



The Beat Goes On

Who'd have thought a Kiwi girl group — a covers group — would perform at two Olympics and be up against the mighty Weta Workshop for Young Entrepreneur Of The Year? SARAH LANG goes to a BeatGirls gig.

The BeatGirls are getting ready for a show without the aid of a mirror.

Deep in the innards of SkyCity's Auckland Convention Centre, the boardroom serving as dressing-room has everything a cluster of corporates could need, but the promised reflector's a no-show.

And in just 15 minutes 500 Bayleys real estate employees expect the BeatGirls onstage in stunning outfits designed to bring to life songs and dance from the 40s to the "noughties".

The glam trio's used to rock-star treatment overseas: limos picking them up in US cities, makeup artists fussing over their lippie before they go onstage at celeb-spotted Olympics parties. But it doesn't bother these girls one jot if the red carpet's not rolled out when they prepare for corporate gigs — their mainstay earners in New Zealand. Bayleys has paid for their flights from Wellington, hotel rooms and meals, the girls have done their makeup back in their hotels, and they've told SkyCity they're happy changing wherever.

BeatGirls founder/owner/choreographer/lead singer Andrea Sanders and Carolyn McLaughlin, who's been with the troupe all of their 11 years, recall far more rudimentary backstage arrangements: at a Golden Shears shearing competition their dressing-room was directly opposite the holding pens; they've executed costume changes amid industrial equipment and used the shine from stainless-steel stoves to check their wigs. Demanding divas they're not.

And there's no apparent embarrassment about stripping off in front of a relative stranger. McLaughlin, 35, who juggles BeatGirls gigs with work as an actress, dancer and sound-effect artist, has mastered the subtle art of the unrevealing quick-change. The third BeatGirl, Kali Chote, 21, smiles widely and says little.

They're wearing tummy-compressing stockings, though it's perplexing why: stomachs are flat, arms toned, legs lean. As they step into sequin-studded dresses, a Bayleys guest dressed as James Bond wanders in, implausibly claiming he's lost his way; he has the grace to blush and back out.

Show time. They sashay through the kitchen, past pots and pans and bored-looking wait staff. Sanders times the first of their three 45-minute sets perfectly: "when the audience is amped", she says; too soon and they're still quietly chatting, too late and they've gone flat.

They whirl on to the stage: "We're going to help you with your digestion this evening," coos Sanders as they launch into the Supremes' "Keep Me Hangin' On". She shoots a smile at husband Billy Watkins, BeatGirls co-founder, business manager and occasional guitarist and sound and lighting whiz, who's in the wings looking dapper if comparatively dull in a black suit.

Within minutes, the dance floor is packed as one crowd-pleaser follows another: "Proud Mary" (Tina Turner), "Dancing In The Street" (Martha and the Vandellas) — Sanders leading from the middle with her powerful voice. The slick dance routines are perfectly in sync. Dusty Springfield's "Son Of A Preacher Man" starts up: "This goes out to all the sinners in the room!" Sanders calls.

There are plenty of covers group — it's the BeatGirls' energy, timing, humour and crowd interaction that gives them the X-factor.

Tagged a "retro" group, the BeatGirls are styled on 60s girl groups, but have a broader repertoire. They sing six decades of music from the Andrews Sisters, the Shirelles and the Beatles to ABBA, Kylie Minogue and Outkast, meshed with polished

dance routines. Music's tailored to the listeners' teenagerhood: baby boomers love 60s music, 25-to-late-30-somethings go mad for the 80s.

The BeatGirls have also been dubbed a "parody trio" but, says Sanders, "we don't take the mickey out of the songs — it's just we don't take ourselves too seriously".

(The BeatGirls are neither a franchise nor the same three women. For the troupe's first four years, from 1996, there were three BeatGirls including Sanders and McLaughlin; since 2000 a pool of girls has made up the performance trio. But Sanders and McLaughlin usually head it up.)

For a decade the troupe's entertained hometown Wellington; the *Dominion Post* hailed them as being "as Wellington as the bucket fountain", the Cuba Mall water feature that's one of the city's best-known landmarks. And they've been booked everywhere from Kerikeri to Bluff.

