

# Gathering entrances good-natured crowd

Sheep that last week safely grazed at Canaan Downs on Takaka Hill were evacuated to make way for the Gathering - the biggest dance party in New Zealand - which winds up today.

What they would have made of trance, house, hardcore and drum-n-bass-dub music - not to mention their human replacements - is anyone's guess.

The Gathering is very much an "alternative" event - no one is dressed for a job interview at the bank. Most of the crowd of around 5000 were in their late teens or early 20s, although a few looked old enough to be Woodstock veterans.

Setting up the event was a mammoth undertaking, with 200 crew on site on Boxing Day to get it ready.

After the chaos of New Year's Eve - when traffic was bumper to bumper all the way up the Takaka Hill road - the rough and narrow 8km access road to the Gathering was relatively clear yesterday.

That brought its own problems though, with two cars badly damaged in a low-speed collision on a blind corner yesterday afternoon. No one was injured.

The incessant pounding of the trance music from four large speaker stacks has been central to the event.

For those not up with modern music, trance is a form of techno - electronically created music pared back to a series of repetitive beats. There are no lyrics apart from the occasional sample.

Organiser Tim Owens said trance was an uplifting version of techno - the sort to party hard to.

Those who wanted to party even harder could opt for the hardcore zone, where the number of beats each minute would blow anyone's pacemaker.

The house funk and disco tent had dance music for those who like a bit of singing and melody.

In the ambient zone, set in a crater, only music without any beats was played for those just wanting to chill out.

The tribe vibe zone was the place for people to make their own beats with drums and other acoustic instruments, an old log being one.

Aaron Ferguson of Dunedin had blisters on his hands after drumming for much of the night before. He said there were posters around Dunedin advertising the Gathering, and plenty of publicity in Christchurch.

"This seemed like a good idea."

Rebekah Coogen of Palmerston North had gone to sleep after midnight on New Year's Eve and was yesterday dancing with recharged batteries.

"I just plan to dance all day and dance all night. I love dancing in the daylight - I love being able to see everybody."

Those who were finding it hard to stay awake could buy a drink of guana, an extract from a South American tree, packed with caffeine.

Police were notably absent from the site. Mr Owens said police were happy for the organisers to provide their own security. Security personnel were all martial arts exponents, with their job being to defuse any situations without confrontation.

"It has been a peaceful event. The atmosphere is utterly positive."

Alcohol was banned from the event and there were no obvious signs any was being drunk yesterday afternoon.

Mr Owens said the use of drugs was not encouraged, but the organisers could not prevent it.

"For us the core of this thing is the dance music. There don't seem to be a bunch of drug-crazed loonies (here)."

Mark Hamilton of Oregon was hoping to trade hemp chokers for "herbs" but would not say whether he had been successful.

The Red Cross caravan was kept busy throughout the event by everything from cuts and burns to one broken foot and plenty of dislocated knees and ankles from dancing in the dark on uneven ground.

Red Cross worker Mike Price was full of praise for the event.

"It's been fantastic - good crowds. We've had no fights."

