



Archie Roach: 'The Stolen Generations is as much a part of Australia's history as Captain Cook and Burke and Wills.'

Archie Roach's *Took the Children Away*: how one heartbreaking song galvanised a nation

On its 30th anniversary, Archie Roach, Paul Kelly, Mick Dodson and others reflect on the 'anthem for the stolen generations' – and the legacy it left behind

by Kate Hennessey
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It wasn't hard to find people who wanted to talk about Archie Roach: everyone approached by the Guardian said yes, and all of them spoke from the heart.

Roach has that kind of impact on not only those who know them, but everyone who has heard his music or seen him play live, often accompanied by his late wife, the singer-songwriter Ruby Hunter. It's been that way for 30 years, since his debut record *Charcoal Lane* came out in 1990 with its landmark song about the stolen generations, *Took the Children Away*.

After the pandemic shut down what was to be his final Australian tour this year, Roach re-recorded the songs of *Charcoal Lane* at his kitchen table, in his home on Gunditjmara lands in south-western Victoria, his mother's ancestral country.

On Friday, in celebration of the album's 30th anniversary, Roach will release these reimagined versions; and on 25 November, he will be inducted into the Aria Hall Of Fame, the latest in a long line of honours, including the Ted Albert award for outstanding

services to Australian music (2017) and the Order of Australia (2015), received for services to music and social justice.

This year, Archie Roach is also releasing his Stolen Generation Educational Resources, freely available on ABC Education, and a picture book edition of *Took the Children Away*, with illustrations by Hunter.

We spoke to those involved in and affected by *Charcoal Lane* about how the album was made, how it changed Australia, and how much work remains.

The writing

Paul Kelly, musician: I first heard about Archie through my guitar player, Steve Connolly, who'd seen him on a TV show called *Blackout* and said, "You gotta hear this guy." We wanted to do something special for our Hamer Hall show in 1990 so we tracked down Archie [to support]. He finished [his set] with *Took the Children Away*. There was this stunned silence; he thought he'd bombed. Then this wave of applause grew and grew; I'd never heard anything like it.



Archie Roach, Steve Connolly and Paul Kelly in the studio recording *Charcoal Lane*.

Steve and I started visiting Archie and Ruby's home in Melbourne's northern suburbs. We'd sit around the kitchen table: endless cups of tea, lamb sandwiches with white

bread, kids running in and out – their kids and foster kids. It was a busy place and a happy place.

One day Ruby said: “Archie, sing that Charcoal Lane song” and our jaws just dropped. This complete, beautiful song, like a mini movie. I thought the songs were extraordinary and deserved a wide audience.

Archie Roach: I’d never recorded an album before Charcoal Lane and I wasn’t sure of the process. I’d be there all day before I’d put down a vocal! When I started hearing the rough tracks, they were pretty deadly, and I thought, “It’s taking a little while but it’s all coming together.” I was happy.

I remember going into some cubicle, putting the headphones on and I had this “click, click, click”. I said “What the hell’s that?” and [producers Connolly and Kelly] said “It’s a click track Archie, it keeps the rhythm,” and I said, “Nah, it’s putting me off.” For the backing vocals they said, “We’ll get the Bull sisters who sing with the Black Sorrows,” and I said “What? You’re kidding?” They brought in Tim Finn for Took the Children Away too; that blew me away.

Paul Kelly: We recorded in Greg Ham’s studio in Carlton. Our approach was to make the vocals and the storytelling the main thing. Took the Children Away is a searing political song but a love song to Archie’s family, people and country too. I knew it would get a strong response because of how it affected me and that audience at Hamer Hall when we first heard it. It’s got a very strong gospel tone, which is why we started it with just his voice and a church-sounding organ. Archie is a beautiful soul singer.

Emma Donovan, musician: I got to know Archie and Ruby during my time with Black Arm Band. On tour, in the hotels, Aunty Rube would ring up and say “Come up for a yarn now, bub.” We’d collect the tea bags and complimentary bikkies so we’d have a little stash. She looked after me



Emma Donovan: ‘Uncle Arch brings this energy - to rehearsals, soundcheck, to anything.’

Uncle Arch brings this energy – to rehearsals, soundcheck, a lighting thing, to anything. It’s more than singing for a show – it’s for himself, it’s for everything he stands for. I’ve jumped at every opportunity to be a part of his beautiful albums.

Archie always yarns that Aunty Ruby was gonna chuck [the song] Down City Streets away; it was on a piece of paper, he grabbed it. That was the extra song they needed for Charcoal Lane, he says.

The reception

Adam Briggs, musician: I was four years old in 1990. Music was very much about heavy metal and rap but Archie Roach was our rock star anyway. Our community has a great way of embracing Aboriginal people of note and putting them on a well-deserved pedestal.



'I reckon if you don't like Archie Roach, there's something wrong with you,' Adam Briggs says.

It wasn't until I was older that I grasped the importance and weight of his songs. Took the Children Away is a pivotal song for Australia. That line – “This story’s right, this story’s true, I would not tell lies to you” – sums up his whole career and why he resonates with everybody. I reckon if you don't like Archie Roach, there's something wrong with you.

