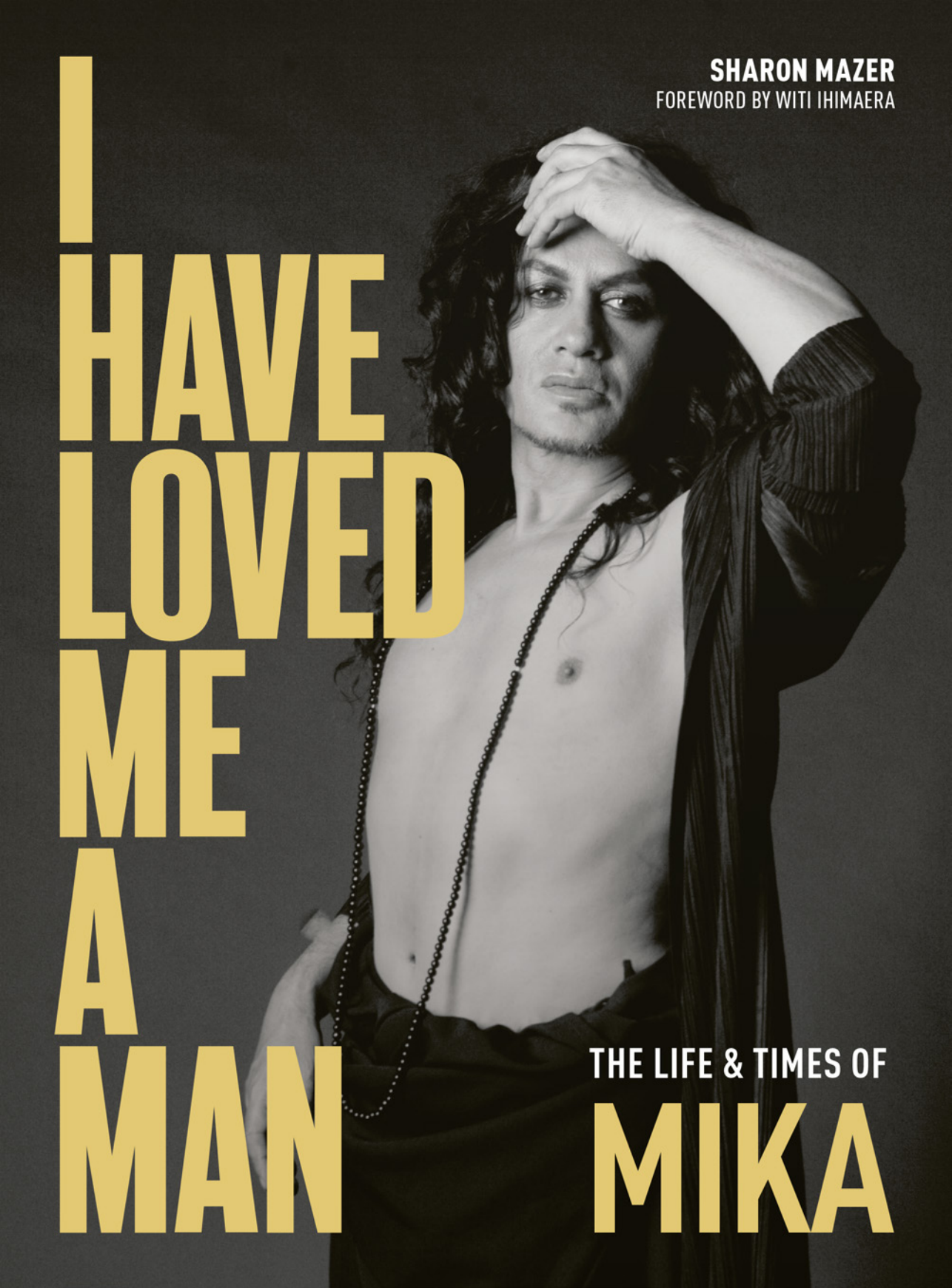
SHARON MAZER
FOREWORD BY WITI IHIMAERA
I HAVE LOVED ME A MAN
THE LIFE & TIMES OF
MIKA

















