



# Striking a chord: stories of change through a youth song writing competition

Youthtown is active in several spaces working to support youth development and the next generation of young adults who feel prepared to take on their worlds with purpose and passion.



*Play It Strange* has been supporting and encouraging young New Zealand songwriters to write, record and perform their own songs and Youthtown has had a massive part to play in ensuring young people have access to this opportunity! As a sponsor for the National Songwriting Competition since 2020 for young people aged 13-15 (Year 9 – 11 at secondary school) across Aotearoa, Youthtown have backed four competitions, supporting young songwriters to enter 655 songs in that time. This has enabled young people to hone their skills in songwriting and music more generally. Their support means that over the years, ALL finalists have had their songs recorded in a professional recording studio to go on the Youthtown Songwriting Competition digital album of that year. 178 finalist songs were recorded between 2020 and 2023, with this number still growing.

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Mike Chunn, ONZM, founding member of the iconic New Zealand band Split Enz and founder of Play It Strange, says, “The support from Youthtown in the running of the Youthtown Songwriting Competition by Play It Strange gives the programme a true emphasis and a wide support structure in ensuring there was a national awareness of the competition and its elements.”

## Why songwriting is important for young people

Songwriting is a valuable art-based tool for young people as it enables them to express their emotions and thoughts creatively. Engaging in songwriting helps young people articulate their experiences and develop a deeper understanding of their feelings (Beech, 2015). It also enhances their critical thinking and problem-solving skills as they navigate the complexities of writing lyrics and composing music (Holochwost et al., 2017). According to research by Baker and Bor (2008), Caleon (2019) and Rickard et al., (2013) engaging in musical activities, such as songwriting, is associated with numerous psychological benefits, including improved emotional regulation and social connectivity.

In the broader context of New Zealand, engagement in the arts, such as songwriting, plays a crucial role in the cultural and social development of young people. Art helps preserve and celebrate the diverse cultural identities in New Zealand, including Māori traditions. It provides young people with opportunities to connect with their heritage and community, fostering a sense of belonging and pride. Engaging in art also promotes mental well-being by offering a constructive outlet for self-expression and stress relief (Bennet et al., 2024; Ennis & Tonkin, 2018; Moula, 2021; Johnson, & Rickson, 2018).

## The importance of arts funding

However, recent budget cuts in New Zealand have threatened the accessibility and sustainability of arts programmes. The 2024 budget included a reduction of \$42.2 million over four years, affecting various cultural agencies and initiatives (Ministry for Culture & Heritage, 2024). These cuts could limit opportunities for young people to engage in artistic activities, which are vital for their personal and social development.

In Auckland, the proposed budget cuts have put additional pressure on funding streams that support arts and culture. These reductions could hinder the maintenance of community arts programmes and restrict young people’s access to arts education and participation in cultural activities (Auckland Council, 2023). Ensuring adequate funding for arts programmes is essential to provide young people with the opportunities to explore their creativity and develop essential life skills.

Communities and policymakers need to recognise the significant role that the arts play in nurturing young minds and fostering a vibrant, inclusive society. Adequate support for arts programmes is crucial to maintaining these opportunities for future generations and ensuring that the benefits of engaging in the arts are accessible to all young people.

# What's the impact of Youthtown's songwriting competition by Play It Strange?

The Youthtown Songwriting Competition by Play It Strange is for young people aged 13-17 across New Zealand. The songs created by young New Zealanders form a community thread, a national voice, and a distillation of their identity. The songs they produce offer a reminder that there is much to learn from young people. These songs are means to understand young people's emotions and thoughts, but more specifically share glimpses into their experiences at critical periods in their adolescence.

In 2023, Youthtown wanted to know the impact of their sponsorship on the young people who participated in the competition. They invited the Centre for Community Research and Evaluation (CCRE) at the University of Auckland Education and Social Work to ask young people who participated in the National Songwriting Competition by Play It Strange over the years to share their experiences in order to understand how they may have been transformed through participation. The study aimed to investigate young people's motivation for participation, the competition process, and their thoughts on potential impact to confidence and skills as a songwriter.