Feel like you've seen them but not sure where? Probably on TV — recently they've performed on *Dancing With The Stars* and *Good Morning* — or at numerous public festivals and events.

They've also performed in Singapore, Hong Kong, Greece, Germany, Fiji, Hawaii and other Pacific Islands. When Sanders and Watkins lived in Sydney for three years from 2000, they set up a second-tier BeatGirls trio there, and once they'd moved back organised the Aussie girls from Wellington.

They've even performed at official Olympics parties at the Sydney 2000 games and Athens in 2004. Bands the world over would be elated to be asked, so how *did* they score these gigs?

In 2000, they were packing up after a Sydney outdoor festival performance when a man from the audience introduced himself as a member of the International Olympic Committee; he asked them to perform for fellow members the following night. They rebooked that day's plane tickets home, and so impressed the committee at the Sydney Olympic Stadium they were offered spots at four official Olympic functions.

The parties — hosted by *Sports Illustrated* in giant, lit-up marquees opposite the Sydney Harbour Bridge — were attended by hundreds of celebrities, athletes and media representatives. The BeatGirls were such a hit that four years on they were rebooked for the Athens Olympics, again performing at four official events, this time at the trendy seaside club Akrotiri.

"Speed boats kept patrolling to make sure no terrorists in scuba gear were trying to blow the place up," says Sanders. "They even checked our parents to make sure we had no dodgy connections."

The partygoers calling for encores included heavyweight boxing world champ Evander Holyfield, Chelsea Clinton, and *Sex And The City* stars Kristin Davis and Kim Cattrall. US media heavyweight Katie Couric, host of *The Today Show*, immediately booked them. Two days later at the show's open-air studio outside the Athens stadium, the BeatGirls were introduced by Couric as "the hottest ticket in town" and beamed live to 140 million viewers.

Following that appearance, US corporates started phoning, and they were booked for gigs in Miami, Palm Beach, Colorado and San Francisco. The offers — more than they can handle given the long-distance flights and jetlag — keep rolling in. Later this year they'll perform in South Africa, Las Vegas and Kentucky.

Sanders plans to franchise the BeatGirls, first in the US then Japan, but she and Watkins aren't rushing the masterplan.

They have a lively four-year-old daughter, Tara. When Sanders is

Billy Watkins, who occasionally plays bodyguard, says friends call him Hugh Hefner. "But it's more like Charlie's Angels. I'm Charlie and the angels go out and do the business."



BeatGirls' founder and driving force Andrea Sanders.



not performing or parenting, she's organising costumes, choreography and rehearsals. (It takes hours to devise and teach each routine.) Watkins works mainly on business development and marketing, and the couple share administration.

For now, New Zealand corporate events comprise around 80 per cent of the BeatGirls' bread-and-butter work. And it's never the same mix of routines regurgitated; each show's crafted to the individual event.

Twenty minutes into the "B theme" Bayleys party, "Gimme Some Loving" by the Blues Brothers comes on. Their namesakes, all 17 of them, take that as an invitation to pile on stage. Sanders says nervously: "I thought there were three of them..."

As a set of wandering hands moves close to McLaughlin's waist, Sanders' eyes flash a warning and Watkins looks poised to pounce from the wings, but the girls segue into a Beach Boys number and the Blues Bro's head back to the dance floor.

Among the bogans, bikers, ballerinas, bohemians, bimbos, butchers and boxers — in a curious case of partygoers impersonating impersonators — there are three middle-aged women in blonde beehives and sequins: yep, they're dressed up as the BeatGirls.

At the pre-show sound check, Watkins and the trio had spent 40 minutes fine-tuning the sound with the audio man, but through the first set the backing tracks are slightly crackly. At the break, McLaughlin diplomatically asks the audio man to rectify a voice distortion. He tries to brush her off with technical terms. "I know what a gain is," she says (but refrains from pointing out she's an award-winning film and television sound-effects artist).

Back in the dressing room, Sanders says she's done most of the set with a broken shoe strap; but now it's time to slip into red stilettos and froufrou skirts teamed with tank tops ("Supre," says Sanders, a self-confessed costume collector and bargain hunter).