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I HAVE LOVED ME A MAN

THE LIFE & TIMES OF MIKA

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Photographs on pages i and ii: Salon Mika shoot, March 2018. Necklace and shoes by Patricia Fields (NYC); the necklace was worn by Rihanna in her September 2014 *W* magazine shoot. One-piece by Patrick Steele; leopard costume by Jasper Powell and Karlyn Cherrington. Make-up by Charlène Esthétique (MAC Paris). Photos by Lennie Hill, with Photoshop effects by Zakk d'Larte. Powell, Cherrington, Hill and d'Larte are Mika Haka Foundation Emerging Leaders.

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Thank you to the photographers, creatives and stylists who contributed to the artist Mika.

Mika lives on fast-forward. But he decided early on that his life was worth memorialising. Over three decades ago, he set himself to the task of preserving his history in photographs, artefacts and narratives – preliminary steps towards writing an autobiography. Calling it *Mātiro*, which he translates as 'to gaze within' or 'look inside' (the word also implies 'with longing' or 'desire'), he wanted the book to be introspective, something he knew was ironic given his reputation as an extrovert. He wanted his own voice to be set within the diverse voices of his many friends and collaborators, and the book itself to be a work of art, filled with beautiful and provocative images: his personal journey as a mirror held up to New Zealand social history, both fabulous and revolutionary. Almost ten years have passed since he brought this project to me. Brushing past our obvious differences – the gay Māori performance artist and the Jewish-American performance scholar – he invited me to set my own recollections of the past half-century against his, and to be my usual academic self and something more in so doing. As a thing of the past, this book seems already to be standing still, while Mika carries on full speed ahead.

Even so I press pause now, again, to thank Mika for his tremendous enthusiasm, generosity and patience, for telling me stories and showing me pictures, and for creating conversations that have challenged and moved me beyond measure. Mika's words are interwoven throughout the book in ways that are attributed where appropriate; often as not they are reproduced from notes taken along

Salon Mika shoot for Edinburgh, 2014. Millinery by Shona Tawhiao (Pacific Sisters). The jacket, by Elizabeth Whiting, is now in the permanent collection of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. Photo by Phil Fogle.

the way and, with the many details of performances and people, have been confirmed retrospectively as he read drafts of chapters. While never telling me what to think or say, he has been alert and corrective as needed. For this, again, I thank him. For his insistence on maintaining the integrity of the project, and for his persistence in pushing me to see it through, thanks are also due.

We both must offer huge thanks to Julian Cook, whose contribution to the shape and contents of the project has been profound. It was with Julian that we developed the first timelines from the 1960s to 2010 (and beyond, once that threshold was breached) and shaped the story that emerged from the chronology. Julian's sharp eye for aesthetic detail, curatorial finesse and, above all, true grit in shearing what we see here from the 155,000-plus (155,000!!) images in Mika's archive, have made the 'art' of this book possible. Julian's memories are bound up with Mika's and mine in the making of this book, and I must thank him for his grace as a collaborator, for the clarity of his vision and for speaking his truth. I'm sure I didn't always listen as I should, but I hope I've heard enough for *I Have Loved Me a Man: The Life and Times of Mika* to ring true.

It was Mark James Hamilton who introduced me to Mika and organised the fateful field trip to Timaru; over the years he has shared his ideas about what his collaborations with Mika meant both aesthetically and socially. I have been explicit where possible in crediting his PhD thesis, but my debt to him runs throughout the book. As does my gratitude to Te Rita Papesch, who introduced me to kapa haka some twenty years ago when we were colleagues at the University of Canterbury and who has encouraged me to process and present the knowledge she's given me on my own terms. Moe Meyer's provocations about queer performance, drag and camp were at the heart of a decade of animated, coffee-fuelled debate. I miss him now, and hope some of his spirit lives on in *I Have Loved Me a Man*.