## Mira

**Favourite Genre:** So many!

**Motivation:** Motivated by the opportunity to share her music and gain professional experience.

**Experience Summary:** Mira found the recording experience empowering and enlightening. She appreciated the opportunity to work with professionals and saw a significant improvement in her music.

**Impact on Confidence:** Increased confidence in her abilities as a songwriter and performer.

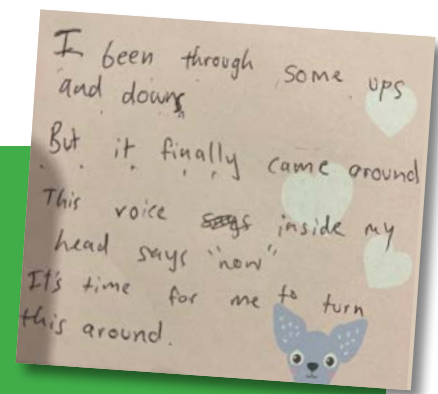
**Future Plans:** Determined to continue making music and exploring different genres.

**Relationship Impact:** Felt closer to friends and family who supported her throughout the journey.

**Advice:** "There's nothing wrong with giving it a go. The worst that can happen is you might not hear back, but it's worth trying again."

**"The song that we wrote, Mira contributed a little bit to the lyrics. And then she was like, I'm sorry, I have to go France. But then I kind of connected with her over Instagram and like, fed her some ideas. And she was like, Wait! Yeah, I really liked that! And it was really a group effort, but just split up. And then, once we, when we were going through the actual recording of the song, we, me and one of my other friends who plays piano, were doing the key instrumentals. And then, from there, once we submitted it . . . for the actual recording itself, we were in the studio in our town, and recording with Jama Holland. And he's like, he's a really nice producer. And through that whole recording process, he helped us shape some of the lyrics . . . we just felt really supported. Mira was back by then for that time. And we felt supported and like, valued as songwriters."**

*\*The vignettes encapsulate the diverse experiences and reflections of the participants, highlighting the themes of confidence building, learning opportunities, and the importance of support from family and friends. Names have been changed to retain participant's anonymity.*



## Sandy

**Favourite Genre:** Pop, R&B, Hip Hop

**Motivation:** Encouraged by her mom, Sandy has been writing songs since primary school.

**Experience Summary:** She gained significant confidence, learned about the recording process, and enjoyed the studio experience.

**Impact on Confidence:** Her confidence increased notably, and she learned more about music production.

**Future Plans:** Sandy is inspired to continue pursuing music.

**Relationship Impact:** Her participation strengthened family support and she received encouragement from friends.

**Advice:** "Do what you love; hard work pays off."

## Lyrics for life: songwriting as a pathway to youth empowerment

Findings from this study echo themes such as three major themes identified by Ennis and Tonkin (2018) in an Australia study concerning retrospective perspectives from adults who had participated in arts activities when they were young. The first theme "joining in" (p. 349) is present in Youthtown songwriting participants through the idea of young people creating new friendships with like-minded peers, forming "a band" and broader community engagement through sharing their music with family and friends. The second theme "developing skills and gaining experiences" (p. 350) came through in terms of songwriting, music industry knowledge, while also building personal attributes of confidence and resilience. Theme three "becoming a real performer/artist" (p. 352) featured strongly where participants in the Youthtown songwriting competition shared excitement for being able to perform in professional studios.

### Main Themes

Personal Growth and Development	✓
Support Systems and Relationships	✓
Professional Exposure and Real-World Experience	✓
Motivation and Passion for Music	✓
Facing Challenges and Overcoming Adversity	✓

### 1. Personal Growth and Development

- **Increased Confidence:** Many participants, like Sandy and Nally, gained significant confidence through their involvement in the competition. This boost in self-esteem is crucial during their formative years and can positively impact other areas of their lives.
- **Skill Enhancement:** Participants like Tam and Davie improved their songwriting and music production skills, illustrating how such activities provide practical learning experiences that are both engaging and educational.