They head back in singing 80s hits: "Walking On Sunshine" (Katrina and the Waves), Irene Cara's "Flashdance" and Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Want To Have Fun". The dance floor's packed.

In over 1000 shows they've witnessed tipsy office workers and plenty more, says Sanders: "If we'd carried a video camera with us everywhere we've been, we'd have a great documentary by now. We go from highbrow corporate dos to someone's wedding in a small marquee; from the Martinborough Wine and Food Festival with a crowd of 10,000 people to the Eketahuna firemen's ball, where everyone was dancing in their socks."

The BeatGirls also stage cabaret shows (in individual seasons or as part of arts festivals), blending song-and-dance routines with stand-up comedy and improv, imparting historical titbits about iconic groups and songs. Their *10th Birthday Bash* show comes to Auckland's Civic Theatre from August 23 to September 8 following a sellout season in Wellington last September.

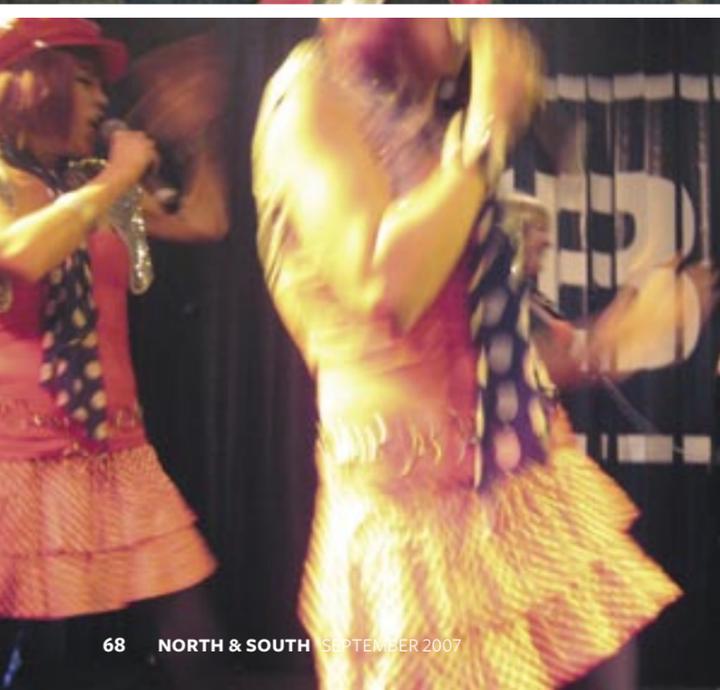
They're milking their 10th birthday, Sanders laughs.

Andrea Sanders is surely the beat behind the BeatGirls. McLaughlin calls her "the mother ship".

"She's very straightforward, focused, gifted and she works hugely hard. She works us hard too, and looks after us all."

Sanders and Watkins grew up just down the highway from each other — Sanders in Plimmerton, Watkins in Paekakariki — and both are the youngest of four children in families steeped in music and the performing arts.

Long-time BeatGirl Carolyn McLaughlin (top left); the "Blues Brothers" pile on stage for "Gimme Some Loving" (top right); a mirror finally turns up for the first costume change — as does Billy Watkins, Andrea Sanders' husband (centre right); Kali Chote and Sanders relive the 1990s (far right).





Olympics 2004, Athens: the BeatGirls perform on *The Today Show*, with host Katie Couric and Billy Watkins (top); Sanders and Watkins at home in Wellington with daughter Tara (left and above); their wall of fame (right).

Fresh from school, in the mid-80s Sanders choreographed and performed dance works for Wellington's Summer City festival. In 1987 she moved to Sydney, working as a dancer and vocalist.

In 1991 when her father Bill died she returned to Wellington intending to stay just a few months. There she met Watkins at a dance show and a whirlwind courtship ensued. "Billy said he wouldn't go and trek the Himalayas if I didn't go back to Sydney." Instead they stayed in Wellington and she became a back-up singer for his blues band Billy and the Blue Flames.

