

The soulful voice of the Aboriginal stolen generations, Archie Roach (1956–2022)

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The death in late July of Archie Roach, aged 66, marks the passing of a much loved and richly talented Australian indigenous singer/songwriter whose gentle and soulful music—drawn from his own harsh life experiences—powerfully connected with audiences across Australia and internationally.

Roach’s best-known songs grapple with the inter-generational trauma of the “Stolen Generations”—the brutal colonialist policy that saw Aboriginal children taken from their parents, placed in orphanages, and then fostered out to Anglo-European families, many of them never to see their parents again.

Under these government measures, which were also implemented in Canada, an estimated 100,000 Aboriginal children were removed from their families between the 1880s and the late 1960s to “breed out” the indigenous population. While the policy officially ended in 1969, the practice of welfare agencies removing Aboriginal children from their families and into out-of-home care still continues.

Roach was born in the central Victorian town of Mooroopna in 1956, the youngest of seven children. His mother, Nellie Austin, was a Gunditjmara woman from southwestern Victoria, and his father, Archie Roach Sr, a Bundjalung man from the north coast of New South Wales.

In 1958, welfare officers forcibly took Roach, aged 2, and two of his sisters from their parents when the family was living in Framlingham, a poverty-stricken Aboriginal settlement near Warrnambool in southwestern Victoria. The children were placed in a Salvation Army orphanage and then “fostered out.”

Roach had three foster placements. The first two were cruel and abusive; the third was with the loving family of Alex and Dulcie Cox, a Scottish immigrant couple in Melbourne.

The Coxes, as Roach explained in his autobiography *Tell Me Why: The Story of My Life and My Music* (2019), were told that his family had died in a house fire, and that he was the only survivor. They were “blameless, as far as I’m concerned,” Roach wrote, and “I will love them to my last day on earth.”

Living with the Cox family, Roach went to primary school and on weekends to the local Protestant church. He also briefly attended a Pentecostal church where he first heard “Your cheatin’ heart,” the music of Hank Williams, whose lyrics had been replaced with lines from the Bible.

Williams’ song, Roach later wrote, was “crushingly sad, but uplifting and beautiful,” and with a melody that “spoke completely to me about a feeling that I thought was mine and mine alone.”

Roach also discovered that Alex Cox was a Hank Williams fan and had many of his records. Taught guitar by Mary, the eldest Cox daughter, the young boy spent hours playing along with the Williams’ records.

Charley Pride, Fats Domino, Elvis Presley, Billie Holiday, Mahalia Jackson, Nat King Cole, Johnny Cash, and Otis Redding, along with Christian hymns and popular Scottish ballads, were background music in the Cox home. In a fitting tribute to Hank Williams’ early influence Roach sang “I’m so lonesome I could cry” on the album accompanying his 1994 autobiography.

Aged 15, Roach received a letter from Myrtle—an unknown sister—telling him that this birthmother had just died. The sudden discovery that he had an Aboriginal mother, as well as a father and brothers and sisters, was a massive shock.

Animated by a deep sense of loss, Roach decided to leave home and look for his Aboriginal family, a journey that would change his life forever. He took to the road, travelling to Sydney to try and find Myrtle.

Unable to locate her, Roach spiralled into alcoholism, poverty, and years of street living. He was arrested several times in Sydney for vagrancy and jailed for short periods in Sydney’s Long Bay, an adult prison. Roach returned to Melbourne, eventually tracking down his siblings in the inner-city suburb of Fitzroy.

Roach lived a precarious hand-to-mouth existence with periods of homelessness, interspersed with fruit picking, labouring in foundries and abattoirs, and even a brief experience as a circus tent boxer.

Roach’s “Rally Around the Drum,” co-written and sung with popular Australian musician Paul Kelly, deals with his tent boxing experiences. Archie ‘Snowball’ Roach Snr, his father, had been recruited by the long-established Jimmy Sharman boxing tent troupe. Sharman often recruited boxers from Aboriginal missions, paying them a pittance. “A round or two for a pound or two,” the boxing tent spruiker shouted before each bout.

Tragically, Roach never reunited with his father who had died in a Melbourne police lockup with no explanation given about the cause of death.

Roach was jailed for seven months in Melbourne’s Pentridge jail for being a passenger in a stolen car. On release, he went fruit picking in northern Victoria and then on to Adelaide, South Australia, where he met his lifelong companion, Ruby Hunter, also one of the stolen generations.

Ruby Hunter was eight years old when she, and several of her

siblings, were removed from their family by government authorities. Her grandmother was assured by welfare officers that they were taking the children to the circus. Hunter was never returned home and she, like Roach was, fostered out.

