

Sewell's 'potpourri' of music

He was the New Zealander behind the phenomenally successful "popera" group Amici Forever, and still leads a jetset music star's life two years after leaving the group. Jeff Neems spoke to Geoff Sewell about his current project, Incognito Artists, which heads to Hamilton in February.

Two days after the dramatic Rugby League World Cup final, singer Geoff Sewell is still buzzing with excitement.

A proud Kiwi, despite being based in London for more than a decade, Sewell says it was one of the highlights of his career to sing *God Defend New Zealand* before the Kiwis' incredible upset win over the Australian side, the Kangaroos.

"I always say that life is about moments, not days — and that was a moment, 'y'know?" says Sewell. "I've done these anthems a few times now, in different places around the world.

"I've done blimmin' Twickenham, I've done the FA Cup final, Millenium Stadium (Cardiff) and Wembley. But they're all kind of steeped in tradition, and people go 'no, you can't do anything, you've got to stand there, you've got to wear a suit and tie... no speaking', all of that."

For his performance at Brisbane's Suncorp Stadium, Sewell threw the anthem singers' rule book out the window, and — having flown out from London especially to sing — he wore his loyalty on his chest, donning a Kiwi league jersey.

"To say it was an incredible experience is an understatement," says Sewell, back in New Zealand for a few days and on the line from his father's office in Auckland.

"Everything was just perfect: it was one of those nights, a huge (career) highlight." He's heard whispers his passionate version of the national anthem — complete with a yell of "C'mon New Zealand!" at the end — helped motivate the Kiwis to their historic victory.

"That's what they were saying — I was really humbled by it.

"We all came across on the plane (from Australia), and the two guys who were in the team came up and said 'mate, thanks so much, we were so gee'd on'," says Sewell, now 35 and father of two.

It wasn't only the players who Sewell impressed: even veteran Australian league commentator Ray Warren passed comment on Sewell's rendition, noting it was one of the most inspiring versions he'd heard.

So inspiring, NRL officials jokingly regretted flying Sewell out to make his contribution.

"You've got to have some sort of spirit and drive behind it (anthem singing)," says Sewell, one of a stream of New Zealand singers who've made their mark performing the national anthem.

"I just don't care what it sounds like, as long as there is energy to what I'm saying."

For Sewell, the Maori verse which opens the anthem is no problem.

This is a man who, after all, can also sing in French, Italian, German as well as English, and has made his name singing with Amici Forever, the contemporary pop-opera crossover group which has sold millions of albums worldwide.

While the lifestyle of Amici Forever seems glamorous on the surface — "Amici was taking us all around the world, and it was amazing for a period of time," says Sewell — it took a toll on his family.

"Your time was not your own," says Sewell.

"The record label was saying 'we need you in America, we need you in Canada, we need you here and there'.

"Plus we owned the company, which had offices in New York and Edinburgh, so I was just all things to all people... and trying to be dad to two little girls."

Despite "creating the whole thing", he says Amici made him feel like a mouse in



a wheel, and while he owes music giant Sony "a massive debt of gratitude for breaking us worldwide" a change soon beckoned.

He handed over control of the group in early 2006 after his oldest daughter Sienna was diagnosed with a form of autism, and has subsequently set up The Sewell Foundation to support autism sufferers and their families.

"I think people can relate to the decision I made (to leave Amici)," he says. "Fame and fortune and all that stuff are great, but you know what? It doesn't mean jack shit."

While he's no longer with Amici Forever, Sewell knows full well that his current project, Incognito Artists, will appeal to the same demographic — the 30-plus market, and the Nanas and Grandads.

"I was blessed to have a really great fanbase with that group," says Sewell of Amici Forever.

He enjoys the fact that post-Amici he now has more control over his work and his whereabouts, and seems to thrive on being able to call all the shots.

"When opportunities like the rugby

league come up, and they want me to fly to Brisbane, I can say 'hey, let's do this at the same time'."

With Sienna now at school age, he and his wife Simone have given thought to returning to New Zealand permanently, but he says "the stars have to align first".

While he was regularly urged to tour solo, the tenor says he "loves just having friends around me as well". Wary of performers who do two-hour solo shows — and risk boring the audience — Sewell insisted on touring his homeland with other singers under the Incognito Artists moniker.

"I wanted to give it the added value of 'yes, you'll get me, but also you'll get a few surprises as well,'" he says.

Sewell adds mystery to the mix, declining to name the "most amazing talent from (London's) West End and Broadway" who'll join him for the New Zealand Incognito Artists tour in February.

It'll be Sewell and six other "guys and girls", and he's quick to point out some of them have played lead roles in productions of the epic musicals *Phantom of the Opera*

and *Singin' in the Rain*.

