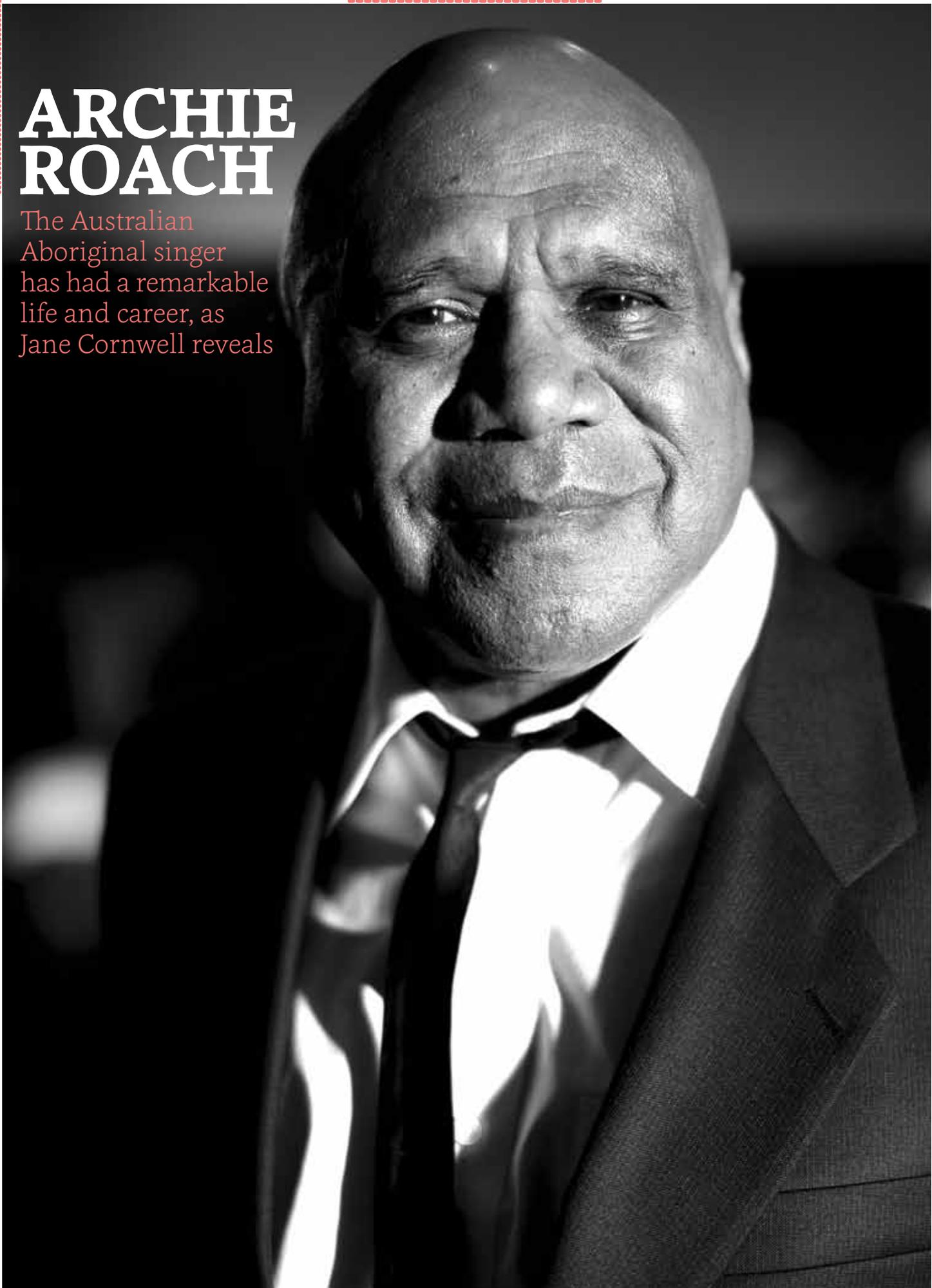


ARCHIE ROACH

The Australian
Aboriginal singer
has had a remarkable
life and career, as
Jane Cornwell reveals



When Archie Roach walked on stage at the Playhouse Theatre in Melbourne during the 2012 Australasian Worldwide Music Expo (AWME), the applause bounced off the walls. The stocky 57-year-old is one of Australia's most beloved voices and songwriters, but this was something else. Having endured a stroke, lung cancer and the loss of his partner and muse Ruby Hunter in the preceding three years, that Roach was there at all – let alone dressed in a dinner suit, with a 13-piece band and ten-voice indigenous choir behind him – was simply remarkable.

This was the launch of *Into the Bloodstream*, a gospel-flecked album chock full of songs of hope, joy and redemption and Roach's first release of new music in five years. Here were songs such as 'Big Black Train', with its cautionary bound-for-hell lyrics; the beautiful 'Mulyawongk', a tribute to the life, land and spirit of Hunter; and 'Old Mission Road', a lament on a lost childhood and an imagining of what might have been. 'Won't you walk with me darling just a couple of miles,' he sang in his familiar cracked baritone, sitting on a high stool with a heel hooked on a rung, his tie undone Sinatra-style. 'Won't you tell me the stories of when I was a child...'

