

Vale Uncle Archie Roach AM

The Australia Council sadly acknowledges the passing of legendary First Nations Songman, singer-songwriter Uncle Archie Roach AM, and pays tribute to his impressive and generous contribution to Australian music and culture.

The Gunditjmara and Bundjalung Elder was one of Australia's most recognised storytellers, human rights campaigner and cultural ambassador. A member of the Stolen Generations, he shot to fame in 1990 with his song *Took the Children Away*, which told a story of survival, hope and healing. This remarkable song was first performed at La Perouse, near Botany Bay as part of protests surrounding the Commonwealth Bicentennial celebrations. Uncle shared with Council –

“There was an open forum and people camping there, mobs coming to march against the bicentennial. I said, ‘I got nothing much to say but I’d like to sing you this song. I played ‘Took the Children Away’. Afterwards, what struck me first, was the complete silence. Everybody in the crowd, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, all had their heads bowed.

“After that, all these old people started coming up to me, one by one, and asking me who I wrote that song for. I said I wrote it about me. The old people just gathered around me, crying because they were taken away too. I didn’t realise the extent of what was going on in this country.”

Archie's music enlightened audiences to the traumatic treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia. To this day, he is the only songwriter to receive an international Human Rights Achievement Award for the composition of *'Took the Children Away'* — an honour bestowed upon him in 2000.

He went on to achieve both local and international acclaim, gracing the cover of *Time* magazine, touring and performing alongside artists including Joan Armatrading, Bob Dylan, Tracy Chapman, Suzanne Vega, Billy Bragg and Patti Smith.

Archie Roach and life-long partner Ruby Hunter were the founding members of Black Arm Band in 2006 and was famously quoted as saying

‘The Black Arm Band reminds me of the long struggle and the long journey we’ve been on. 30 years ago we were marching for justice down the city streets, but now we’re telling our stories in the concert halls.’

— Archie Roach, The Black Arm Band

Among his numerous accolades, he received the Australia Council's prestigious Red Ochre Award for Lifetime Achievement in 2011. He was made a member of The Order of Australia

in 2015 for his lifetime contributions to music and activism. His music won numerous ARIA awards and he was inducted into the ARIA Hall Of Fame in 2020.

Australia Council Executive Director First Nations Arts and Culture Franchesca Cubillo said:

“Uncle Archie Roach was a remarkable Songman of great renown, a storyteller, Elder and a quiet gentle voice for our people. His voice so powerful in song, seemed to echo the spirit of our ancestors and transport you to another world, his stories reverberated within you long after the music ended. He exemplified the transformative power of song, ceremony, culture, drawing from his own painful life experiences to help provide hope and healing to many others. His powerful legacy – his Songline, helping to share First Nations culture and stories with the world, will not be forgotten.”

Australia Council CEO Adrian Collette AM said:

“Uncle Archie Roach will be remembered as one of our nation’s greatest storytellers. We extend our deepest heartfelt condolences to his family and community, as well as the countless others whose lives he touched through his music.”