"The show is going to be an eclectic mix of classic songs, but there'll be some surprises in there as well."

Punters should go in to Incognito Artists performances expecting a "potpourri" of music including both the popera style which has made Sewell famous, as well as well known tunes from famous musicals, jazz cuts and perhaps a few pop ditties thrown in — he hints "a *Grease* medley" is a distinct possibility.

"The main vibe of the tour is that the audience have more fun than we do," he laughs. "But we do have an absolute blast on stage."

For the Auckland show, the singers will be joined by the Auckland Philharmonic Orchestra, but with space a lot tighter for the Hamilton performance, the orchestra will be what Sewell describes as "stripped down".

But he's adamant it'll still be a "real big sound" and says there'll be dancing too.

Prepare for an old-fashioned good time. Sewell says he's "wiser second time round", and the tour coincides with the release of a special festive season double-

disc edition of the *Believe* album which also features work by Incognito Artists. It makes sense — fans who loved Amici Forever are almost certain to like Incognito Artists.

"Two for the price of one," he laughs.

Who is Geoff Sewell?
Former boy soprano at Plimmerton School and Havelock North High School.

He is a professionally trained tenor, and a qualified chartered accountant.

Sewell is now 35, and is married to his business partner Simone Lanham.

The couple have two daughters, Sienna, aged 5, and Olivia, 3.

Sewell and Lanham came up with the concept of Amici Forever in 2002. The group — a mix of male and female singers combining classical opera delivery with the appeal of pop music — went on to sell more than 2.5 million copies of the albums *The Opera Band* (2003) and *Defined* (2005) worldwide.

The Opera Band peaked at No 1 on the NZ album chart. Geoff Sewell's Incognito Artists perform at Hamilton's Founders Theatre on February 18. Tickets are available from TicketDirect.

TOP RATERS

SINGLES
For the week ended November 23

LADY GAGA

- (1) **Poker Face**, Lady Gaga
- (2) **If I Were A Boy**, Beyonce
- (3) **Everything**, P-Money feat. Vince Harder
- (4) **Whatever You Like**, TI
- (5) **Live Your Life**, TI feat. Rihanna
- (6) **Hot N Cold**, Katy Perry
- (8) **Now You're Gone**, Basshunter
- (7) **All Summer Long**, Kid Rock
- (9) **Sex On Fire**, Kings Of Leon
- (18) **Use Somebody**, Kings Of Leon

ALBUMS
For the week ended November 23

THE FEELERS

- (1) **The Best: 1998-2008**, The Feelers
- (-) **Chinese Democracy**, Guns N Roses
- (-) **Dark Horse**, Nickelback
- (2) **Only By The Night**, Kings Of Leon
- (3) **Funhouse**, Pink
- (-) **Safe Trip Home**, Dido
- (6) **Rob Guest: 1950-2008**, Rob Guest
- (5) **High School Musical 3: Senior Year**, High School Musical Cast
- (4) **Black Ice**, AC/DC
- (9) **The Fame**, Lady Gaga

FILMS
For the week ended November 26

- (1) **Ghost Town**
- (-) **My Best Friend's Girl (1)**
- (2) **RocknRolla**
- (6) **Young @ Heart**
- (3) **In Bruges**

DVDS TO RENT
For the week ended November 23

- (-) **Hancock**
- (2) **Get Smart: The Movie**
- (3) **You Don't Mess With The Zohan**
- (1) **The Incredible Hulk**
- (4) **Mamma Mia!**

Compiled from video stores throughout New Zealand by the Video Association.

ALBUM REVIEWS

The Hold Steady
Stay Positive (Vagrant/Shock)

Strummer/I think he may have been our only decent teacher". Navy Sheets is a toast to disillusioned sex, while Joke About Jamaica is funkier and equally lyrical. The Hold Steady head out on a different tangent with Loyalty to Loyalty, and it fits me like a glove. The second album from the Californian Velvet Underground fans is a modern musical triumph, weaving the joy and pain of Jeff Buckley, the musical symbology of the Velvet Underground and the lyrical urgency of medium range Beat Generation poetry. What struck me most about this album however, was how immediately accessible it was: from the first chord on the absolutely beautiful opener *Against Privacy*, I was hooked. Mexican Dogs is the real gem of the album, like waves of pure sound rolling down over you, rising and falling with all the ecstasy and angst of a night of whiskey drinking after a bad breakup. Relief is a rare beauty too, lyrically flawless and musically tuned. For me, Loyalty to Loyalty is the album of the year. Head down to your favourite record store now, and get it.

