The early local pop recording industry was dominated by three American genres. Female singers and male vocal groups performed mainstream pop, a wave of recording in a faux-Hawaiian style occurred, and a posse of country and western artists arrived. On the live scene, big bands still featured in cabarets and ballrooms, while in Auckland the Maori Community Centre was a Mecca for aspiring talent.

Hawaiian music’s long popularity in New Zealand had begun in 1911, and a key part of the attraction of ‘Blue Smoke’ in 1949 was its use of the steel guitar. In Auckland, the style was led by two Tongan steel-guitar players who became stalwarts of the live and recording scenes: Bill Sevesi and Bill Wolfegramm. Daphne Walker, a Maori from Great Barrier Island, was the most prominent singer, and it was Sam Freedman—a Russian Jewish songwriter based in Wellington—who wrote the biggest local hit.

Country and western has a history in New Zealand that is almost as long, and evolved from recordings and film. Country recordings by US acts were available in New Zealand in the late 1920s, and western films also inspired those wanting to emulate the cowboy sound (and look). New Zealand’s earliest prominent country artist, Tex Morton, remains the most influential. Radio also spread the popularity of country music, through request shows, live broadcasts from regional stations, and specialist shows hosted by Happi Hill and Cotton-Eye Joe (Arthur Pearce). Also important was a square-dancing fad in the early 1950s. The new independent labels jumped onto the country bandwagon immediately, with Tanza finding wide acceptance for the Tumbleweeds, who toured nationally. Otherwise, solo singers dominated the early country scene, so there was little of the interaction seen in jazz and dance bands. It was as if they heard a lonesome whistle while mustering on distant paddocks and practised their yodelling in isolation.

Maori pop music was nurtured at the Maori Community Centre in Auckland’s Freemans Bay. Here, the families of the urban migration of the 1940s and 1950s met, mingled and made music. Its stage was an ongoing talent quest and proving ground for a diverse array of acts, such the Howard Morrison Quartet, Lou and Simon, and the young Kiri Te Kanawa. It also helped establish many of the Maori showbands that later flourished overseas. For many careers in pop music, the road leads back to the Maori Community Centre.
By the early 1950s, local singers were competing in record stores against overseas performers like Rosemary Clooney, Patti Page and Dinah Shore. In Auckland, vocalists such as Dorothy Brannigan, Pat McMinn, Marvin Rivers and Eime Stephens were starting to make headway with their releases on Tanza and Stebbing. One Auckland retailer reported to New Zealand Truth in 1953 that sales of local records had more than doubled, and were now running neck-and-neck with their overseas rivals.

For those who followed local pop music, there even seemed to be a small-scale star system developing. Thanks to radio play – much of it live broadcasts with dance bands, or recorded jingles, rather than 78s – some young women singers were almost becoming household names. To fans, wrote a New Zealand Listener reporter, they were known as ‘chicks’ or ‘canaries’, although for those who did not venture to the cabarets, it was difficult to put a face to the voice. Mavis Rivers was the most polished of the class of 1952, said the reporter: always at ease with a song or a band, she was ‘hep to the beat and does a fast bounce tune as well’. Her 78s could be heard on Auckland jukeboxes, and sold to ‘collectors and kids’. Even Mavis’s sisters – Natalie, Sally and Mitzi – became a recording act, releasing five 78s on Tanza as the Rivers Sisters.

Dancing in My Socks
In each main centre, a female singer was prominent, on the wireless and on cabaret stages. Usually this led to recording work as well, even for those outside Auckland. With Marion Waite temporarily back in the US, she missed out on the early 1950s boom in recording. After the initial burst by Pixie Williams, Wellington’s main contribution came from Jean McPherson, who recorded for Tanza and HMV in the twilight of her career. The two Tanza discs are charming if contradictory: the follow-up to 1951’s ‘I Don’t Wanna Be Kissed’ was ‘Kisses and Affection’.

In Christchurch, Coral Cummins was a household name, especially through her work with Martin Winiata. ‘She sings with a cozy, intimate jauntiness’, said the Listener, her voice coming out of the radio ‘as personal and intimate as a kiss from your fiancé’.