When we were starting out, we invited Mika's friends, collaborators and former lovers to share their memories. We are most grateful to Witi Ihimaera for kindly allowing us to publish his remembrances as the foreword. In addition, the recollections offered by Nicholas Alexander, Tim Coffey, Trevor Doig, Loretta Livingston and Sue Schuster have informed the story told in ways that are not always visible but are important nonetheless. I owe a big thank you also to Lexie Matheson for her perspective on Mika's life and times, especially for bringing her own memories of Christchurch in the 1970s and 1980s to the surface where we could see them and, perhaps, put them to rest again. I have leaned on Jay Tewake, whose ability to light up the room has made the trek to Mika's studio a real pleasure more times than I can count, and on Lance Loughlin, whose steady presence has saved me during more than one panic over finding the thing – the thing! – that Mika says I need to do the job properly.

As always, the generosity of colleagues and their insights and perspectives have forced me to do more than just chatter on. Pare Keiha has been rather relentless in urging me forward. Peter Falkenberg helped me set the stage for this work with a joint paper offered at the 2009 Performance Studies international conference in Zagreb, and his sense of humour and scepticism have been crucial to my thinking here as elsewhere. Peter Cleave has been endlessly enthusiastic for the project. Paul Moon has gone beyond the call of collegial duty in reviewing and providing precise feedback for the first full version of the book. His adamant support has given me courage whenever I've faltered.

A huge thank you must go to Sam Elworthy at Auckland University Press for welcoming the project and seeing it through. Thanks also to Katharina Bauer and Matt Turner for their patience and exactitude in guiding the manuscript to fruition, and to Katrina Duncan for her grace in finding the perfect place for each of the 200-odd images in this book. Parts of this book have been adapted

from previous publications: 'Mika on the Mirror Ball Stage' (*Theatre Annual*) and 'Skirting Burlesque' (*Australasian Drama Studies*). My deepest gratitude to both editors, Dorothy Chansky and Peta Tait, and to the peer reviewers, who in guiding these articles to print helped me to craft effective ways of talking about Mika's performance art in the academic frame. The first step towards this project was funded by a small but handy College of Arts Research Fund grant (University of Canterbury, 2008). The curation of images was further supported, in part, by a research grant from Auckland University of Technology (2016).

For their unflagging good cheer as I wafted into long digressions about Mika's work, and for friendship and understanding above and beyond when I've been in the writing tunnel, in particular, I must thank Bettina Wallace, Colin Goodrich, Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Jani Katarina Taituha Wilson. And finally, my daughter, Casey Larkin Mazer Carsel, must be thanked again, as always, for giving way to my performance research when I'm sure she could imagine other ways for us to spend our days and evenings together. I hope she remembers her childhood conversations with Mika at the kitchen table – on everything from condoms to intellectual property rights – as fondly as I do, and that such lessons are being put to use appropriately now that she's away at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Thanks, Casey, for putting up with both of us. This one's for you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Mika often talked as I typed. Our personal communications were then shaped as a result of further verbal and written exchanges into many of the quotes that appear here without formal citation. In addition, Mika's use of te reo Māori in his songs involves a degree of poetic licence, and has been left much as he originally arranged it to maintain consistency with his performances. The translations into English are somewhat literal without necessarily being lyrical, to evoke the meaning underlying the singing.

The images that appear here were collected by Mika from numerous sources: family photos, snapshots and selfies, show posters and professional photo shoots. Mika has a remarkable gift for remembering the faces in front of and behind the cameras. We have taken particular care to identify the photographers who worked with Mika to create so many fabulous images. There are, however, some names lost to time, for which we apologise.

FOREWORD

MIKA: STILL A STAR

WITI IHIMAERA

People forget that Mika was once a Timaru boy.