Fast forward a year and Roach is telling me about his story and how it is depicted on the vibrant ochre cover of his new album. Two images flow into each other: on the left is a close-up of a blood cell. On the right, an extract of a painting by Robert Lowe Senior of the Aboriginal mission at Framlingham in south-west Victoria, where Roach's mother was born and where he lived with his sisters and brothers until he was three.

"Then we were taken away," he says matter-of-factly. Roach is a member of the Stolen Generation: the Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their families by Australian government agencies and placed in orphanages and then with white foster families. His landmark song, 1990's "Took the Children Away", tells the sad truth of indigenous Australia and subsequently received two ARIA Awards and an international Human Rights Achievement Award.

The young Roach was eventually fostered by the Coxes, a family of Scottish immigrants in Melbourne: "Dad Cox had LPs by the Ink Spots, Nat King Cole and Mahalia Jackson, whose version of 'Amazing Grace' blew me away. My sister Mary Cox played pedal organ in church; one day this lady got up with a guitar

and played a Hank Williams tune. That was it; I wanted to play guitar after that."

He was 14 when he got a letter from his blood sister, Myrtle, explaining who he was, who his siblings were and that his mother had just passed away. Head spinning, Roach grabbed his guitar and left to search for the truth. He fell apart along the way, living on the streets as an alcoholic. It was at a Salvation Army hostel in Adelaide that he met Hunter. Roach was 17; they would be together until she died in February 2010. Later in their marriage, once they'd had a family themselves, the doors of their house were open to troubled indigenous teenagers, as they themselves had been.

Together they made music and formed a band; Roach was working at a homeless shelter when he was asked to support the well-known singer-songwriter Paul Kelly in concert. "I only did two songs. The first was 'Beautiful Child'. The other was 'Took the Children Away'. I sang that and there was dead silence." A shrug. "I thought, 'Fair enough, no one knows me,' and got up to walk out. Then the clapping started, here and there at first, and then it was like rain coming down."

His career took off with the Kelly-produced *Charcoal Lane*; peppered among a series of acclaimed albums and innumerable live shows have been soundtracks for films such as Rolf de Heer's *The Tracker*, opening slots for the likes of Bob Dylan, Billy Bragg and Patti Smith and

projects including the Black Arm Band (a supergroup of indigenous Australian artists) and Ruby's Foundation, an organisation that supports Aboriginal arts and culture.

Understandably, the triple whammy-tragedy of 2010-11 made him think about retiring. But with the support of his family, long-time manager Jill Shelton and the producer and guitarist Craig Pilkington, Roach went into the studio and recorded *Into the Bloodstream* with an oxygen bottle on standby: "Slowly, the songs came into me, and as I sang them I started to get better mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

"I felt like I'd sung enough about troubles, sorrow and pain, and I needed to turn a corner," he says in his quiet, dignified way. "I wanted to write about coming through pain in a positive way. We can all rant and rave and I'll still do that," he adds with a grin, "but I wanted to say 'hang on a minute. It's good to be alive.'" ♦

➤ **VIDEO** Watch a video by Archie Roach on the *Songlines* YouTube channel

"I felt like I'd sung enough about troubles and pain, and I needed to turn a corner"

BEST ALBUMS



Into the Bloodstream (Liberation Music, 2012)

Having suffered the loss of his wife Ruby Hunter, and survived both lung cancer and a stroke, Roach rose from the ashes like a proverbial phoenix with what is arguably his finest album to date. Reviewed in #89.



Charcoal Lane (Hightone, 1990)

Roach's gentle, moving debut features minimal acoustic arrangements, deft accompaniment by Paul Kelly and the late Steve Connelly, and such powerful ballads as 'Native Born' and 'Took the Children Away'.



Jamu Dreaming (Aurora, 1992)

Roach's sophomore effort casts the net wider with songs about everything from marital happiness ('Love in the Morning') and fatherhood ('Mr T') to domestic violence ('Walking Into Doors').



Journey (Liberation Music, 2007)

A companion piece to the acclaimed documentary *Liyarn Ngarn*, a tale of racism and a plea for reconciliation between black and white Australia that featured Roach's powerful lyrics and voice. Reviewed in #51.

BEST COMPILATION



Creation (Warner Music Australia, 2013)

This four-CD set features remastered versions of Roach's first albums, and includes songs such as 'Down City Streets' and 'A Child Was Born Here', on which the great man's reputation was built. Here, too, are 14 previously unreleased bonus tracks.

IF YOU LIKE ARCHIE ROACH, THEN TRY....

Shane Howard



Goanna Dreaming (Goanna Arts, 2010)

One of Australia's most beloved singer-songwriters and one-time frontman of the iconic Goanna, Howard has spent most of his working life collaborating with Aboriginal musicians including Roach. This, Howard's 11th album, combines poetic and folk traditions as it underlines his commitment to indigenous Australia.