



IN PHOTO, BRIAN SWEENEY | PHOTO BY CHARLES A. Y. THOMPSON

THE PATRIOT

At ten o'clock one Wednesday evening during a phone interview, Mr Brian Sweeney delivered a careful selection of words that profoundly changed the way I thought of my country. This is not a hammed up statement for the sake of a good story – these words truly had a effect. More on this particular sentence later.

Based in New York, Sweeney and his wife Jane Vesty run the successful global communications company SweeneyVesty. In a private capacity, Sweeney is the co-founder and producer of nzedge.com – a website devoted to telling the story of New Zealanders. I spoke with Brian about his views on issues dear to him; the creative revolution in New Zealand, notions of identity, the importance of an export economy, and nzedge.com. Indeed Brian Sweeney is well qualified to shout about these topics – he has been stirring up the creative industries in New Zealand since his time studying Political Science at the University of Waikato. He worked in student politics and edited the infamous student newspaper Nexus. This gave him an interest in publishing and expression of points of view, and he saw the importance of a strong national identity. In 1980 he was asked to chair the Student Arts Council which toured artists around university campuses and theatres all over the country. He then went into business as an entrepreneur, producer and agent for a number of bands, theatre groups and performance artists in New Zealand and Australia. Most notably were the five years spent with Sam Hunt and the Topp Twins.

Lets not mince words (Sweeney doesn't) this man is a mover and shaker and from early on had an affinity with those working on the fringe; he gave validity to a groundswell of artists whose work has been hugely influential in giving the New Zealand creative underbelly some real fat. He continues to be a tireless advocate for this country.

On the creative revolution in NZ

It has been long agreed that we have experienced a rather suffocating case of cultural cringe which, in terms of our creative history, has been totally unjustified. It wasn't what was actually being produced across creative genres in New Zealand which instigated reaction – far from it. The art has always been there, but for Sweeney the slow smoldering creative revolution in New Zealand was more against the attitude towards artistic pursuits. It was about allowing the arts to permeate our everyday lives and building fertile ground for them to become a

fruitful profession.

Francis Pound's recently published book *The Invention of New Zealand Art and National Identity* cites the period of 1930 – 1970 as the years when our creative story was emerging. For Sweeney it was the fifties when things really started to hot up – a time when art and literature were dark and somewhat underground.

"There was a lot of grappling around; New Zealand culture had been beautifully mapped but it was in such a ghetto. You were thought to have been very odd if you indulged in the arts. NZ under Keith Holyoake was like black and white television – not a very charitable place. If you were creative there was no place for you."

This cultural darkness may not have all been bad, it arguably went a long way to typifying the works of such luminaries as Colin McCahon, Ralph Hotere and James K Baxter. For Sweeney the paintings of McCahon in these years epitomised the New Zealand he knew. In fact he goes as far as to say McCahon was

'god-like' in his expressiveness of spirituality and the land. Sweeney acknowledges McCahon's point of view helped to snowball the creative revolution which bought with it an understanding that a uniquely New Zealand creative voice was valid. Influences from this so-called 'ghettoised' era can be seen in many of our creative industries today – renowned Dunedin fashion label Nom'd is an obvious one.

When 52 year old Brian Sweeney began work as a promoter in the 1980's the creative industries had come a long way but it was still foraging for an audience. Sweeney set about heaving the arts in New Zealand further to the surface. He battled along with many others to get much greater share for New Zealand stories and voices on radio, television, and stage. His businesses was producing and selling shows by touring New Zealand artists, from Sam Hunt swaying in his stovepipes melodically delivering his poems on our school stages and in country pubs, to the Topp Twins with their emergent "anarchist variety show" that has now travelled around the world. The mid eighties were financially, politically and culturally buoyant, and it was an exciting time to be in show business.

Arguably he was at this time a helmsman for the creative revolution. For all the incubation that had occurred in the arts in the past 20, 30 and even 50 years, for Sweeney, the path has gone in the right direction.

"Out of the struggle, introspection, and depression, there is now this radiant burst of a creative voice in New Zealand."

Brian Sweeney is incredibly positive about the health of our creative industries.

"There are now more people than ever working full time and making a living out of the arts. Gin Wigmore, Ladyhawke and The Flight of the Conchords are to name a few musicians riding the waves of a creative revolution. The film industry has been huge in opening a world view in and out of New Zealand, we have the International Arts Festival blending New Zealand and overseas artists; we are now very encouraging of the arts."

