

# **RIVERS FLOW**

**REFLECTIONS ON THE SONGS OF  
ARCHIE ROACH  
& RUBY HUNTER**

**CURATED BY KIM SCOTT  
FOREWORD BY AMOS ROACH  
EDITED BY CASEY MULDER**



**FREMANTLE PRESS**

## PLAYLIST

*Rivers Flow – reflections on the songs of Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter*  
can be found on Spotify and Apple Music

Wash My Soul in the River's Flow

Took the Children Away

Yarian Mi Tji

Held Up to the Moon (In My Grandfather's Hands)

The Place Where I Grew

Little by Little

Sister Yappa

Lighthouse (Song for Two Mothers)

Down City Streets

From Paradise

Mission Ration Blues

Ngarrindjeri Woman

Aurukun Moonlight

A Child Was Born Here

Dancing (with My Spirit)

Beautiful Child

Place of Fire

We Won't Cry

The Old Days

Native Born

Summer of My Life

Love in the Morning

Watching Over Me

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## FOREWORD – AMOS ROACH

From Yorta Yorta Country, Mooroopna, where Dad was born, and to the Riverlands of South Australia, where Mum was born, the Murray River connects them. From the desert to the forests and the rivers to the seas, North to South and East to West, their Bloodlines and Songlines connection to the land: they connect each and every one of us, making sure no one is left behind, and as they complement each other as Man and Woman, Husband and Wife, Father and Mother, they conduct the whole ceremony. Song Man and Song Woman.



## INTRODUCTION – KIM SCOTT

‘Make a playlist,’ said Casey Mulder. Casey is editor of this collection, and she with consultant editor Kirsten Krauth comprise the powerhouse behind it.

So I made a playlist, and revisiting the songs of Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter opened me right up. Remembering where I’d heard a song, or tried to sing it. Who I was with, when, where. And then there is the very quality of the songs themselves, their big spirit.

How I wish I could sing like that, write like that.

This is how *Rivers Flow* came about: we asked First Peoples writers to riff on any one of Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter’s songs; first in got first choice. Some wrote about the song they’d chosen, some of Archie and Ruby, some of what they were doing with that song as soundtrack, some of where the song led them. Or they wrote something else again.

Each writer’s first page shows the title of their piece and – appearing vertically – the title of the song that motivated and inspired it.

Gina Williams (‘Took the Children Away’) mostly gives thanks to Archie for support and inspiration. She is not the only one to feel that way but is the only one so fortunate to have

Archie Roach in her audience, and calling out for her voice, singing his support.

Gina also writes that, ‘Just about every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person has a story about when they heard this song, or when they first saw Archie perform.’

True, but it’s another song, another time that sticks in my mind.

Like Jeanine Leane’s protagonist (‘Afterglow’/’Love in the Morning’) late in this collection, I was huddled among crumbling, inner-city renovations the first time I heard a Roach and Hunter song. Over the rooftops came this song, their singing. Winter sunlight splintered on corrugated iron, speared through tangled grapevine and fell in coins around my feet as the song entered and expanded me. It was only a recording and not the real thing but so very, very human and so precious. At the time it seemed a most special gift. Was Archie’s voice mostly, but Ruby’s song: ‘Down City Streets’. The same song inspires ‘Be Never Alone’, Claire G Coleman’s moving piece in this anthology.

I saw Archie and Ruby perform just a few times, mostly at small venues, and met them only very briefly. Once, at Clontarf Aboriginal College, I had my baby son in my arms as I shook Archie’s hand. ‘Pleased to meet you too,’ Archie said, introducing himself to my little boy and shaking my baby boy’s hand with a sideways-smile. I was a pleased and proud father at that moment.

On another occasion, companions braver than myself knocked on the backstage door at some small venue and we were all bustled into a room. Ruby and Archie looked up as we entered and smiled big as could be. Archie had his guitar on his lap. Then we were stammering admiration and gratitude and family names.



The two of them so very warm and strong with the silly, flailing ones among us.

In the 1990s I was running an ‘Aboriginal Bridging Course’ for mostly mature-age students transitioning into university studies. We made a songbook each year, and these songs made the cut: ‘Took the Children Away’, ‘Native Born’, ‘Down City Streets’ and ‘Walking into Doors’. We sang the first of these most of all.

It’s not a particularly easy song to sing, certainly beyond my capabilities. But someone else would take the notes I could not, and others joined in so that, as the weeks went by, together we came to collectively embody the song. I am wistful today for those times, for that small group replenishment, that family-feel; wistful even for the notes I could not reach, or hold, or deliver so straight and strong as Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter. But few could and few can. It seems certain some human voices can work magic, and I don’t know whether it’s their timbre, their range, or the way they harmonise and surprise ... It’s a gift they’re given and, if all goes for the best and we are lucky, pass on to the rest of us.

Of course, print also carries voice. In this collection, in both poetry and prose, you’ll feel the shifts in tone and content, the various ways marks on the page are made to work their magic.

Anita Heiss’s heartfelt, impassioned piece made me consider again the song ‘Summer of My Life’, only to be reminded of a Chekhov short story. The structure and restraint, the detachment and controlled point of view in stepping around the very sort of passion and emotion Anita recounts, allows it to linger all the more.