They still talk about him down there in that staid southern town where he began life as rugby-playing Neil Gudsell, adopted and beloved son of a Pākehā couple. Based on his adopted background, in fact, Mika actually said one of the bravest things I have ever heard a Māori say: that it wasn't blood ancestry that was important if you wanted to claim being a Māori.

Of course, I had heard of Mika's fabulosity years before I actually met him. The great Carmen first told me about him in one of her clubs in the red-light Kings Cross district of Sydney when I was trashing myself at some point in the 1980s. Up to that time I had known Mika only as one of the regulars of a television series called *Shark in the Park* where he played, of all things, a young constable or police officer.

Yes, our Mika, the trans-everything hypersexual all-guns-blazing celebrity, playing a nice inoffensive officer of the police force! What was television thinking? That was in the days of black-and-white television, too!

Mika and Witi backstage at the 1991 Devotion party in Wellington.

But there was nothing black and white about Mika. He was totally Technicolor; I have to say that he was much better typecast as the desirably dishevelled Māori boy sitting on a tree and showing off his wares in Jane Campion's *The Piano* some years later.

At the time that Carmen inveigled me across the street, Mika was planning to make a movie of the great drag diva's life. Not only that, but he also planned to star as Carmen, who was always one of the great icons in his life. And why not? Mika was a star himself!

I first met Mika with one of his lover-protégés in Herne Bay where I was living with my partner. I didn't think he knew who I was, as I usually appear in high-quality glossy publications and not the kind of trashy, slutty reading material that he favours. But from the beginning each of us recognised something in the other: two Māori boys off to conquer the world. We became fast friends, womb to tomb, birth to earth.

At the time he was, and still is, a force of nature. He was working as a gym instructor – once I went with him, and when these young muscle Marys saw that he was taking the session they walked out because he was known for his punishing routines.

He was also putting shows together for various clubs up on K Road and particularly for Mardi Gras and other dance parties around New Zealand. I once went with him to a Wellington dance party where, after taking something that was probably illegal at a hotel room before the event, I found myself fighting all these queens for mirror space as they put on their false eyelashes; they won.

The dance party was totally fabulous. Mika was due to have the final starring spot, and he couldn't make up his mind as to whether he should wear a leopard-skin coat or a lurid green jumpsuit. As the spot approached he kept on asking, 'Which one? Which one!'

As if it mattered. When the spotlight came on, he had decided not to wear anything. There he was, like some Folies Bergère fan dancer, striking a pose without a fan.

I've been with Mika during good times and bad. During the heady gay-carnival 1980s, his 'Lava Lover' period, I foolishly proposed to write a cabaret act for him called something like 'Luana, Queen of the South Pacific'. I planned to model it on an old Maria Montez movie called, I think, *Cobra Woman*, in which Maria played both the Queen (a badass gal) and her twin sister (a good girl). At the end of the cabaret, I planned to have a volcano erupt on stage into which the Queen would be thrown, leaving the twin sister to take over as ruler of the island and marry the hunky hero. When I began to tell Mika about the scenario, he so wanted to be the bad Queen, dripping in pearls and nothing else. 'I can do that!' he said. Alas, when I explained about the virginal twin sister, he also said, 'I can be a virgin!'

Yeah, in his dreams. The point is that he wanted to play all the roles and, you know, I reckon he could have.

In the 1990s, our friendship deepened. My long-time lover thought we were having an affair. His short-term lovers (I used to call him 'Mika, of a thousand lovers') came and went with not so surprising regularity, but he managed to maintain most of them as friends. I say most, but there was a certain occasion when he pleaded with me to come to his apartment just in case a recent ex-lover was waiting. The lover wasn't but, before he had left, he had taken the scissors to everything. It was like a movie, truly.

As I've said before, Mika was always working it: projects, projects and more projects. There was an ill-advised couple of jaunts to Japan with a covey of innocent dancers . . . but God looks after fools and Mika, and all casts returned without having been sold to any Arabs. He also went to New York, where he appeared with some fabulous gay icons including Grace Jones (yes, Grace Jones!!!) and stayed at my friend Leni Spencer's apartment on the Upper East Side. Leni adored his glamour and sassiness.