Cummins was always elegant, whether in rehearsal – all in black, with a string of pearls – or in flowing satin ballgowns on stage. She began singing in her teens and during the war was appearing with the bands of Brian Marston and Winiata. The residency with Winiata – at the Union Rowing Club on the banks of the Avon – made them a drawcard right into the 1950s. Cummins was also regularly featured on 3YA with the studio bands, and ventured up to Auckland for a year to appear at the Peter Pan and Metropole with Art.
Crooner'. The ZBs took Leone on a national tour, and after 'Aloha'. The Tanza, 'Perimpo Perampo' backed with (b/w) 'Don't sing Rosoman. 'Coral's hip style is just what is needed to do full Rhythmaires. in 192 featured vocalist in Dick Colvin's band on 4YA. The band Jukebox justice to [the] fine Rosoman arrangements', said regular played Joe Brown's Town Hall dances, where her in the war she sang with clarinettist Keith Harris's group the entrance to her future husband, Dale Alderton. she described herself as

In Dunedin, Leone Maharey began as a child singing in the competitions and on radio, before becoming the featured vocalist in Dick Colvin's band on 4YA. The band regularly played Joe Brown's Town Hall dances, where her future husband and singing partner, Dave Maharey, was a 'crooner'. The ZBs took Leone on a national tour, and after that the frills. in a word she's a torch singer.'

But Auckland had the stars whose names resonated for years: Mavis Rivers and Eme Stephens, ostensibly rivals at Tanza and Stebbing, and Pat McMinn, dedicated to pop. Stephens was the first to become prominent, when she sang with Artie Shaw's band during its visit in 1943. She had been singing pop songs since childhood, accompanying herself on the piano when she should have been practising her scales. 'In fact, she liked to sing all the time, at home, at school, and at her first job in an Auckland store.' A part-time musician working at the store suggested she audition for Theo Walters, who needed a vocalist for his Friday night band 'Wagon show on 1ZB. When his contract ran out, there was no shortage of work. Stephens sang with the bands of Len Hawkins, Fred Gore, Art Rosoman and her future husband, Dale Alderton. She described herself as

strictly a commercial singer', and 'a nervous one at that'. Perhaps because of her modesty, said the Listener, 'her warm love of singing comes through very satisfactorily and makes the customers feel warm, too'.

Stephens was the vocalist on HMV's first release by New Zealanders, the Latin-flavoured 'You Can in Yucatan'. Her biggest solo hit came in 1951, 'Between Two Trees', which sold over 5000 copies and was often featured on 2YA's Hit Parade; her best seller was a collaboration with the Duplicats, 'Mockin' Bird Hill', which had already sold 6000 copies before the original version by Les Paul and Mary Ford had arrived from overseas. Besides Stephens, this vocal group featured Alderton, Ena Allen and pianist John Thomson, modernising pre-war popular songs such as 'If You Knew Susie'. The group was soon in demand for its 'old songs in new dresses', some in the style of Spike Jones.'

Alderton described Stephens as 'a romantic singer, who liked Rosemary Clooney and Ella Fitzgerald, of course, all those marvellous singers: it was part of her in-built repertoire'. She died suddenly in 1992, aged 68, within a week of her 1925s contemporary, Mavis Rivers. Forty years earlier, the pair had released a duet for Stebbing's Zodiac label: 'Ya Got the Makin's of Love b/w 'Promises'.

Of the top three female vocalists, Rivers and Stephens concentrated on sophisticated pop, aimed at adults, while the other member of the triumvirate became best known for her novelty songs. Pat McMinn, an accomplished singer during the war while still in her teens, was probably New Zealand's busiest vocalist in the early 1950s. In fact, she had never stopped singing professionally since winning the Duxford's talent quest in 1941, aged fifteen. After five years at the Trocadero came another six singing for Ted Croad's big band at the Orange, where she met her first husband, drummer Eddie Croad. During an evening of spike Jones. McMinn's success made the customers feel warm, too'.
After meeting Noel Peach at Astor studios, work quickly followed: jingles, nightclubs, radio bands, record releases. At the Auckland Swing Club she met Crombie Murdoch and soon she was singing ‘The Coffee Song’ at the Peter Pan with his group. ‘We were all very impressed. . . . Like all good vocalists she almost invariably got her lyrics wrong but the thing that always struck us about her was her natural musical ability and perfect diction.’

At Astor in 1949, Rivers was commissioned by Warner Brothers to record four songs from the film My Dream is Yours – ‘I’ll String Along with You’, ‘Canadian Capers’, ‘Someone Like You’ and the theme song. These became Peach’s first productions for Tanza. ‘Mavis was a wonderful little trouper’, Peach said later, ‘and she could accept direction when necessary – not that she needed teaching, for she was a born singer.’