Emma Donovan: I grew up in a country music family and one uncle played Native Born all the time, that yarn about Albert Namatjira. Just hearing other Aboriginal names and people was a big thing. We'd see Archie and Ruby on TV; they were our royalty, our king and queen. In Perth at Naidoc week, my nan made me get a photo with them. She was like “Get in, get in.” I'm in my school uniform in the photo!

Archie Roach: We won two Arias in '91. People like John Farnham were walking down the red carpet, and there was screaming and cheering and cameras flashing. And then me and Ruby arrived and it went real quiet all of a sudden. Ruby said, "Keep your head down, don't look up and just keep walkin' Archie", and so we did. Later, everybody wanted to take my photo and say, "How do you feel?"



Archie Roach and Paul Kelly at the Aria music awards in 1991.

On tour, people would come up and say, "We didn't know." I get letters from children saying how sorry and sad they are that [the stolen generations] happened. Beautiful, when it comes from children. They basically just ask the same things: "Why? Why would that happen? Why would they do that?"

Paul Kelly: What really struck me about the songs on Charcoal Lane was that they were all love songs, and they were all political. People often separate those, but Archie had it all in the same song.

A constant refrain on that first tour with Archie was people saying: "I didn't know about [the stolen generations]." People would tell him it happened to them too and he started to realise it was a much broader story. I think some of that helped lay the groundwork for the Bringing Them Home report.



Ruby and Archie Roach with Archie's first Aria award in 1991.

Mick Dodson, former Aboriginal and Torres Strait justice commissioner: If I were to hear *Took the Children Away* now, I'd still be sad, if not weeping. Archie's a lovely bloke. No one should suffer in the way he and the stolen generations suffered. That song is a summary of a pretty awful part of our history. It's become a sort of anthem for the stolen generations.

The politics

Mick Dodson: It had a huge impact. People were pretty ignorant. It was highly relevant to what we were doing with the [Bringing Them Home report] – our research, talking to the survivors. This happened at the hands of the state. Some people were well-meaning, just misguided, but you don't take kids away from societies unless you want to destroy those societies.

A whole generation has passed since then but a lot of non-Indigenous Australians are still unaware of the ongoing impact of colonisation on Aboriginal people. As a nation, we need a truth-telling process. They're really dark truths. I'm just back from Coniston in central Australia, where the last-known, or acknowledged, massacre of Aboriginal people occurred in 1928. That's the part people seem to prefer to forget; that tens of thousands of Aboriginal people were slaughtered.



*A stolen generations protest in Australia, in a still from the documentary *After the Apology* by Larissa Behrendt.*

We pick and choose what we care to remember. If it's an awful episode in colonial history, people tend to not want to discuss that. I don't think people are wilfully ignorant, though some might be. But generally, when people find out, they're pretty shocked because it's not something that has had any prominence in our education system. The way Australian history is taught glosses over a lot of stuff.

Archie Roach: [The stolen generation] is as much a part of Australia's history as Captain Cook and Burke and Wills. We still need to own the whole history of this country and be honest and courageous. It's the only way we're going to move on. That's why we created the resources for schools and students, so they don't have to find out about the stolen generations as adults.

Emma Donovan: Like *Solid Rock* or *My Island Home*, *Took the Children Away* identifies Aboriginal Australia, our history and who we are. I won't use the word "forgiving", but Archie is so generous. He's such a big fella for seeing change. I've seen him play it live and he makes you feel in the moment like you're already there.



Archie Roach performs at the Sydney writers' festival.

Adam Briggs: The truth is still the truth, 30 years later, any day of the week. Facts are facts. People recycle Shakespeare for hundreds of years, it doesn't become less relevant; sometimes it becomes more relevant. The educational materials coming out: there's Indigenous Australia going above and beyond, again. How many records come with an instruction manual on how to be empathetic? It's us leading the way again, teach yas how to act.

The legacy

Archie Roach: I've sung Took the Children Away so many times over the years. It's become a healing song. We did [the Charcoal Lane re-records] here at my kitchen table, relaxed and comfortable, with plenty of cups of tea. I know the songs so much more now than I did [in 1990] and recording them this way made me think, "This is how I should have sang them."

Adam Briggs: I did *The Children Came Back* in 2015 as a homage. It was Naidoc week and I was like “How do I make this thing triple black?” Blackfellas in Australia have done so much in the face of adversity, so I was like: “Can we just pop some champagne and talk about the wins, and not the struggle, for three minutes?” I also wanted Archie to know we stand on his shoulders and others like him.

The Children Came Back

Emma Donovan: What’s so special about Uncle Arch is that when he writes a song, he makes people understand. He’s come through a lot of stuff but he still understands the other side. He’s not gonna turn his back on mob, you know? He’s gonna always see that Aboriginal perspective. Wherever mob are at.

Mick Dodson: I’m sort of getting choked up here, thinking about Archie. He’s had a bloody tough life. It’s very good to hear about the educational materials. The proof in the pudding will be how they get used, if they get used.

- *The Songs of Charcoal Lane, an album of re-records by Archie Roach, is out now. Archie Roach will be inducted into the Aria Hall of Fame on 25 November. A picture book edition of Took the Children Away, illustrated by Ruby Hunter, is out through Simon & Schuster. The Archie Roach Stolen Generation Educational Resources are available via ABC Education.*