There were two really interesting projects. One of them was the writing of a sitcom for Māori Television called *Pania's Palace*: Ginette

McDonald, Mika and I were all contracted by Ripeka Evans to do that one and the scripts must be somewhere. They were pretty good. I think Mika expected to star in that one, too.

Then, when my novel *Nights in the Gardens of Spain* was published, Mika produced a launch party to end all launch parties. Imagine this: a coffee bar filled to the brim with publisher and writer types, and all the entertainment looking as if it was coming out of *La Cage aux Folles*. And in the middle of it, Mika and I dancing a mean, sexy, down-and-dirty tango.

We're still friends today. He looks exactly the same now as he did forty years ago. And he's still working it, though he numbers the rich and the famous among his friends now. He's still fabulous. And working for so many charities.

Most recently he was to be seen, glamorous as ever, campaigning for a political future in Gareth Morgan's party. He didn't make it this time, but I'm betting this is just the beginning and looking forward to when he makes his first speech in the Beehive. Watch out world!

Still a star.

September 2017

Witi and Mika at the launch of the Auckland Museum's two-part exhibition 'Wonderland: The Mystery of the Orchid and The Magic of the Rose', 2009.

CHAPTER ONE

WEET-BIX MĀORI

But the queer – not yet gay – world was an even more intimidating area of this hall of mirrors. I knew that I was in the hall and present at this company – but the mirrors threw back only brief and distorted fragments of myself.
— James Baldwin, 'Here Be Dragons'

I used to believe that my birth mother gave me away without a second thought, but that wasn't true. I only found out forty years later. My birth sister tracked me down and told me the real story. When I was born, my mother told the hospital that she wanted to keep me, but they wouldn't let her. They took me away before she could even see me. Turns out, at the time when I was born, it was not unusual for single Pākehā women who had babies with Māori men to be forced to give their babies up for adoption. I've met two other men who were also taken at birth, handed to nice middle-class, Pākehā families in the same way. We're New Zealand's own 'Stolen Generation'.
— Mika

Singing a Māori-haka-meets-Liza-Minnelli version of 'New York, New York' in *Tribal Hollywood* at the Edinburgh Fringe, 1999.

THE ONE, THE ONLY . . . MEEEE-KA!

A few years ago, I took a road trip to the port town of Timaru, several hours to the south of my home in Christchurch. Our destination was Timaru Boys' High School, a bastion of middle-class culture for the (male) descendants of New Zealand's early settlers. We were there to see the Māori performance artist Mika, an 'old boy', perform his cabaret show. The gymnasium/auditorium was lit mostly by votive candles on low tables that were scattered, cabaret-style, around a cleared space on the floor. Overhead was a mirror ball, casting diffused glints of light at the basketball hoops and commemorative plaques and on us. At the grand piano in one corner, a man sat playing a mix of classical and contemporary tunes; in the opposite corner a large TV screen was soundlessly cycling through highlights from Mika's TV series, *Te Mika Show*.[1] The room filled quickly around us: mostly older Pākehā (white, non-Māori) men and women,[2] who greeted each other as if at a high school reunion – which is what it was in many ways. They purchased glasses of wine, beer or soda, nibbled on rice crackers and dip, and chattered amongst themselves in cosy companionship.