From Sweeney's international perspective we are starting to mature creatively. One may call the likes of the Finns and Don McGlashan refugees from a less artistically convivial few decades but for both these musicians their struggles have bore enough fruit to inspire their children to enter the scene as well. It seems we have a traceable lineage forming – a solid hump on which the arts in New Zealand, provided it continues to get the support it needs, can comfortably grow.

On notions of identity

Brian Sweeney has had a long interest New Zealand both historically and sociologically. While at the University of Waikato he was awarded the Blackwood Paul Prize for New Zealand Studies. He places a great deal of value on the identity of a nation.

"People identify with family, religion, or gender, but absolutely always with their country. It is fundamentally important in the human condition to identify with country".

For Sweeney we have historically lacked awareness of our identity.

"I do think we have an "under-awareness" of our uniqueness. New Zealand's role in the world is pretty rarely discussed in public life, in any depth. There is an attitude that talking about things like our national identity is a lot of woolly thinking, you can get trashed quite quickly. Everyone is an expert, we're a talkback nation, we're opinionated and oppositional, our public institutions and our media have conflict as a central organizing idea, which means we don't take much time to look and listen and consider the possibilities. We love welcoming visitors but we're really tough on ourselves and each other."

So what exactly is New Zealand's identity? Sweeney explains that we are an incredibly distinctive country with a culture that is found nowhere else. We are an island nation on the edge of the world – a blend of Maori, Polynesian, European and Asian cultures all of which have influence over each other – perhaps most obviously in a creative sense.

"McCahon recognised the influence of Maori oral traditions. There is a fusion of European and Asian art emerging; Denise Kum and Yuk King Tan are strong examples of this. We have a more coherent design sensibility unraveling, for example architects like Andrew Patterson are telling a story that could come from nowhere else but New Zealand."

Because of this distinct culture and the willingness more and more to embrace it, a confidence in our identity is growing. According to Brian Sweeney there is no longer the need to go off-shore to hone skills or to develop creatively, there is the talent and the inspiration here. Although much of my interview with Sweeney had an arts focus, he acknowledges that this applies equally to fields of technology, research and development and engineering.

Sweeney has the happy combination of a deep affinity with New Zealand and, from his base in New York, an international view. He sees a bigger picture. And he sees the perception of New Zealand as being extremely good. This, he cites, is in part due to the development of a stronger awareness of identity and a growing confidence in expressing who we are.

"It is obvious when you survey the worlds' media. The Guardian, the Times of India, the Sacramento Herald, all of them reference New Zealand. There is a genuine mapping of a New Zealand presence in the world. Culture generates the most coverage putting New Zealand forward as a sophisticated, quality society."

Language is also a crucial tool in enabling a confidence in our national identity. The methods we employ to describe New Zealand can shift our view of ourselves dramatically and Brian Sweeney feels it is time for a change in language.

"We now need a new language which will equate to new perspectives, new ways of seeing things. We have been stuck in narrow definitions of our country. Aside from groups of historians, creatives, and film makers, this country seems to carry on almost stuck in its isolation."

The way Sweeney has been doing this is to describe New Zealand as a country of five million people - including the one million of our citizens who are living off-shore. Huzzah! This was the sentence that led to my epiphanous moment. I immediately pictured a map of New Zealand with one million parabolic curves reaching the rest of the world like you see in flight magazines. It was a very subtle change of language but instantly my view was expanded. I realised that there was an unconscious sense of isolation and removal from the rest of the world when regarding my life as a New Zealander which could be changed with the use of a few words. In doing this, Sweeney has turned the fact that we have a large number of people regularly leaving the country into a positive thing.

"People are scared of New Zealanders leaving. It is crazy that we had a disconnected view of our people - there are another one million people out there whom we have ignored. When you change the language you amplify New Zealand into the world and therefore have a much more holistic country."

If identity arises out of an awareness of a unique culture, a confidence in that culture and a shift in language, then a means of communicating what we have achieved and what we are about is vital according to Sweeney. He puts much weight on the importance of storytelling. By this he means not the predictable, thin stories we hear about New Zealand, but those that have some actual meat.

"There was an absence of good story telling. It was like, the All Blacks are the best in the world and by God that girl Kiri can sing and now we've got a good bit of Pinot Noir...that was about the extent of it."

An enthusiastic Sweeney happily suggests that a strong sense of national identity has now emerged. A lot more stories are being told, acknowledged and truly claimed as our own. It is having a snowball effect - the more we hear them the more inspiration we gleam from them and the more stories we create.

