

# George Tumahai

9 Jan 1932 – 22 May 1991



**George Huriinaha Tumahai** was born in Auckland 9 Jan 1932. His father Francois Tumahai had come from Tahiti with a culture group in the 1920s, fallen in love with Pori, a Ngati Whatua woman from Orakei, and never left. George was raised on 'Boot Hill', the Maori settlement adjacent to the Orakei marae with its Tumutumuhenua meeting house. Geoge had five siblings; Charlie, Danny, Freda, Frank and Tamaki and he himself had 5 children; Diane, Francis, Marshall, Taina and Glen. When George remarried, he and Barbara adopted two more. His nephew Charlie jr had a successful musical career in Europe and later returned to join the reggae band *Herbs* until his untimely death in 1995.

George had been singing since he was six. He was one of the Sunbeams in the *1ZB* radio show, *Thea and Her Sunbeams*. He also had a stint in that other great prewar radio institution, *Uncle Tom's Choir*.

George's teenage days in the last years of WW2 and the immediate postwar years, saw him singing in Auckland's leading dance halls such as the *Polynesian Club*. His contemporaries then included such entertainers as Howard Morrison, Lou and Simon and the *Hi-Fives*. Spots on radio included shows such as Wally Ranson's *Around the Town* and *Spotlight on the Bands*. The later saw him singing with the band led by Bernie Allen.



There were also road shows, touring with Noel McKay and George Tollerton and eventual entry into the record-making field with *Eddie Lund and his Tahitians*. Asked to do backing vocals on a record, George formed his trio, *The Deuces*, accompanied by Johnny Nelson on guitar and later Johnny Bradford when Nelson left to join the *Maori Volcanics*. They often picked up gigs at the *Chrystal Palace* alongside Merv Thomas and his *Dixielanders*. When the Deuces broke up George supported his family as a taxi driver and qualified fitter and turner. He became known as the *Singing Taxi Driver!*

George and Johnny played all of the Auckland nightclubs in the 50s and 60s. He also recorded with Bill Sevesi and Daphne Walker, notably on an album called, *New Zealand Maori Songs*. Tumahai also recorded on the *Tanza* label with Bill Wolfgram and his band in the 1950s and 60s.

He did some spots with Ricky May on *AKTV's* light entertainment show *Note For Note*, undertook tours with Maria Dallas and Alison Durbin and picked up some long running engagements in Tahiti, New Caledonia and Australia. But these long overseas jaunts were never to Georges liking. 'I like home. I just get homesick when I'm away.'



He talked about his philosophy in life, 'My ambition is simple. I just like doing what I am doing now. If I can make people happy, that's enough. If I entertain a couple of hundred people and they come up after and say they enjoyed it, that's enough'

In one of his last TV appearances he played one of the 'cuzzies' in a TV News segment of the *Billy T. James Show*. James reckoned, 'He was one of the most underrated performers of his time. Along with Uncle Howie (Howard Morrison) he was probably the most frequently working solo artist of the time.'

Promoter Phil Warren who booked Charlie regularly when he ran *Fuller's Entertainment Bureau* says the sunny-natured singer was a rare entertainer. 'He made you laugh and he made you cry. He was always in big demand.' Promoter Benny Levin says Tumahai was an immaculate all-round entertainer. He was a star of Television and the club circuit.



In an interview in 1981, he pointed out that it was the slowest year he had experienced and that you could count on one hand the number of people earning a living by entertaining fulltime. Even taxi operators were finding work slower. He had just finished four nights in Rotorua and had work lined up in Gisborne and Wellington for the next month.

Keith Leggett reminisces, 'My eternal memory of George was a *Variety Artists Club Award* evening at *Trillo's Downtown* when we were clearing up and George was on the stage, not realising the night was over and with his eyes closed, singing romantically, 'Feelings'.

George died on 22 May 1991; he had been ill since a cancer operation the year before. His funeral at the chapel in the Orakei Domain was a massive event with 600 attending. Lou Clausen and Ben Tawhiti were the head pallbearers along with two taxi drivers and two elders. The entertainers attending reads like a list of *Who's Who*; Les and Sonia Andrews, Johnnie Bond, Paul Bennett, Johnny and Millie Bradford, Daphne Walker, Bill Sevesi, Johnny Watson, Elaine Bracey, Jon Zealando, Joe Dewey, Silvio De Pra, Spencer Sylby, Rufus Nehu and Ronnie Sunden.

He received a *Scroll of Honour* from the *Variety Artists Club* in 1977 and the *Benny* in 1978. George was a very dedicated founder member of the club, serving on the Committee from 1975 to 1987 and as vice-president from 1980 to 1984. He performed with Simon Mehana at their *Auckland Centennial Variety Concert* on Sunday 25th April 1971 at the *St James Theatre* before Princess Alexandra, her husband Angus Ogilvy Mayor Sir Dove-Myer Robinson and the Governor General Sir Arthur Porritt.