

2026 Country Music Honours Finalists Announced

2026 Apra Best Country Music Song & 2026 MLT Songwriting Award

Wednesday 6 May 2026

Finalists have been announced for the 2026 Country Music Honours, celebrating the best in original country music from across Aotearoa. Presented in Gore on Friday May 22, the event will feature performances and award presentations for APRA Best Country Music Song and the MLT Songwriting Award (unreleased songs).

Country Music Honour finalists for APRA Best Country Music Song:

- Dive Bar, written by Aaron Pulemagafa, Jeremiah Jayden Fale, Edward Liu, Christian Tjandrawinata, performed by TheWesternGuide
- Moonlight Hotel, written by Shannon Fowler, performed by Tom Lark
- Neon Cowgirl, written by Tami Neilson and Joshua Neilson, performed by Tami Neilson Feat. Neil Finn
- Whakameatia Mai, written by Marlon Williams and Kommi Tamati-Elliffe, performed by Marlon Williams

For APRA finalist images, bios, imagery & more, [please see here](#)

For APRA media enquiries, including finalist interview requests, please contact: Lauren Clough, Maiden NZ Entertainment, lauren@maidennz.com, 021 223 6788

First time finalist, **TheWesternGuide** AKA Aaron Pulemagafa wrote Dive Bar alongside collaborators Jeremiah Jayden Fale, Edward Liu, Christian Tjandrawinata. It's a classic country song written about spending so much time at a bar the staff just ask you if you'd like your "regular." Hailing from West Auckland with his sound shaped by church harmonies, the Samoan singer-songwriter is carving out a distinct path in Aotearoa's evolving country scene, redefining what the genre means to Kiwi listeners. Dive Bar speaks about a man distracting himself from heartbreak by spending time at his local bar. Through the song, Pulemagafa hopes to encourage the conversation around responsible alcohol consumption and remind people to check up on their friends.

Tom Lark also known as Shannon Fowler is another first-time finalist with the title track from 2025 album 'Moonlight Hotel'. A historical hotel in the small town of Murchison is the basis for the folk pop tune with a country bent. Ōtautahi born Fowler's ancestors were involved in the gold-mining industry in the area in the 1800's, the rundown Moonlight Hotel was where his 3rd great grandmother worked as a barmaid. Fowler envisaged what it must have been like at that point in time, serving loyal patrons and those breezing through hoping for good fortune and what it became after the gold dried up, folk left, and it became more of a place to harbour the lost and found.

Tami Neilson returns as a finalist this year with title track from the album 'Neon Cowgirl', co-written with her brother Jay and featuring Neil Finn. Tami says "The song represents a lifelong dream of chasing Nashville and country music. I've loved her all my whole life, even when she breaks my heart over and over again". Tami has won the APRA Best Country Music Song Award five times since 2014, and in 2025 became the inaugural recipient of the Country Music Honour for Contribution to Country Music in Aotearoa. Recently returning from Nashville, where she performed at the Grand Ole Opry and the Ryman, Tami is also a finalist in four categories at the Aotearoa Music Awards, including Album of the Year.

Whakameatia Mai comes from **Marlon Williams'** most recent album 'Te Whare Tiwekaweka', co-written with fellow APRA Silver Scroll Award | Kaitito Kaiaka co-winner KOMMI. The intimate, sparse and acoustic-led arrangement leans on four-part vocal harmonies and up-tempo guitar, upright bass, and mandolin, and Marlon credits Richard Puanaki's (Ngāti Kahungunu) elegant and concise whakamāoritia of the Catholic Hymn to the Virgin as the basis of this tribute to the 28th Māori Battalion. The lyrics of Whakameatia Mai draw on imagery of the natural world in disarray – storms, earthquakes etc – and the title loosely translates to "Let it be done to me," pointing to a quiet sense of acceptance or surrender. A former finalist for this award, Williams also won the award in 2013 with co-writer Delaney Davidson for Bloodletter.

Ant Healey of **APRA AMCOS** says "Country music from this part of the world has its own unique identity. These songs showcase our incredible original sound and the talent that the world is only just realising. We heard it here first!"



Country Music Honour finalists for the MLT Songwriting Award (unreleased songs):

- 5 More Minutes written by **Audrey Bangay**
- Better Than One written by **Shelley Wyatt (Elskan FLY)**
- Cherry Blossom written by **Sophie Gibson & Jonathan D'Souza**
- I Don't Mind written by **Chad Robinson**
- Last First Dance written by **Keith Pereira, Jeremy Turner & Tori Darke**
- Little Creeks written by **Leroy Brown & Mark Bruce**
- Nancy Wake (White Mouse) written by **Milly Tabak**
- Not Enough written by **Mel Parsons**
- Quicksilver Days written by **Barry Saunders**
- Wedding Ring written by **Ron Mitchell**

For MLT Songwriting Award finalist images, bios, imagery & more, [please see here](#).

The **MLT Songwriting Award**, gives a platform to the best unreleased songs from writers from all over the motu. This year's finalists include industry heavyweights Mel Parsons and Barry Saunders along with first time finalist Milly Tabak. Judged by a panel of country music artist and music industry individuals, this well-loved award gives audience members a chance to witness the very first chapter of unreleased songs from the eclectic songwriting community of Aotearoa.

The Country Music Honours will also include a celebration of the **Topp Twins** with the presentation of the **2026 Country Music Honour for Contribution to Country Music**; an Honour that celebrates members of the country music community who have not only achieved great heights of their own but **uplifted others and contributed to the past, present and future of country music in Aotearoa New Zealand**. Recipients do not perform at the event but are given a tribute crafted by their friends and peers.

Country Music Honours Event Info:

The Country Music Honours are held at the St James Theatre and are presented by the volunteers of the NZ Songwriter's Trust. This red-carpet event marks the opening of Gore's Tussock Country Music Festival; a 10-day festival with over 80 events on offer this year. Festival-goers can look forward to a glamorous evening filled with live performances by finalists, award presentations and a special guest performance from The Warratahs.

Country Music Honours tickets [available here](#).

Tussock Country Festival programme [available here](#).

For Country Music Honours queries, please contact:

Vanessa Harvey | NZ Songwriter's Trust Chairperson & Country Music Honours Event Manager
info@countrymusichonours.co.nz | 027 867 9358