



▲ The accordion has been a lifelong passion for Kevin Friedrich, and it's an instrument that's accompanied him around the world

Not playing the blues this year

► by Andy Bryenton

2020 will go down in history as the year when Covid turned our lives upside down. Displacement, concern and different levels of lockdown are all things we've (generally) handled with aplomb and creativity. None perhaps more so than Dargaville-born, New York-based musician and airline crewman Kevin Friedrich, who has used this period of 'exile back home' to complete a 30-year vision.

Far from being dour as New Zealand's second coronavirus lockdown winds down, Kevin is smiling as we meet at Dargaville's museum, where glass cabinets host some of his intricately built, inlaid, applied and filigree instruments.

"It's actually 40 years ago to the day that I first left for the USA," he says, recalling the rush to get visas, passports and tickets ready in time. "Very few universities had a formal music programme which accepted the accordion, but the University of Missouri was one of them.

"The esteemed tutor of this course was visiting New Zealand for the world accordion champs, so I was able to secure a letter of recommendation, and so, from the age of 17 onward, I've been an American resident or,

eventually a citizen." Kevin says that coming from Dargaville was a source of pride when taking that first big step.

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The whole town rallied around people who were off to make their mark on the world, and he believes that carrying a bit of our local 'number 8 wire' attitude and can-do focus made a difference. Through a quirk of geography and history, Kansas City is actually mostly situated in Missouri, spreading across

the border to form the biggest city in the centre of America. After graduating with a musical degree, Kevin found employment with TWA airlines, which was based in this central hub by owner Howard Hughes. The aviation magnate rightly thought that having his HQ halfway between the east and the west would make logical sense. Thus, opportunities were right there for aircrew, and Kevin's love of travel matched his love of music.

Through the years it's turned out to be a good balance. Moving to the air industry capital of New York in Kew Gardens, Queens, he's been able to blend flight with music, taking breaks now and then in his schedule to perform in many nations. Perhaps one of the more surprising, considering the traditional European



▲ Dwarfed by the massive bass pipes of Auckland's biggest pipe organ, Kevin prepares to record with a complete orchestra



▲ In the studio at last with Gary Deverne and sound engineer Mal Smith, to record an album 30 years in the making

“We'd both been wanting to record an album for years but found it hard to secure time in the studio at once”

home of the accordion, is China. There, the instrument was embraced as 'revolutionary' after accordions were carried by Chairman Mao's red army and used to play patriotic songs. Today, it's so popular there that Kevin was able to help organise a Guinness world record in the People's Republic; a 2,260 musician all-accordion orchestra all playing at the same time.

Part of Kevin's travel itinerary for the past 15 years has been an annual concert in his home town of Dargaville. This time around, Covid caught up with him here in New Zealand, as the world went into lockdown, borders closed and airline flights became scarce.

“It was actually very easy to take a break,” he says. “The airlines were offering voluntary leave packages, and in our company alone 16,000

pilots and crew out of 25,000 opted for leave.”

It would have been easy to slip into despair, far from home, with no work to fill the days. But Kevin instead turned lockdown 'downtime' into creative capital.

“For more than 30 years I'd been working with composer and friend Gary Deverne; all the way back to the time long ago when I toured New Zealand with a quartet; and asked him to write a song for us. We'd both been wanting to record an album for years but found it hard to secure time in the studio at once. Gary had a cruise planned, but this was cancelled by Covid, and I was locked down in New Zealand too. The only problem; all the sheet music for the songs we wanted to record was locked up in my apartment in Queens!”

A long-distance call, a helpful neighbour and a bit of rummaging around, scanning and emailing later, and the music was in Kevin's hands. Collaborators, including the New Zealand Symphonic Orchestra, the Czech Republic's Moravian Philharmonic, conductor Kenneth Young and fellow Kiwis Lionel and Elena Reekie, added their talents to an almost hour-long composition titled *The Journey*, which features among its tracks the three-part Anzac trilogy composed for the centennial of the first world war.

Kevin also took the time to organise a 'thank you' concert for vital service workers during our first and most dramatic Covid lockdown, and he's not done with putting down tracks on record just yet either; a collection of

his previous, remastered symphonic works is on the way. Aside from these creative endeavours, he says that the Covid 'exile' has given him valuable time with nature, with his home town roots, and with his family. Kevin plans to return to work and to New York in November, permitting on world developments.

“Thought I've been joking with my mum that I might not have time to go back to work,” he says, contemplating a release celebration for *The Journey*, and other things which could be accomplished with a bit more time. He's been a student in Kansas City and Paris, a musician in Italy, China and America, a 'permanent tourist' in New York, and a lifelong proud son of the Kaipara. But one thing Kevin Friedrich can never be is bored. ■