### 2. Support Systems and Relationships

- **Family and Friend Support:** The competition strengthened participants' relationships with their families, friends, and people in the music industry. For instance, Sandy and Bella felt supported by their families, which enhanced their overall experience and well-being, whereas Casey and Mira both spoke to supportive experiences with industry partners.
- Participants like Casey and Mira worked with friends or band members, fostering teamwork and collaboration skills.

### 3. Professional Exposure and Real-World Experience

- Studio Experience: The opportunity to record in professional studios was a transformative experience for participants like Tam and Nally. This exposure to real-world environments is invaluable for aspiring musicians.
- Understanding the Music Industry: Participants gained insights into the music production process and industry workings, which is essential for those considering a future in music.

### 4. Motivation and Passion for Music

- Intrinsic Motivation: The love for music and a desire to share their creations drove participants like Nally and Casey. Such intrinsic motivation is a powerful force that can propel young people toward their goals.
- Future Aspirations: The competition inspired many participants to continue pursuing music, as seen in Sandy's and Mira's experiences. This highlights the long-term impact of such activities on their career aspirations.

### 5. Facing Challenges and Overcoming Adversity

- Facing New Experiences: Participants like Davie described the challenges of entering a new competition and stepping out of their comfort zones. Overcoming these challenges builds resilience.
- Learning from Failure: The willingness to try again despite setbacks, as mentioned by Mira, emphasises the importance of perseverance and learning from failure.

*Now no longer am I living lies, in other's eyes I am alive, complete and sound is how I'm found amongst my peers underground I'm happy doing this no longer hiding, we were not the biggest stars*

#### Davie

**Favourite Genre:** Cannot choose

**Motivation:** Participating in the competition to share his music and gain experience.

**Experience Summary:** Davie described the process of songwriting and recording as challenging yet rewarding. He appreciated the support he received and felt that the experience helped him grow as a musician.

**Impact on Confidence:** The experience significantly boosted his confidence and skills in songwriting and performing.

**Future Plans:** : Inspired to continue pursuing music and explore different aspects of music production.

**Relationship Impact:** Felt supported by friends and family, which strengthened his resolve to pursue music.

**Advice:** "Take that first step, even if it's scary. It's a great experience overall."

#### Nally

**Favourite Genre:** Rap, Hip Hop, Pop

**Motivation:** Nally has always loved music and songwriting, participating in previous competitions with her band.

**Experience Summary:** She gained confidence from the experience, with her parents supporting her future recordings.

**Impact on Confidence:** Her confidence in music production increased.

**Future Plans:** Nally wants to continue making music, encouraged by her supportive parents.

**Relationship Impact:** Her friends enjoyed her music, and her parents offered to support further recordings.

**Advice:** "Just go for it. Fulfilling your passion is important."

*"I'm working this out, tryna be patient, I'm only 14 afterall."*

## Investment in arts programmes benefits young New Zealanders and their communities

Funding and government support for arts programmes have a vital role to play in:

### 1. Accessibility and Opportunity

- Making Arts Accessible: Funders like Youthtown make such competitions accessible to a broader range of young people, regardless of their socioeconomic background. This ensures that talent and passion are nurtured across all demographics.
- Providing Opportunities: Funding enables the creation of opportunities that might not otherwise exist. These competitions offer a platform for young people to showcase their talents, gain recognition, and build their futures.

### 2. Supporting Personal Development

- Holistic Growth: Arts-engaged activities contribute to the holistic development of young people, encompassing emotional, social, and intellectual growth. These programmes help young people build essential life skills, such as teamwork, communication, and self-expression. Studies have shown that participation in arts activities is linked to improved cognitive abilities and social skills in youth (Liu, 2023; Kisida & Bowen, 2019).
- Encouraging Passion: By supporting arts programmes, funders encourage young people to pursue their passions, which can lead to lifelong engagement in the arts and potential career paths. Research indicates that early engagement in arts increases the likelihood of continued participation and success in the arts (Elpus, 2013).

#### Bella

**Favourite Genre:** Not specifically mentioned

**Motivation:** Entered the competition to gain exposure and improve her songwriting skills.

**Experience Summary:** Bella appreciated the structured feedback and support from the competition. The experience helped her refine her songwriting and understand the production process better.