In 1994 the couple launched Bossa Nova (Brazilian music) group the Lounge Lizards. Deciding Bossa Nova wasn't commercial enough, they morphed the Lizards into a Beatles tribute band with a twist: three women singing and a band playing.

Soon they realised that while the female trio concept was a winner at Wellington bars, no one noticed the band's instrumentalists or noticed when they got rid of them. With a market niche identified, they began approaching businesses, and corporate gigs replaced bar work.

In 2000 they moved to Sydney, set up the BeatGirls there and continued to run their pool of New Zealand performers.

When Sanders became pregnant in 2002 it was to her surprise and not entirely to her pleasure. "I never thought I'd have children — I didn't like them and I was married to my career."

Realising she needed a family support network, she convinced

Watkins to move back to Wellington and found she "loved being a mum".

Tara has 32 stamps on her passport. As a baby she accompanied them to gigs, sleeping in a hammock in wardrobes while they got ready. Now on most out-of-town gigs, Watkins stays at home with their daughter.

Home's a 3.2-hectare property just outside Wellington with rolling hills, bush and sheep paddocks. Inside the colourful, multi-level house there's a BeatGirls wall of fame and one good-sized room dedicated to costumes and props.

"I've put a lock on the door now, but Tara's smart — she'd carry a chair up the stairs and unlock the door," laughs her mum. "She gets her hands on the wigs and lipstick all over her face."

"She knows heaps of songs and some of the moves. We laugh that she's going to take over the business."

It wouldn't be a bad inheritance.

While they won't comment on exact figures, Sanders says: "We've doubled our turnover in the last four years. Nowhere near where we want to be, but we could definitely make a million if we broke into more markets."

Seventy per cent of earnings go back into the business. Recently they've developed their website (www.thebeatgirls.com) into an eye-catching shop window. Users can scan reviews, photos and

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testimonials, listen to songs, book the group or order merchandise. There's a BeatGirls T-shirt, three CDs and a plan to expand the merchandise: more CDs and T-shirts and a calendar.

Now they're financially comfortable, they've set up a trust for charitable endeavours. In April they staged a *We'll Meet Again* Anzac concert in the Wellington Town Hall, singing 40s music like the Andrews Sisters. So many older people came backstage to thank them that they've planned a no-charge tour of Wellington region rest homes in 2008.

The BeatGirls: not a business you expect to find up against Oscar-winning special effects company Weta Workshop & Digital at the 2006 Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Awards. None were more surprised than Sanders and Watkins. Under company name Total Entertainment NZ, they were nominated for Services (including Financial Services, Property and Arts) — the most keenly contested of five categories — as was Weta's Richard Taylor.

Taylor was awarded both category and supreme honours at the November ceremony in Wellington; his company also pipped the BeatGirls for the 2006 Wellington Gold Awards (regional business awards). But being alongside the mighty Weta was kudos enough, says Sanders. And as nominees, they had to submit mission statements

about achievements and aspirations, which she says was a useful business exercise in itself. (Weta Workshop and Sanders had met before: Taylor worked on Peter Jackson's 1994 film *Heavenly Creatures*, in which Sanders played fantasy creature Diello, acting a love scene with Kate Winslet while "glued" inside a latex suit. Jackson has also hired the BeatGirls to entertain at his private parties.)

The BeatGirls are unashamedly "entertainers". Sanders: "As a covers group you always feel like original musicians and other people look down their noses a bit, but the symphony orchestra does covers, everyone does covers. People think you're only successful in the music industry if you've got a single on the radio or a record deal, but especially in New Zealand it's the opposite: a lot of those [original music] artists aren't making much money after the record company's taken its cut. Now there's the problem of free downloading."

The BeatGirls make more money than most original artists in New Zealand, she adds.

There's also the slightly sniggery suggestion their chief selling point is sex appeal. Sanders is unfazed: "That's what people in those eras looked like," she says. "Women performing in the 60s had miniskirts, 70s performers wore tight pants."

Watkins, who occasionally plays bodyguard, says friends call him Hugh Hefner. "But it's more like *Charlie's Angels*. I'm Charlie and the angels go out and do the business." ■