

Kiwi's storm song rocks global contest

When the world watched in horror as Hurricane Katrina devastated Louisiana, New Zealand blues musician Mike Garner took notes. He added his words to a tune and came up with a song that has reached the finals of the world's most prestigious songwriting competition.

His song, *Louisiana Hurricane*, is one of 14 finalists in the Americana category of the International Song Competition, based in Nashville, United States. The Rotorua man is the only Southern Hemisphere finalist in the Americana category. The competition, which has 19 categories and an overall prize pool of more than US\$150,000 (\$188,760) in cash and prizes, attracts songwriters from around the world.

There are four other New Zealand finalists - Mahara Tocker from Te Aroha in the pop category, Daniel James Maguire from Wellington in the rock category, Ruia from Auckland in the world music category and Radha and The Kiwi Kids from Wellington in the children's category.

Garner said he found himself drawn to the television news during the 2005 disaster as more than 1800 people - mainly African Americans - lost their lives.

"New Orleans is iconic for jazz and blues. People who play this music all care about what happens there."

The song criticises the Government's inability to cope and how it didn't seem to care that people were dying. The lyrics are scathing, such as "rich folks left in their SUVs, poor folks left praying on their knees" and "soldiers guard convenience stores, keep food and water from the poor".

Garner said he was initially a blues entrant, only entering the Americana category "on a whim". He said news of being a finalist in the Americana category had come as a surprise but a huge honour.

He has been on "tenterhooks" since but will have to wait until next month for the results.¹ Garner said he was usually "cynical" about competitions, suspecting they were just money-making scams. However, this competition attracted some top names as judges, including Macy Gray, Tom Waits and Joe Satriani.

New Zealand songwriters have done well in the past. Moana and the Moa Hunters won the overall competition in 2003 and Wayne Mason was named a finalist in the Americana category in 2005.

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¹ "Louisiana Hurricane came third in the Americana section, 2008