

Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter in Brewarrina in 1995. Picture: Gerald Jenkins



As Archie Roach embarks on his final tour he is still building on his musical legacy, writes
Kathy McCabe

Archie Roach knows how music can save a life. Before the treasured Gunditjmarra/Bundjalung singer-songwriter imprinted his voice and all the pain within it on the Australian cultural psyche with *Took The Children Away* in 1990, he was battling alcoholism and homelessness provoked by the trauma of being taken away from his family at the age of three in 1959.

Singing out his suffering, whether around the kitchen table where he has written dozens of songs over the past three decades, or in front of audiences silenced into awe-struck reverence punctuated by tears, has been a healing journey.

"It's not like how I was years ago, when the pain was quite raw and I had no way of processing it except negatively, through alcohol, getting drunk and in fights," he says.

"Music helped me to process that in a positive way; each day, you get better and better, it's given me peace.

"I won't forget what happened, and the pain of it, but it doesn't hurt me every day because music has become this shield."

His musical legacy looms large this month courtesy of the film *Wash My Soul In The River's Flow*, an expansive anthology album *My Songs: 1989-2021* and his final extensive tour of NSW and Queensland.

The documentary shares the poignant love story of Roach and his late wife Ruby Hunter, also of the *Stolen Generations*, who died of a heart attack in 2010 aged 54.

The pair found each other as homeless teenagers at the People's Palace, the Salvation Army hostel in Adelaide, and powered by the force of their love and the medium of music,

became two of the most influential Indigenous voices in Australia.

Wash My Soul tells their story with unearthed film of a concert called *Kura Tungar - Songs from the River*, performed with pianist Paul Grabowski and his Australian Art Orchestra in Melbourne in 2004, as well as candid backstage footage and interviews with the songwriters.

Those candid vignettes of Roach and Hunter during rehearsals illustrate the playful and protective dynamic between them.

Roach says he hasn't been able to watch the film in its entirety, just a scene here and there when he felt strong enough to do so.

"It was beautiful just to see how she

was presenting stuff on stage but also backstage and how we interacted, it was a great time," he says.

He chuckles as he recalls one moment captured during rehearsals when he leans in to whisper something in her ear about her performance and she shoos him away, provoking much mirth among the orchestra members.

"There was one part where she'd forgotten something to do with the arrangement (of the song) and I whispered to her 'Nah, that's wrong'. And she's like 'Just go away, go over there!'" he says.

The frenzy of this creative endeavour spotlighting Roach's inestimable contribution to the Australian soundtrack is remarkable,

considering that at 66 the Maar nation elder from southwest Victoria has been battling chronic obstructive pulmonary disease for many years.

He wears a nasal cannula for supplementary oxygen; his illness is entirely the reason why his upcoming tour will be his final long run on the road.

The singer was so critically ill in late 2020, he was transported by ambulance with a medical team on standby as he performed for his induction to the ARIA Hall of Fame before being taken back to hospital.

His 16-date tour through regional NSW and Queensland, which begins on March 31, will be his final lap around those states; he plans to still perform

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Archie Roach's final long tour comes hard on the heels of the film *Wash My Soul In The River's Flow*, a love story with wife Ruby Hunter, and an expansive anthology album *My Songs: 1989-2021*.

but not undertake a month-long tour ever again.

"It will have a celebratory feel to it, we won't be doing another road tour ever again where you play one town and then the next day you're off to another town," he says.

The tour will highlight the career-spanning repertoire, a musical autobiography which he added new single *One Song* to for the *My Song* anthology released last week.

It is a hefty 44-track collection of raw truth (*Charcoal Lane*), evocative odes to Indigenous spiritual landscapes (*Spirit Of Place*, *Morning Star*) and protest anthems (*Open Up Your Eyes*).

Roach says the ethereal thread that binds the songs is spirituality.

"A lot of the old people believed that a lot of the earth was sung into existence, including people," he says.

"Song was the breath that awoke people. I believe song is that which keeps you, and has that ability to transport people and places into life."

At each show, on this tour and almost every time he takes a stage, Roach will sing *Took The Children Away*.

In the documentary, the songwriter, who penned the *Stolen Generations* anthem with Paul Kelly, remarks "I didn't know what it would do".

He says it seems to strike an even more visceral connection with audiences now, as First Nations people and wider Australia confront injustices such as Indigenous deaths in custody and incarceration rates, and campaigns ramp up pushing for federal government action on the Uluru Statement of The Heart and Aboriginal history to be adopted into school curriculum.

"It's a song that still helps me heal. Every time I sing it now, I let a piece of it go. I'll keep singing it and one day, I'll be free," he says.

"Those elders that are still around, and those who have gone through that, or their parents or grandparents who were born through the *Stolen Generations*, look to that song still, today, so it's just as important as it was when I first wrote it and sung it."

WASH MY SOUL IN THE RIVER'S FLOW IS CURRENTLY SCREENING IN CINEMAS. MY SONGS: 1989-2021 IS OUT NOW; TOUR DATES VIA ARCHIEAOACH.COM/TOUR

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ROAD TO HEALING