When she was twelve the Rivers family moved to Pago Pago, American Samoa, and soon the harbour was full of US warships; hundreds of tents were pitched near her home, sheltering the troops. She began singing with her father’s band – ‘I loved big bands with a passion’ – and became a favourite of the Americans. Still in her early teens, she was almost a mascot, travelling from camp to camp singing several shows a week. For the marines based in outlying areas, a special hookup was arranged using the telephone system linked to camp intercoms. The family moved to Auckland in 1947, settling in Grey Lynn. It was guitarist Tommy Kahi who first spotted her talent when she sang with a Mormon choir in Auckland. ‘She had this one bar and I thought, Gee, what a voice. I went back and said, “Was that you? Look love, I’m having a jazz show tonight, would you sing?” . . . “Yes, I’d love to.”’ At the rehearsal Kahi introduced her to George Campbell, Frank Gibson and Derek Heine. ‘I said, “Look, you guys, I’d like you to back this young lady” . . . She sang about eight numbers, and once she sang “How High the Moon”, the boys were rapt.’

From 1947 until she left for the United States in 1953, Rivers was the queen of Auckland’s pop vocalists, flitting between gigs at the Peter Pan and Orange ballrooms to recording sessions for Tanza and Stebbing’s. By day she was a stenographer at Farmers Trading Company, often falling asleep over her typewriter after getting home at two in the morning. As a shy nineteen-year-old she impressed her co-workers when she picked up the sheet music of a song she hadn’t heard, ‘Mona Lisa’, and started singing. ‘Mavis was one of thirteen musical children born to Moody and Louisa Rivers in Apia, Western Samoa, in 1929. Moody was an alto sax player in a dance band with his brothers. Once a week he organised Family Night, at which every child was expected to perform an item, culminating in a finale featuring all fifteen members of the Rivers family. As a girl, Mavis went everywhere with a ukulele, and her grandmother encouraged her to perform for women’s clubs. ‘Mavis, sing! [But] I was singing before they asked. I was destined to sing.’

Her voice took her from Apia to Las Vegas, but the six years during which Mavis Rivers was Auckland’s leading singer were crucial to her career – and the fledgling New Zealand pop industry. Rivers, whose pure voice managed to combine subtlety and confidence, would record with Frank Sinatra, stand in for Ella Fitzgerald at her request, and perform regularly with the bands of Benny Goodman and Red Norvo. Before that, however, came a busy apprenticeship of which her international fans were largely unaware.
Stewart was in Auckland for a brief stopover. He was persuaded to enter the Astor Studios to back Rivers recording: ‘I’m in the Mood for Love’. Harrie, also on the session, said, ‘Rex prophesied quite a future for Mavis, but even he never realised how far she’d go.’ Stewart’s endorsement did not come cheaply after the session, when asked if he wanted a fee, instead of just suggesting a standard union rate, he replied, ‘You can give me £50.’

Rivers put her singing on hold while she had two sons, aged 17 and 19, shortly after a performance in Los Angeles. Frank Sinatra, Riddle agreed. At the first recording session with the Capitol Tower studios in Hollywood, when Rivers heard the orchestra strike up, she started to sing, then sat down and wept. ‘All of a sudden I was thinking of my dad. Look at me! I’m big time, recording with Nelson Riddle! We did one number and then the string players applauded with their bows. So I started crying again.’

A glittering US career followed for Rivers: three albums with Capitol; several more with Sinatra’s label, Reprise; and a residency at his hotel at Lake Tahoe. Riddle described her as having ‘the authority of a poised nightclub singer, the beat of a jazz vocalist, and the expressiveness of a girl who really feels what she sings. What’s more, she combines these qualities in a professional style that comes approachable; I’ll fix it, just like new.

What’s the address, what’s the address?
Hurry please and tell me do.
Top of Queen Street, on the corner
And the number is 492.

Geddes Dental Renovation clinic was in the same block as the Metropole, just 100 yards away from the original Dixieland (which had been built on the profits of Frederick Rayner’s denture empire). Written to the tune of ‘Clementine’, the jingle has lyrics attributed to Mrs Geddes. ‘It featured Astor Studio’s top session musicians of the day – George Campbell, Nancy Harrie, Lee Humphreys and character actor Athol Coates, plus McMinn – all on their way to the annual Musicians’ Union ball. Forever more, McMinn fielded requests to sing it, especially at parties.’

Usually, McMinn’s sunny pop songs were accompanied by the honky-tonk piano of Crombie Murdoch. But the person tickling the ivories on ‘Broke My Dentures’ was the most successful female session musician in New Zealand: pianist Nancy Harrie.

With Noel Peacock energetically recording at Astor, many other Auckland women made it to disc. Dorothy Brannigan began as a violinist, in a family that contained its own chamber group, giving camp concerts during the war as the Diggle String Quartet. Church choir and light opera performances led to radio work on 1ZB, as a vocalist with John MacKenzie and Maurice Tansley, and as a violinist with the station’s orchestra and dance band. She released more than twenty sides with Tanza, many of them smooth, country–pop duets with Buster Keene (the pseudonym of the Knaves’ Doug Mowbray).