Roach and Hunter became inseparable and had two sons together, Amos and Eban. Like other members of the stolen generations, life was difficult as they wrestled with psychological impact of being removed from their parents. Roach struggled with alcoholism, suffered from depression, and attempted suicide. When Hunter briefly left him during a particularly difficult time, Roach stopped drinking. She then encouraged him to begin telling his and others' stories through song.

During a return visit to Framlingham, Uncle Banjo Clarke, one of the community elders, suggested he write about being taken from his family. While Roach initially rejected the idea, saying that he could not remember, Clarke explained what happened.

"The coppers came, and your dad wanted to fight them and all the yelling and the screaming. I thought about you kids all the time. No-one talks about it, but I reckon they should," Clarke said.

That night Roach wrote "Took the Children Away," which would become his signature song. Dedicated to all his family members, it describes babies being ripped from their mother's breasts, Aboriginal people fenced in like sheep on mission land, humiliated and told how to live, and then placed in foster homes.

He then composed an accompanying piece—"Weeping in the Forest"—about the pain inflicted on those left behind, later describing them as "trees that had been stripped of their leaves and green branches and left like husks."

Roach, however, did not perform "Took the Children Away" to large audiences until a 1988 concert at La Perouse in Sydney, during the bicentenary of British settlement of Australia on January 26, 1788. While Australian authorities and the media promoted the bicentenary as a time of celebration, it was anything but for Aboriginal people who had endured massacres, forced removal from traditional lands, state breakup of their families and decades of endemic poverty.

Prior to the concert, Roach mistakenly believed that his song was only about his and Hunter's story, unaware that it was the experience of thousands of Aboriginal people. The song had an overwhelming emotional impact on the largely Aboriginal audience many of whom were in tears. Others approached him after the song to share their own heartbreaking stories.

In 1989, Paul Kelly asked Roach to open his Melbourne concert and perform the song. It had an electric impact. The initial pin-drop silence when the song ended, which Roach initially thought meant he had failed, was followed by an explosion of applause.

In 1990, Roach released *Charcoal Lane*, his first solo album, named after an inner-city factory lane in Melbourne, where Aboriginal people met to drink and share stories without being harassed by the police.

The album, which included "Took the Children Away" and Ruby Hunter's "Down City Streets," was certified gold, won two ARIA awards in 1991 and was listed in *Rolling Stone's* top 50 albums in 1992. In 1994, the talented Hunter signed her own record deal. She was the first Aboriginal woman to do so, another revealing indication of the ongoing oppression of Aboriginal

people.

Charcoal Lane was the beginning of a 30-year music career for Roach who went on to record ten studio albums, three live albums, several film soundtracks and four compilation albums. In 1995, he performed in the US, Canada, the UK and Europe and also opened tours for Joan Armatrading, Bob Dylan, Billy Bragg, Tracy Chapman and Patti Smith.

"Took the Children Away" was a landmark in Australian contemporary music, opening the way for many other songs, dramas and films about the stolen generations and other social crimes still being committed today by Australian governments.

In early 2000, Roach and Hunter began working with the Australian Art Orchestra and celebrated jazz musician and composer Paul Grabowsky. The collaboration resulted in *Ruby's Story* and *Kura Tungar—Songs from the River*, highlighting Roach and Hunter's lives. The performances were incorporated into the feature-length documentary, *Wash My Soul in the River's Flow*, released in 2021.

In 2010, Hunter suddenly died of a heart attack, aged 54, leaving Roach devastated. Later the same year he suffered a stroke while holding music classes for children at a remote community in the Kimberley.

During his recovery, Roach was diagnosed with early-stage lung cancer. He underwent surgery and had half a lung removed. He continued to work, however, releasing the critically acclaimed *Into the Bloodstream* in 2012, a mixture of gospel, country and soul. "Song to Sing" and "We Won't Cry" are standouts on the album.

Roach released his final album this year, an anthology entitled, *My Songs: 1989–2021*, and continued to tour, performing on stage in a wheelchair with an oxygen bottle at his side.

To see Archie Roach on stage and hear his soulful voice was a deeply moving experience. His songs, many of them laments about the social crimes perpetrated against his people, were delivered in a gentle manner, his voice often trembling but without any anger or bitterness. For Roach, his musical storytelling was in order to understand, educate, heal and to bring unity.

After Roach's funeral, the hearse drove past Charcoal Lane, through the inner suburbs of Melbourne and then back to his homeland near Warnnambool. Along the funeral route, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike stood in silence, some with fists held high or others in tears, in respect to an extraordinary storyteller, artist, musician and deeply humane individual.

Perhaps the most effective tribute to Roach after he died was from singer-songwriter Paul Kelly, Roach's long-time musical collaborator: "Archie Roach. Big tree down. Weeping in the forest."



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