

Edinburgh jazz musician flies high with RNZ Air Force band

A former Edinburgh musician has lent his musical know-how to the Royal New Zealand Air Force and earned an honorary rank in the process.

Drummer John Rae, who led the ground-breaking jazz group the John Rae Collective in the 1980s and went on to win awards for his jazz-folk band Celtic Feet, has produced the new release by the Royal New Zealand Air Force Jazz Orchestra, Kaiwhakatere, which is the Maori word for Navigator.

Working under the rank of Leading Aircraftman, Rae has overseen the collection of seven compositions, all drawn from New Zealand's currently thriving jazz scene, and was even responsible for the album's photography.

Rae, who emigrated to New Zealand in 2008, is from a well-known Scottish jazz family. His father, Ronnie, is a bass player whose credits include working with trumpeter/cornetist Alex Welsh and gigs with jazz legends including saxophonist Ben Webster, trumpeter Ruby Braff, vibist Red Norvo and guitarist Tal Farlow.

"I was delighted to be invited to work with the RNZ Air Force Jazz Orchestra," says Rae, whose large ensemble experience includes leading his own Big Feet, a thirty-seven-piece amalgamation of jazz big band and pipe band and drumming with the Scottish National Jazz Orchestra. "The standard of musicianship is very high and the orchestra's adventurous

approach might surprise people who associate military bands with a certain kind of discipline.”

Kaiwhakaterere is the orchestra’s second album, following its 2017 debut, Suites and Moods, although the band dates back to the swing era, having formed in 1938.

“The members of the Jazz Orchestra are mostly drawn from the larger RNZAF Band which performs regularly at Government House and the Pukeahu National War Memorial and at ceremonies including Anzac Day and state occasions,” says Rae. “They’re all reservists, although some are also freelance musicians, and on the new album we have saxophonist Oscar Laven, who made quite an impression internationally with his Questions in Red album towards the end of last year.”

Laven contributed one of the tracks on the album, Royal Blue, and another of the tracks was written by the award-winning jazz pianist and composer Anita Schwabe.

“The album gets its title from the understandable connection between the Air Force and navigation,” says Rae. “However, by coincidence, all the compositions, which include a vocal, Let’s Not Fall in Love, from Stephanie Paris, are inspired by some form of travel or change. We’re looking forward to hearing the response from the public when the album is released on 30th September but early feedback from reviewers and radio presenters has been extremely positive.”