At 7.30 p.m. sharp, the pianist stopped. Recorded music swelled. From behind the curtain Mika announced himself over the PA: 'Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, performing here for you tonight, it's the one, the only . . . Meeee-ka!' And then he entered to ecstatic applause. A cluster of feathers topped his hair, and he wore an enormous black patterned cloak (by Issey Miyake) that he dramatically swished to make a peepshow of covering and revealing a loincloth festooned with pāua shells and yellow straw – a creation of the Pacific Sisters performance art collective. He spent the next hour in the spotlight under the spinning mirror ball, singing medleys that slammed traditional Māori tunes and phrases into songs by Madonna, Prince and – for the encore – Roberta Flack, dancing,

joking and reminiscing with the audience about how he felt to be back where, so many years ago, he had been so well known as Neil Gudsell, at once the only visibly Māori and the only openly gay boy in the school. His adopted sister and his birth sister were sitting together in the front row, along with his old teachers and former schoolmates. After the performance, he changed into a kaftan that was adorned with cameos of the Virgin Mary; then he posed for photos, his arms around clusters of adoring fans. He was, after all, a celebrity – an old boy who had made it big on the international stage, returning in triumph to the town where it all began.

All this is to say that it was a very strange evening. All the more strange because I seemed to be the only one who thought it so as I watched this native New Zealander, this gay Māori man, spin bits and pieces of Māori language and cultural performance into songs from the international hit parade. It was a kind of 'native drag', at once ambivalent (in attitude) and ambi-valent (in motion), a queer tipping into and slipping between the tropes of postcoloniality and biculturalism, dressing up and discarding each in turn.

A WEE BROWN FACE IN A SEE [*SIC*] OF WHITE FOLK

Who is Mika? Proudly, performatively Māori. Just as proudly and performatively gay. Mika grew up in Timaru, as he says in his performances, a queer brown boy adopted into a resolutely white, straight home, discouraged from seeking out his birth family who, he discovered only much later, were living just a few doors away. Mika's childhood experience of self calls to mind the hall of mirrors James Baldwin describes in 'Here Be Dragons',[3] or as Mika sometimes says, 'here be taniwha' – taniwha being a Māori equivalent to the European concept of dragon, or sea monster, the awe-full apparition at world's edge.

Families are our first mirrors; we look to them to find out who we are, who we might become, mostly by aligning ourselves with what we see. Sometimes, however, it's not so simple. From the start, Mika, in looking to his family to find himself reflected, saw instead prismatic refractions – not the singularity of sameness but the bits and pieces of difference, of Other-ness.[4] Embraced by the family who took him in, he embraced in turn his shifting sense of self as something to be discovered, experimented with and performed for others. And as he has gone along, his celebration of a different sort of self-in-the-making has inspired him to celebrate others for their differences. It's made him the celebrity we see today.

In an early family photo we see him with his older sister and parents, just about to dance himself out of his frilly baby clothes. Neil Gudsell. Mika before he was Mika. He's not at all camera-shy, flirting with the lens (and whoever is behind it) already: chubby-cheeked

Mika, aged eighteen months, his parents Dawn and Bill Gudsell and his sister Shirley in the family's state house at 24 Tweedy Street, Timaru, c. 1963.

and cheeky, looking as though he's just told himself a little joke. With the floral drapes and blinds setting the stage, this could be just about any nice, middle-class-ish family portrait, taken from anywhere in the Western world: 'a vision of ordered, comfortable domesticity' perfectly reflecting New Zealand's 'post-war suburban idyll'.[5] It's the early 1960s, the tail end of the baby boom, the last lull before the incursion of popular culture via television and radio stirred things up. Mika's parents look old enough to remember the war, yet young enough to move to the new beats.

The family photo is also quintessentially Timaru – from Te Maru (meaning 'place of shelter') – where (as I write this) the mayor has just declared war on the rest of Southland for the cheese roll title.[6] As a convenient stopover on the drive between Christchurch and Dunedin, Timaru can seem to the casual traveller like the land that time forgot. A beautiful ocean view, with a summer carnival on the

Mika's mother and father courting in the 1950s.