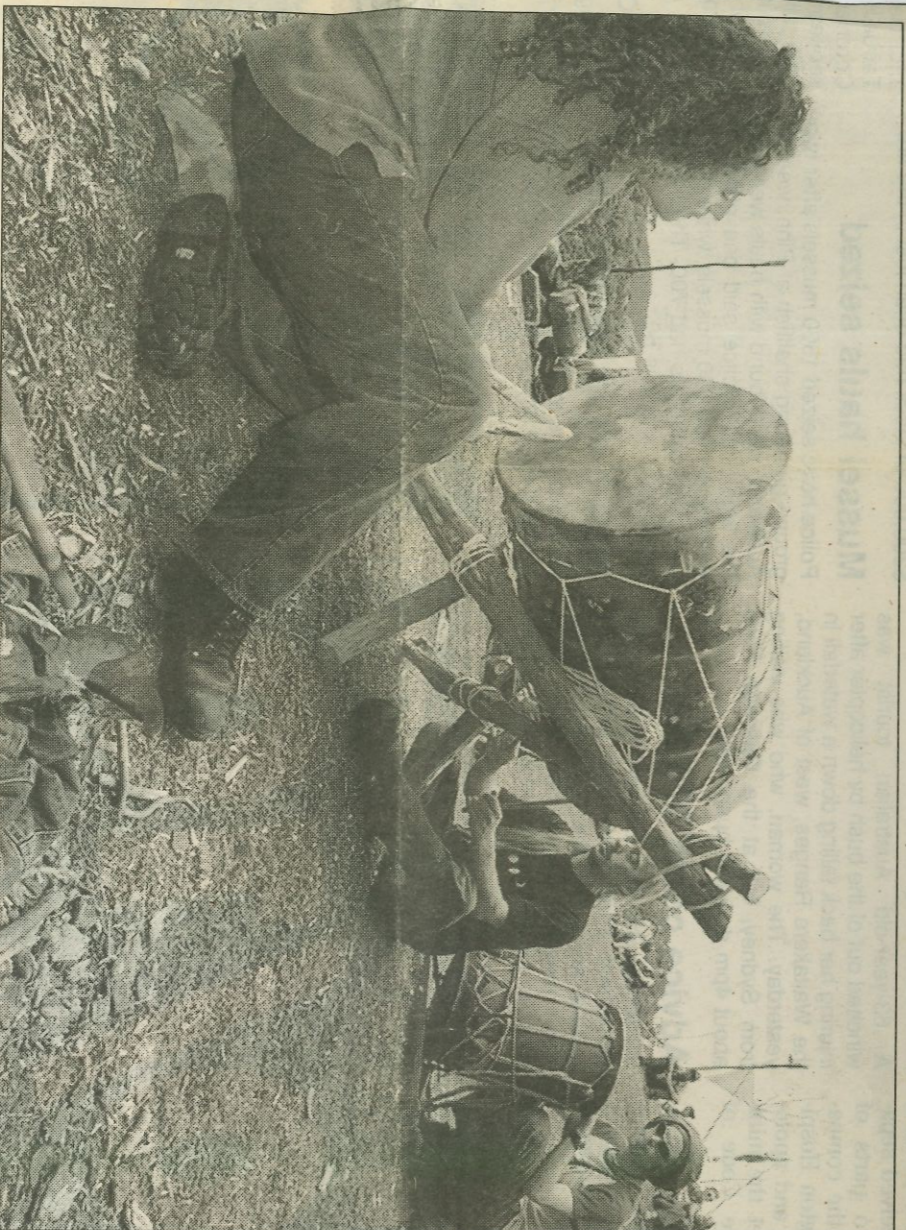
However, he said two men on speed had been helped to calm down.

Despite pushing 50 he didn't mind working in a caravan vibrating to the bass beats - he said he liked most of the music.

