

# Books & Culture

## Paste-up poetry pioneer

Almost half a century after he began putting up posters for band gigs, Jim Wilson is taking New Zealand poets' work to the world. **by SALLY BLUNDELL**

**T**hey're reading our poems. On the streets of Australia, Austria, England, Scotland, France, the Netherlands, Serbia, Hungary, Spain, Japan, Singapore and the US as well as New Zealand, people are

reading the words of Tusiata Avia, Brian Turner, Cilla McQueen, Hinemoana Baker, Bill Direen, David Eggleton, Sam Hunt, Bill Manhire, Frankie McMillan, Elizabeth Smither and almost 90 others. This without a ticketed book fair or literary conference in sight.

Nearly 50 years after he began pasting up posters for music gigs in Christchurch, Jim Wilson, founder of Phantom Billstickers, is one of New Zealand's most proficient literary ambassadors. Over the past decade, the Phantom Billstickers Poetry Project has applied some 22,000 poem-posters to walls, fences, lampposts and cafe windows across the world (including a memorably risky paste-up of a Hone Tuwhare poem, opposite the federal penitentiary Parchman Farm in Mississippi).

For this year's National Poetry Day and to mark James K Baxter's birthday (on June 29; he would have been 90), Phantom has printed five Baxter poems including *Tomcat* and *The Ferry to Lyttelton* ("These bare hills have their own non-human beauty, / A country made for angels, not for men."). Now, in its 11th issue, the quarterly *Phantom Café Reader*, edited by

*Landfall's* David Eggleton, brings together a reliably distinctive and eclectic range of new and established writers in a giveaway zine available in cafes around the country and now in the US. In an email interview from New Hope, Pennsylvania, where he lives with his American wife, Kelly, Wilson

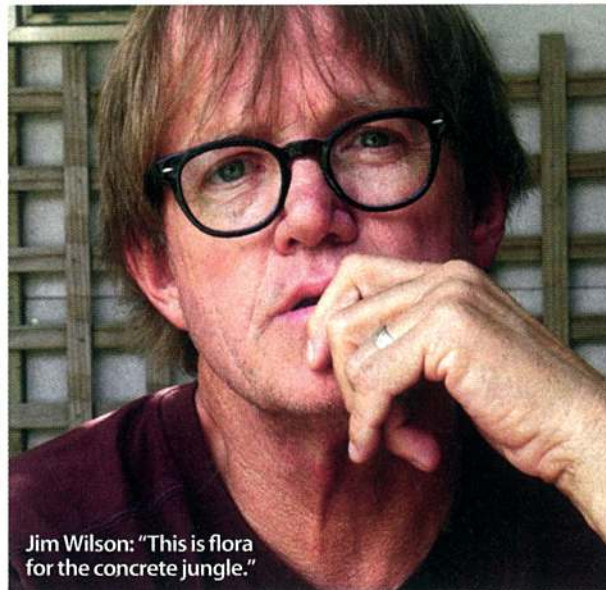
seemed to be something genuine about painting the streets in their name. I still think a good street poster is infinitely more valuable than anything that happens on social media. This is flora for the concrete jungle.

**Since then, you have battled to get local authorities to legitimise posters and billboards – but Phantom still has that underground, unscripted feel.**

I began dealing with bureaucrats at the city councils in the early 1980s, when New Zealand was a closed shop and free expression was barely tolerated. In my first correspondences with Christchurch city councillors back then, I used the name Malcolm X. I hope that Phantom Billstickers always has a mongrel feel about it because if you do only what people let you do in this life, you will never get anywhere.

**Why did you start the Phantom Billstickers Poetry Project?**

My mother died in 1999, and over the next decade, my two closest friends died. I had at least two significant betrayals in life in the early 2000s and there followed two heavy-duty courses of a medical treatment akin to chemotherapy. Reading Janet Frame became very important to me in recovering from all of this – I am originally from Dunedin, after all. Then I became familiar with Tusiata Avia's poetry and I found that to be exciting. I wanted to do something that was good because a lot of people were doing stuff



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**"I hope that Phantom Billstickers always has a mongrel feel about it."**

talks paste, posters and poetry.

**How did it all begin?**

I began putting up posters for bands because I completely believed in their music. In those days, a band had a poster before a demo tape and there always



**BOOKS 53**

A husband's love letter to the wife who campaigned for death with dignity

**CRIME 55**

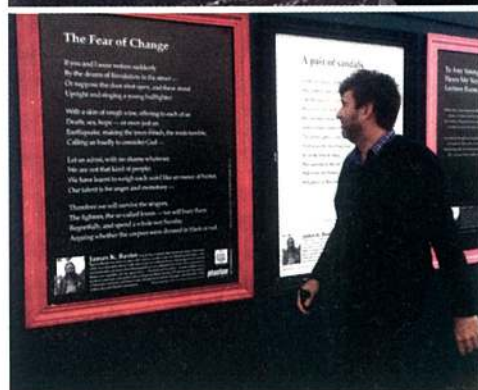
Giverny and Claude Monet are part of Michel Bussi's new detective novel

**MUSIC 59**

Maturity is at the heart of a Kiwi guitarist's jaw-dropping new album

**FILM 60**

Mel Gibson's comeback action thriller has a hint of *Mad Max* about it



that was really bad. Whatever life hurls at me, I can address it by going out and putting up a poem-poster.

