeared in one of the biggest movies of the year *Matrix 2 (The Matrix Reloaded)*, filmed at *Fox Studios* in Australia. His character Tyrant was also included in the video game *Enter the Matrix*. He played King Nikolas in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1996); Assan in the 1998 TV series *The Legend of William Tell*, Phil Mayo in *Lawless: Beyond Justice* (2001); Mr Lima in *The Strip* (2003), and the father in the 2019 television series *Aroha Bridge*.



2004 saw Frankie involved as one of the Judges on the most successful TV entertainment show of the year *NZ Idol*. He reprised that role in 2005 and 2006. He was instrumental in 2008 in putting together a 2 hour musical tribute to Sir Howard Morrison, *To Sir with Love*. Other local television programs he has been involved in are: New Zealand: *This is, Frankie Stevens, Ray Woolf Show, The Royal Command Performance* and *Dancing with the Stars*.

2005-08 he worked in events and entertainment; in the corporate world as a performer and emcee, and as an actor in local productions. He was also an organizer and emcee with *International Netball* and sang at the *Rugby League World Cup Final* in Australia.

Stevens has been honoured by his home town of Upper Hutt, which named *Frankie Stevens Place*, a street in the suburb of Riverstone Terrace. Frankie became a *Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit* in the *2005 New Year Honours* for services to entertainment.

In 2015 he was presented with a *Scroll of Honour* from the *Variety Artists Club* for his contribution to the New Zealand entertainment industry. 9 years later he was granted a *Golden Benny* statuette at the *2024 VAC Awards Night*, making him the 63rd recipient of the *Benny Award*.



That evening he shared the podium with Jackie Clarke who also received the Benny. Two Bennys were granted because the 2020 and 2021 Awards nights had been cancelled due to the Covid epidemic.

2009 saw Stevens performing in Canada, Malaysia, Australia, Fiji, and of course throughout New Zealand. That same year a CD called *Frankie Stevens, the Singles Collection* was released in New Zealand.

In 2010 he continued to globe trot, culminating in hosting The *NARTA Conference* on a private cruise ship off the coast of Italy. 2011 has seen him travel to Fiji and Australia; he also, along with Jackie Clarke, hosted a major fundraiser in Singapore for the Prime Ministers *Christchurch Earthquake*

Fund, as well as performing throughout NZ. Stevens once again was involved with the *Coca Cola Christmas in the Park* concerts in Christchurch and Auckland.



Frankie's brother **Jon Stevens**, who is 13 years younger, made a successful musical career for himself as well. Jon was discovered at a talent quest in Upper Hutt when he was 15. He was groomed by Danny Ryan and given singing lessons before joining *Marmalade Artists* and licensed to *CBS Records* who presented him with *Jezebel* and *Montego Bay*, both of which topped the charts. He had another hit single a month later with his duet with Sharon O'Neill *Don't Let Love Go* which made it to #5.

Jon never wanted to be a pop star. 'I was over-exposed and I was over being famous. I was about as famous as you could get in New Zealand. I was walking down an alley one night and ran into a bunch of blokes. One of them recognised me and said, "Jon Stevens!"

Another bloke says, "Let's get him." I needed to get out of the place.'

Australian band *Air Supply's* co-manager Lance Reynolds asked Stevens to travel to California and record a solo album for his *Big Time Records* label. 'What an adventure. It's early 1981 and I am working with some of the best musicians in the world and living in Beverly Hills. There I was, just a teenager.' But when he refused to sign a song-publishing deal with *Big Time* – 'All hell broke loose and I was ostracised.' Two singles were released by *Big Time*, a remake of *Jezebel* and *Lover My Love*, but neither was successful. The *Big Time* album *Jon Stevens* was released in 1982.

Jon moved to Australia in 1981 where he and Stuart Fraser founded *The Change* and released an independent single *Forever Young* in 1984. They became *Noiseworks*, built up a following on the pub rock circuit and signed to *CBS Records*. *Noiseworks* played their final concert in March 1992, recording *The Beatles Let It Be* as a swansong and a bonus track on their *Greatest Hits* album, which made it to No.6 on the *Australian Album Chart* in November. 'The creative differences that were going on and the drug problems that were prevalent were undermining the fabric of the brotherhood.'

In early 1992 Stevens joined the cast of *Jesus Christ Superstar* as Judas; John Farnham was Jesus.

In 2000 he became an Australian citizen, wrote and recorded *Carry The Flame* the official song for the *Sydney Olympics* torch relay, and replaced the late Michael Hutchence in *INXS*. Stevens left the band in 2004, frustrated by the band's slow creative process, and returned to his solo career.

In 2013 Jon joined the super-group *The Dead Daisies*. They opened for *ZZ Top* and *Aerosmith* in Australia then joined the 25 date 2013 North American *Rockstar Uproar Festival* alongside *Jane's Addiction*, *Alice In Chains*, and *Coheed And Cambria*.