★★★★ (The Hold Steady)
★★★★★ (Cold War Kids)
BEN STANLEY

Chiwoniso
REBEL WOMAN (Cumbancha/Elite Music)

Zimbabwean singer Chiwoniso successfully weaves ancient soul and deep African grooves through the sounds of contemporary pop music on this album. Her fine and powerful voice is underpinned by the haunting, almost otherworldly notes of the mbira (the African thumb piano), rippling effortlessly through tracks like *Vanporapa*, *Matsotsi* and *Nguva Ye Kufara*. And Chiwoniso has pulled together a strong lineup of some of Zimbabwe and South Africa's top musicians to help her interlock the melodies — fellow countryman Thomas Mapfumo, for instance. Horns counterpoint electric guitar and driving percussive rhythms, infusing the songs with a modern edge and injecting an infectious optimism against lyrics which speak of female independence and social problems. A couple of songs in English let the sum total of *Rebel Woman* down — the lyrics are banal and sentimental, and the backing lacklustre — but the rest of Chiwoniso's offerings are a richly melodic new sound for this reviewer.

★★★★
GILL DAVIS

Yes We Can!
Maria Muldaur (Telarc/Elite)

"Yes, we can!" That is the message that blues singer Maria Muldaur wants to get out to people who feel they can't do anything to stop wars. She has made a protest album to promote peace. Joining her and a four-piece blues band are an eight-strong Women's Voices For Peace Choir and 10 "special guests" from the entertainment industry, who rarely provide more than backing vocals. Where the album differs from 1960s folk albums is that most of the songs are in the blues tradition, with a bit of soul, r'n'b and gospel thrown in. Musical highlights are Marvin Gaye's *Inner City Blues* and Allen Toussaint's *Yes We Can, Can*. But lyrical highlights are three Bob Dylan protest songs, which sit uneasily alongside the predominantly utopian views of world peace espoused in most of the tunes. The much-recorded 1960s protest song *War* is given an unexpectedly gentle blues touch but the nationalistic gospel song *Pray For The USA* is unlikely to get Kiwi feet tapping. The album's cover drawing of a dove holding up the Earth by a string should be a sufficient warning to serious music lovers that this album is for idealists and political activists only.

★★★
WARREN BROWN

Jonas Brothers
A Little Bit Longer (Hollywood Records, EMI)

Riding high on the waves of Disney-produced mass media, The Jonas Brothers have cemented their place in today's young pop culture and have made a fortune in the process. With their third album in as many years they are now a big-ticket item and their production, marketing and presentation shows this. Their sound is very pop with a rock edge, and throughout the majority of the album this is consistent. One *Man Show* is the first track that musically had credibility for me with an upbeat punk rhythm pattern which is unfortunately watered down with a tepid melody. Tonight is another fast mover with typical pop hooks and structure. To their credit, the brothers write their own songs and have no problem doing this with a weighty play list of 14 tunes. Sorry and *A Little Bit Longer* are the only two ballads among an upbeat collection of predictable pop pertinence. One of the two bonus tracks is their take on The Beatles' *Hello Goodbye*, successful purely due to the quality of the song and not the delivery. The target audience will be delighted with the new offering, with more of the successful formula on display and no risk taking going on here. Jonas Brothers — dare I say it — are the Hanson of the 2000s. Another safe instalment and Christmas buy for the 12 and under.

★★★
STU EDWARDS

Kaiser Chiefs
Off With Their Heads (Universal/Liberator Music)

Travis
Ode to J Smith (V2/Shock)

The Kaiser Chiefs' third album *Off With Their Heads* sees them teaming up with current hot producer Mark Ronson. Surprisingly, Ronson has not led the band in any new direction, and if anything, songs are more downtempo than normal. Few tracks — save for initial single *Never Miss a Beat* and *Half the Truth* — urge you to get up and dance, which has never been part of the Kaiser Chiefs' charm. Lyrically, *Off With Their Heads* is as witty as ever, nodding at Jamie Oliver's *School Dinners* with the line "What do you want for dinner?/I want crisps". Lovely. *Ode to J Smith* is the sixth album from fellow British group Travis. The songs were written this time around on electric guitar, which has flowed through to the finished album. *Ode to J Smith* has a grittier rock edge than the band's previous four releases, which may startle Travis fans fond of the jangly acoustic guitars and keyboards. *Broken Mirror* could almost be a forgotten Nirvana track, while *Quite Free* hints at REM. Album closers *Song to Self* and *Before You Were Young* appear to close out this diversion of sorts, returning to more familiar Travis territory.

★★★★ (Kaiser Chiefs)
★★★★½ (Travis)
JAMES THOMPSON