Left: Mika's father aged sixteen, dressed up and posing with a penny-farthing in South Canterbury. *Right:* Mika's mother aged sixteen just after World War II, March 1946.

waterfront. Pubs, cafés and tearooms set into preserved colonial buildings. An assortment of shops and a couple of petrol stations on, or just off, the main street. Writing to Mika in 2012 of her memories of the town and time, Sue Schuster remembers Timaru as '[j]ust a small, quiet, slow moving town. Keep in line, don't rock the boat.'[7] In *Growing Up Gay*, Mika describes it as 'the closest thing to the town in *Twin Peaks*, in that it looks utterly conventional but contains pockets of the bizarre'.[8] Indeed, on the grounds of Timaru Boys' High, near the auditorium where I saw Mika perform in 2010, there grows a Black Forest oak tree – presented by Adolf Hitler to Jack Lovelock as a symbol of Germany after his gold medal win in the 1936 Olympics.[9]

New Zealand in the 1960s was, at least on the surface, a thoroughly settled place. It was still colonial, only tangentially connected to the wider world – mostly via the provision of lamb, butter, and army fodder – and, superficially, not much more progressed since it was imagined in *Green Dolphin Street* (1947), the first Hollywood

film to feature New Zealand scenery and peoples in a quasi- (very quasi) realistic manner. In *Green Dolphin Street*, we see the settler-protagonists (played by Van Heflin, Richard Hart and Lana Turner) survive a spectacular earthquake and a vividly violent betrayal by their Māori workers – including a remarkable, for all the wrong reasons, performance of the haka 'Ka Mate' (by a mélange of non-white, non-Māori actors) – to land at last in Dunedin in the late 1840s. The final scene shows them in a domestic tableau, comfortably seated at a formal dinner, looking forward to making their fortunes raising sheep, on the top of the world at its bottom end, the Māori successfully relegated to background colour. Change the hoop skirts for twinsets, I imagine, and the South Canterbury scene might look much the same a century later: sentimentally settled, modestly prosperous and superficially homogeneous.

How unsettling then to be Mika. Precociously self-aware, even as a child, he says, 'I've always been queer. Always.'[10] His first sexual encounter, he claims, was with a boy when he was around four years old – or maybe eight, he adds, depending on how 'sexual encounter' is defined. While his coming out, at age twelve or thirteen, was met with repressive force in some quarters, even violence, when push came to shove he held his own. In his baby photos, whether formally posed in the studio or captured au naturel in the family paddling pool, he looks extraordinarily self-possessed.

His baby pictures and school photos are perfectly ordinary, of course. What we know now of Mika almost certainly colours what we see in these images of the past: a glint in the eye, a sureness in the way he holds his body and poise in his pose for the camera. That the boy in the photos could be any boy, almost anywhere, that his image is so like anyone else's, and yet it is not, is somehow significant, critical to the way we respond to the grown man now. Perhaps this is because in seeing the twists and turns of apparently contradictory identity positions – butch and femme, Māori and

Pākehā – successfully intertwined in Mika's performance of self, we experience our desires to be something more than ordinary in our own selves.

Mika's desire to find himself as Māori, like his desire for sex with other men, seems to have been hardwired into him from birth. Before he was Neil Gudsell, for a brief few days, he was Terence John Pou. He was born in 1962 to a Pākehā mother, Elizabeth Halkett, and traces his whakapapa (heritage) through his Māori father, Witoti Winiki Pou, to Te Kotahitanga Marae in Kaikohe, in the Far North. Almost immediately, he was adopted by the Gudsells – his '*real family*' (emphasis his), as he puts it in *Growing Up Māori* (1998), a collection of reminiscences edited by Witi Ihimaera. And here is where the swings and roundabouts of identity in bicultural Aotearoa New Zealand begin to reveal themselves. For a long time, Mika believed that his birth mother had rejected him, suspecting her of not wanting to be a white mother with a brown son. But while his birth father, who was distinctively Māori, and the rest of that side of the family had removed themselves to the north, it turns out that Mika's birth mother and sister were not

Below left: Mika's mother won this Easter egg in a raffle at the Four Square in 1963. *Below right:* Mika at eighteen months in the family's paddling pool.