Clockwise from top, *Heraldry*, by David Eggleton, Brooklyn, New York; Nick Williamson and his poem *Colin McCahon*; *As big as a father*, by Jeffrey Paparao Holman, New Orleans; *The Fear of Change*, by James K Baxter, New Lynn, Auckland.

**Was poetry part of your childhood?**

When I was a kid, my dad in Dunedin read a hell of a lot. I followed suit. At 16, I broke away and began reading Jack Kerouac and Thomas Pynchon (I've never finished

a single one of his books but I've never laughed so hard, either). Nowadays, I tend to go back to what my dad was reading: William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell and other "Southern Gothic" authors.

**Your poetry project includes New Zealand and US poets – are there different aspirations behind US and NZ writing?**

In 2012, we flew eight Kiwi poets and a video crew to New York City for a reading ▶



Love

Love is raw as freshly cut meat,  
mean as a beetle on the track of dung.  
It is the Celtic dog that ate its tail in a dream.  
It chooses us as a blizzard chooses a mountain.  
It's seven knocks on the door you pray not to answer.  
The boy followed the girl to school eating his heart  
with each step. He wished to dance with her  
beside a lake, the wind showing the leaves'  
silvery undersides. She held the moist bouquet  
of wild violets he had picked against her neck.  
She wore the sun like her skin  
but beneath, her blood was black as soil.  
At the grave of her dog in the woods  
she told him to please go away forever.



**Jim Harrison** is the author of thirty books, including *Legends of the Fall* and *Dallas*, and has served as the fiction columnist for the magazines *Sonar* and *Epoch*. His work has been translated into five dozen languages and produced as four feature-length films. As a young poet he co-edited *Sonar* magazine (with Dan Gerbort) and earned a National Endowment for the Arts grant and a Guggenheim Fellowship. In 2002 he was elected into the Academy of American Arts and Letters. Mr. Harrison divides his time between Montana and southern Arizona.



From left, *Love* by Jim Harrison; the latest issue of *Phantom Billstickers Café Reader* features performance poet Tusiata Avia.

talents, whether in music or literature, only when they can no longer afford to ignore them. Most publishers in New Zealand who print poetry are rather small affairs. They do an excellent job, but I hope that one day David Merritt and Ben Brown will no longer be ignored. They have enough talent to be touring the US. I see New Zealand arts and culture as having major export potential. Some have already broken the way.

**Are you still writing your book?**  
Just this morning we finished editing Chapter 13 of my memoir/autofiction, *Dose*. It is about some people I have met along the way.

◀ that turned out to be very successful. In 2014, we flew four Kiwi poets to New Hope for another event. What I find is that New Zealand poets and American poets basically speak the same language and they get along really well.

**What poems are you most proud to have pasted up?**

I probably "feel" them all in fairly equal measure. I'm dead happy to be putting Hinemoana Baker's poems in the street, I love Serie Barford's poems and Siobhan Harvey's poems; Marisa Cappetta, Michele Leggott and Dave Merritt as well. I've been lucky enough to spend quite a bit of time with Gerald Stern, who was a National Book Award winner in the US, and his poems are very powerful. Jim Harrison as well. We have published 10-20 US poets on posters – I'm very proud to have published poems by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, WS Merwin, CK Williams and Robert Pinsky.

**Your *Café Reader* is great. Why did you decide to go into bound form?**

I had the cash and I decided to make a difference. The *Café Reader* is reasonably well distributed in the US, where people are very inquisitive about Kiwi arts, music, literature and culture.

**In the US, people are very inquisitive about Kiwi arts, music, literature, and culture.**

**How far can technology take your goals? Or is paper and paste still where it's at?**

I will always believe paper and paste to be the best in the same way that music always sounds better on vinyl. However, if I had the money, I would have half a dozen people dedicated to taking all this to the world in a digital format. I, myself, cannot even manage a television remote control. But then, if this project gets too big, it will ruin it.

The posters and the *Café Reader* give space to new and established writers, bypassing the publishing companies and PR agencies that often become our cultural gatekeepers. How important is it to retain that more direct, street-level route for new writers?

There are always cultural gatekeepers and they sometimes criticise newcomers in order to hold onto their territory. Major corporations often sign new

**You write a blog – *A Tinker's Cuss*. Where did the title come from?**

I had a friend years ago and he and I used to book and manage bands together. He was the funniest guy on the planet. Dealing with bands is not easy and particularly back then. Whenever a band presented him with a very difficult problem, he would exclaim, "Look, I don't give a tinker's cuss!", and then he would open up ... I just found that to be hilarious.

**Do you still share your time between New Zealand and the US?**

Tennessee will always be my spiritual home and I have lived there several times over the years. For now, I share my time between Auckland, New Zealand, and New Hope, Pennsylvania. America gives me time to think.

**In a video interview, you say you want to "play it by my heart". What makes a good street poem?**

It has a heart and it touches people.

**Getting people to stop, pause and read poetry in a city street seems a massive challenge, yet it works – why?**

Because it's real. ■