On an exporting nation

We in New Zealand have a well established export history in the agriculture sectors and it is ingrained in the minds of New Zealanders that this is predominantly how we make a crust. The marketing around this particular export industry (beef and lamb advertisements with sporting heroes, pork advertisements with famous comics) inadvertently seeps into our social and cultural views of ourselves and consequently how we are viewed internationally. Though these markets have peaked and troughed over time they remain strong. However, Sweeney believes we need to export across a wider range of industries and seriously consider ourselves as an exporting nation. If we succeed in getting more of our produce, services and intellectual property out to international markets we therefore enhance our identity. One starts to see clear links between Sweeney's views on creativity, identity and having an export mentality here in New Zealand.

"On our way to Karekare I told Kevin that for some reason New Zealand seems to have produced a disproportionate number of people who have changed the world in some way. His explanation was that in biology change happens at the edge of the species. This was a eureka moment for me. Kelly's thing is if you change the language you can change everything."

So 'edge' it was. Let's not be mistaken, Sweeney is not trying to convince us that we are the most clever people in the world, nor that New Zealand is the only place you can call an 'edge.' Scotland he says is a gloomy country at edge of Europe who gave us Alexander Graham Bell, John Logie Baird, and James Watt. Sweeney's 'edge' not only refers to physical location either. It is also metaphorical.

"In all systems and societies there are marginal fringe influences that have a major effect over time on what happens at the centre."

While Sweeney admits the word is not to everyone's liking, predominantly people have responded with incredible enthusiasm, which he thinks has given them permission to go out and be creative.

The intention with nzedge.com was to reach out to a wide range of people from a broad spectrum of society. Most interestingly is the connection it is bringing between expats and compatriots. Sweeney sees New Zealanders living off-shore as having a much more active role in the country, albeit from a distance. He believes there is a growing obligation and desire to bring knowledge back to New Zealand.

"It is a culmination of our website, Steven Tindall and David Teece's work with Kea [keanewzealand.com; a networking website for New Zealanders], increased media coverage, blogs and air travel which have enabled a greater conversational and commercial flow between New Zealanders here and overseas. For a number of reasons many people left New Zealand angry but are now tuning in to the sentiments of nzedge – that New Zealand is a great place; it has changed, is incredibly creative, and very beautiful.

New Zealand school's are also finding the website a valuable research tool due to the mass of content. Sweeney's hopes are (to quote from the site) 'develop an export culture among school kids upwards by encouraging the Tall Punga Syndrome. Local heart - global soul.'

Private sector initiatives such as nzedge.com can contribute much in Sweeney's view towards nation building. They are not as constrained by highly consultative processes as are many government programmes. The nzedge.com site differs from government drives in that is organic and all-encompassing. Its boundaries are movable. As a result it appeals to New Zealanders on a personal level. Intentionally, it is highly emotive and Sweeney sees this as transferable from an individual level to business level.

"We have done it really respectfully in terms of progressing New Zealand. Individual and companies are organised around an idea but not so much countries. New Zealand doesn't have an organising idea. Is this site about an on-the-edge country taking on world? Absolutely."

There is a risk in nation - building campaigns becoming somewhat patronising in that they are often oversimplified. While Sweeney's message is indeed simple it is told with a refreshing level of comprehensiveness. This is evident in the Heroes page where established writers have contributed in depth essays on world changing New Zealanders. Brian Sweeney has unraveled a story to us in a sensitive manner.

"The stories had to told with empathy and comprehensiveness – I was aware that we would get dismissed as glad-handers if we just wrote 50 words."

Although privately funded, in the long term Sweeney sees the site as being commercially viable. For now, Sweeney and Roberts will keep building the story. There is currently a site upgrade in progress which will incorporate social networking and equip it with the latest web strategies.

"In web archeological terms, we are still analog. I am very happy about the story but technologically we're still making up time from our early start. By the end of 2010 we should have lit up all the pipes. I am part of a family and a business and these are priority; nzedge.com has given me my New Zealand identity and I'm very happy about this. At some point soon I know everything will come together."

As if running SweeneyVesty, nzedge.com and raising two children is not enough, Brian Sweeney has just had a photography book published – Paradise Road. He has exhibited large format colour photographs in New York and would like to do so again. New York is home; he loves the pace, the New Yorkers, the balance and the seasons but his mind is always with New Zealand. His greatest wish for his country? To be the place of world-changing ideas.