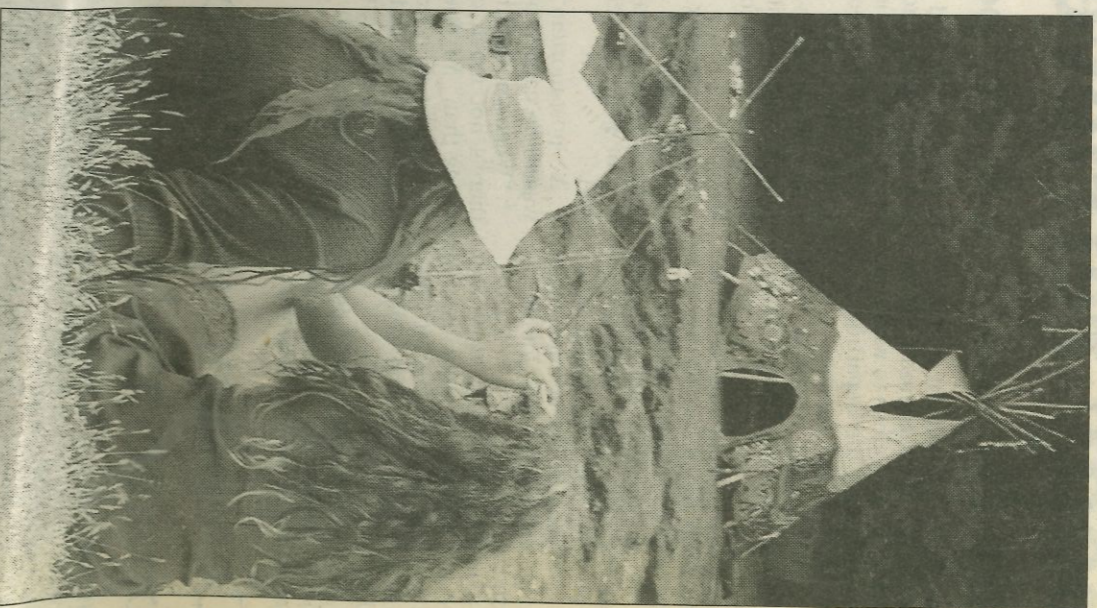
Mr Owens said the Gathering appeared to have at least broken even yesterday. He said it would be back next year and the year after that.

"We are heading for the millennium with this project."

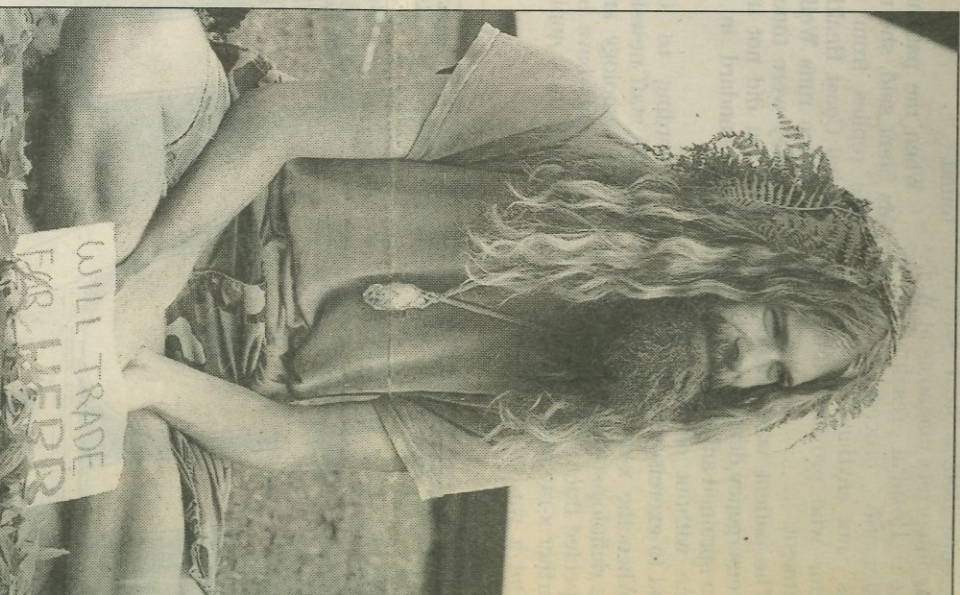
- by Greg Hurrell



MAIL PHOTO / MARRION VAN DIJK  
Playing a Taiko-based drum at the Tribal Zone are, from left, William McLetchie, of Nelson, Murray McDonald, of Wellington with Harley Williams, of Christchurch, on the right.



MAIL PHOTO / MARRION VAN DIJK  
Tracey Boreham, of Dunedin, left, and Katherine Milne, of Auckland, with a backdrop of a colourful teepee at the Ambient Zone of the Gathering.



MAIL PHOTO / MARRION VAN DIJK  
Mark Hamilton, of Oregon, selling and trading handmade hemp chokers.