**Impact on Confidence:** The experience enhanced her skills and confidence as a songwriter.

**Future Plans:** Motivated to keep pursuing music and songwriting as a serious hobby or potential career.

**Relationship Impact:** The support from her family and friends was crucial, making her feel valued and encouraged

**Advice:** "Just do it. Even if you think you can't song write or if it might be bad, it's worth trying."

## What can we learn from young songwriter's stories?

- Young people are eager to grow and learn: They value opportunities that challenge them and help them develop new skills.
- Support from family and friends is crucial: Having a strong support system enhances their confidence and motivation.
- Professional exposure is highly valued: Real-world experiences in professional settings are seen as pivotal moments in their growth.
- Passion drives participation: Their love for music and desire to share their creations are key motivators.
- Resilience and perseverance are important traits: They are willing to face challenges and learn from failures, showing a strong commitment to their aspirations.

*In the studio, looking at the lights  
Singing my heart out  
Voice is ringing through the mic  
I can't remember how  
I got to this world  
Right where I am right now  
Bedroom songwriter no longer  
It's time to take a bow*

## Tam

**Favourite Genre:** Pop, Piano Ballads

**Motivation:** Tam learned about the competition through school and saw it as an opportunity to record music professionally.

**Experience Summary:** Recording in a professional studio was amazing for Tam. She learned about production and saw a notable improvement in quality.

**Impact on Confidence:** The experience enhanced her skills and confidence as a songwriter.

**Future Plans:** She is passionate about songwriting, although uncertain about a professional path in music.

**Relationship Impact:** Collaborating with friends in the studio was a highlight, and her family was very supportive.

**Advice:** "Songwriting is not as hard as it seems. Apply for opportunities."

### 3. Strengthening Communities

- **Community Engagement:** Such programmes foster a sense of community and belonging among participants, their families, and supporters. They create a positive and supportive environment that can strengthen community ties. Community-based arts programmes have been found to enhance social cohesion and community identity (Elpus, 2013).
- **Cultural Enrichment:** Arts programmes enrich the cultural fabric of communities, bringing diverse voices and talents to the forefront and promoting cultural appreciation and understanding. The cultural diversity and inclusion fostered through arts engagement are critical for social harmony and mutual respect (Williamon et al., 2021).

### 4. Long-Term Impact

- **Future Leaders:** Investing in young people's artistic development helps cultivate the next generation of artists, musicians, and creative leaders. These individuals can contribute significantly to the cultural and economic vitality of society. Leadership skills developed through arts participation are transferable to various professional fields (Kisida & Bowen, 2019).
- **Positive Social Outcomes:** Engaging in the arts has been linked to positive social outcomes, including reduced dropout rates, higher academic achievement, and improved mental health. Supporting these programmes can have far-reaching benefits for society as a whole. Evidence suggests that arts education is associated with higher academic performance and lower levels of criminal justice involvement among youth (Elpus, 2013; Williamon et al., 2021).

## Sustaining creativity and fostering future leaders

The experiences of young participants in the song competition underscore the profound impact of arts-engaged activities on personal growth, skill development, and community building.

Sponsorships like Youthtown play a crucial role in making opportunities like those offered by Play It Strange available and accessible, ultimately fostering a more vibrant, inclusive, and creative society. However, with the government cutting funding for such initiatives, it is imperative to promote and spotlight the long-term benefits of supporting arts programmes. Government involvement and a wider support for art across the motu is essential to ensure that these valuable opportunities continue to be accessible to all young people, nurturing their talents and contributing to their overall development. Investing in such programmes is not just about nurturing talent; it is about shaping well-rounded individuals who can contribute meaningfully and creatively to the world around them.

### Casey

**Favourite Genre:** Varied

**Motivation:** Casey needed a song for *Rock Quest* and was curious about the competition.

**Experience Summary:** She felt valued throughout the process, and the experience was a collaborative effort with friends.

**Impact on Confidence:** She felt more valued and encouraged to keep writing and producing music.

**Future Plans:** The experience encouraged her to continue her music journey.

**Relationship Impact:** Collaborative efforts with friends and strong family support were significant.

**Advice:** "Keep trying and appreciate each step of the journey."

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