

## Trance-like communion

The 2024 Aotearoa Music Photo Awards have been announced as part of the Auckland Festival of Photography.

First prize went to Brenna Gotje for her photo of the Princess Chelsea band at Auckland's Town Hall, which the judges described as "Capturing a single, fleeting moment when a musician is in an almost trance-like communion with its instrument."

Second prize was awarded to Tom Grut for his image of Weyes Blood performing at Auckland's Powerstation. "It is simple and minimal, restrained yet moody and it carries within it a rhythmic flow that fits the subject impeccably," the judges said.

And the people's choice award was shared by Doug Peters for his image of superstar Taylor Swift and Samantha Davies' photo of the Jonas Brothers.

The festival supports Kiwi music photographers with more than \$7750 in prize money since 2021, while hosting an online archive with more than 1250 images.



The top pics from the Aotearoa Music Photo Awards, won by Brenna Gotje, above, for Princess Chelsea band.



# Family caught in gang gun bust

Straw buyers bought 13 guns in three months allegedly for gang-linked relatives

Jared Savage

A 75-year-old Auckland man and his daughter bought 13 firearms in three months as alleged "straw buyers" for relatives with links to a notorious motorcycle gang.

Most of the firearms were Alfa Carbine rifles, popular with criminals because they can be readily cut down into hand guns, which makes them easier to conceal and wield.

The Alfa Carbines are also prized in the gang world because they do not eject shell casings when fired, leaving behind less evidence to link the firearm to any shooting crime.

In recent years, police investigating the black market for guns have uncovered dozens of licensed gun owners who bought Alfa Carbines, and other firearms, on behalf of associates who cannot legally purchase them.

The tactic is known as using a

"straw buyer", or retail diversion, which police now believe is the most common way for firearms to end up in criminal hands.

The specialist Firearms Investigation Team (FIT) analysed more than 350,000 sales records over a four-year period, looking for unusual purchases which indicated potential retail diversion.

One suspicious pattern of spending by two licence holders over three months led to a covert investigation codenamed Operation Birch.

Between June and September 2022, a 75-year-old Auckland man and his daughter purchased 13 firearms and more than 2000 rounds of ammunition from two Gun City stores. In total, the pair paid more than \$21,000 in cash.

But the police allege the father and daughter acted as "straw buyers" on behalf of two younger relatives with links to the Comancheros motorcycle gang.

Eleven of the 13 firearms were models of Alfa Carbines. Police have since recovered two, cut down to pistol size, in the possession of a patched Comanchero and a prospect for the gang.

The 75-year-old man and his daughter were arrested in April 2023 and later pleaded guilty to a representative charge of unlawful possession of firearms.

The pair will be sentenced later this month, but cannot be identified yet because their younger relatives are defending the same criminal charges at trial.

The existence of Operation Birch was disclosed in a police briefing earlier this year to Nicole McKee, the associate Justice Minister, and a group of experts advising her in relation to firearms laws.

Released under the Official Information Act, the presentation highlighted a dozen "straw buyers" cases investigated in recent years.

Police say the tactic is the most common way for guns to end up in criminal hands.

Another investigation was Operation Carbine, in which a former Hells Angel in Hastings recruited a network

of straw buyers to purchase \$50,000 of Alfa Carbines and ammunition.

Some were sold to members of the Mongrel Mob, others were delivered to the Killer Beez gang in Auckland during a turf war with the Tribesmen in 2022.

The police also believe that the pump-action shotgun used by Matu Reid in a fatal shooting spree at a

It will give police the ability to trace firearms that have been stolen.

DS Ross McKay

downtown Auckland construction site last year can be traced back to a retail purchase.

While Operation Tuscan was unable to identify the "full chain of possession from sale to [crime] scene", according to Beal's briefing, two men have been charged with unlawful possession of a firearm.

Nicole McKee is in charge of the firearms portfolio and has stated the coalition Government is committed to rewriting the Arms Act "in its entirety".

When in opposition, the Act MP was a vocal critic of the firearms register and other gun-law reform on the grounds the new rules punished legitimate gun owners, instead of criminals who would break the law anyway.

But the police maintain the firearms registry will deter "straw buyers".

"It will give police the ability to trace firearms that have been stolen or diverted for use in crime, so we can then identify how firearms get into offenders' hands," said Detective Superintendent Ross McKay, the officer in charge of Operation Tuscan.

Asked last month whether she still stood by her previous comments about the effectiveness of the firearms register, McKee said the police briefing was "one source of information that will need to be considered".

Before entering politics, McKee was the spokesperson for the Council of Licenced Licensed Firearms Owners (Colfo). The lobby group continues to oppose the register.

Nicole McKee discusses firearms laws A8

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