I trust it causes no offence that I have mentioned only a few of the writers in this volume. You will favour others. However, my vote for best title goes to Charmaine Papertalk Green’s searing

poem, 'Truth-telling Menu's Sad Rations'. Go on, scan the contents page for yourself, and while you're there, note the talented list of contributors. I am especially and exceedingly glad that we have a foreword from Archie and Ruby's son, Amos Roach. Finally, let me acknowledge what is obvious to we insiders: the focused engagement of editor Casey Mulder was crucial – without her, the commitment and energy of this volume would have never been. Casey's deft and considered management and, where necessary, feedback to authors (shepherding us cats) demonstrated a rare combination of talents.

I have not mentioned Archie Roach's many praiseworthy collaborations with other artists. My apologies. However, this volume in effect springs from collaboration. So why not you too? We started with a playlist.

THE SAME RIVER TWICE  
JAZZ MONEY

WASH MY SOUL IN THE RIVER'S FLOW



I keep stepping  
in the same river twice  
and to eternity

~

this water  
knows  
all the care  
to come before  
every song  
sung  
upon  
these banks  
always with flow  
and memory  
of the soft skin  
dipped in laughing light  
still heard within  
the shallows

~

in the current's pull  
I hold our baby  
gentle  
new to this  
world  
known to this  
water

this water  
that has known  
our people  
since the carving  
of the land  
first began

~

let this  
confluence  
cleanse and  
carry ancestral  
back to  
beginning

~

these banks  
are not  
where we  
are divided  
but where we  
meet in shared  
responsibility

~   ~   ~

let boundary  
not be taught  
in binary  
a healthy river  
needs tending  
from upstream  
and beyond

bank to  
swelling bank  
and back  
around the  
bend  
~  
we introduce  
this baby  
dip them in  
the old fresh  
waters  
of their  
story  
to  
sing  
forward  
to nourish  
this world  
taught in  
generosity  
abounding  
always in  
these currents  
the same  
river  
again





TOOK THE  
CHILDREN AWAY  
GINA WILLIAMS

TOOK THE CHILDREN AWAY



The memory of Archie Roach singing ‘Took the Children Away’, his voice ringing out across venue after venue around this country, will never be forgotten. You know the first line, we all do, and when you think about it, you’d be hard-pressed not to hear his voice – warm, powerful, broken, healed, raw and beautiful all at once.

The song remains iconic; forever seared into the minds and hearts of First Nations people right across this land. I think just about every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person has a story about when they heard this song, or when they first saw Archie Roach perform.

I was working as a journalist for a regional television station when *Charcoal Lane* first came to our attention. A while later, Archie was performing at a festival in Kalgoorlie, a mining town in the Western Australian goldfields. We happened to be filming and I remember looking at the audience and wondering how on earth he was going to capture the attention of a very busy, very raucous crowd.

Archie, on stage with his beloved Ruby, very gently started to strum his guitar and, just like magic, the crowd became still. But it was more than that – it was like he was weaving some kind of

fabric across the audience, gently wrapping us up and connecting us all.

Over the years I would see him do this, repeatedly. When asked about it, he would shake his head and smile, ever humble about his ability to transcend so many other performers.

Archie really was one of the first truth tellers, living in a world that wasn't yet ready to listen. Even now, when we should be a nation of *truth listeners*, the irony is not lost that his most powerful and well-known song should start with those words.

His story was right. His story was true.

Archie's voice and his truth became ours; he was finally telling our story as *we* knew it, not as it was told by the establishment. He'd lived this experience, he'd articulated it, without malice or cruel intent, which made it all the more significant, because you can't tell someone who's been so deeply wounded that they shouldn't feel that grief or, if they do – how long they should be allowed to feel that hurt for.

You never forget the moments where your life is irreversibly changed through trauma. Ask any person impacted by the Stolen Generations and you'll see immediately that those scars are still just below the surface and those feelings are every bit as visceral as the day the trauma began.

There's a deep yawning chasm in the core of your very being; it holds a dull ache that never really heals. The trauma of upheaval, the anguish caused by a faceless system which arbitrarily destroys families based on the colour of their skin.

The distress of never getting those family moments, never growing up with the memories that most people take for granted. Family celebrations and events, nicknames, silly or funny stories,

even the sad times, all become things that you're reduced to remember only as a witness to the experiences of other people. You can't have more than that, and it's not even your fault, but it still feels shame that you weren't there.

Unless you've experienced this first-hand, you can never truly understand what that hurt feels like.

In countless conversations with my Mum, invariably with a cup of Lipton in front of her and cigarette in hand, she struggled to remember much about her family when she was a little one, yet in a single conversation she could recall the day she was taken. She remembered it and relayed the day back to me with a laser focus.

Earlier that day, Mum had been asked by an older family member if she wanted to go with her brothers to play hockey at a carnival. Being sports mad, she leapt at the chance for an outing and they excitedly got ready for a day of fun and sport.

I'll never forget her words, 'We all jumped in the car. I didn't even realise anything was wrong until I looked up at the house as the car was pulling away and I saw your Aunt, my big sister, peeking out the window from behind the curtain, tears running down her face.'

Mum was seven. It would be another eleven years before she could have any kind of agency around her life. She told stories of being on Roelands Mission, then Sister Kate's in Perth. Looking back, I realise she had softened her narrative as she knew it hurt us to hear what had happened to her. Many Stolen Generations kids did that as adults. They modified and shrank their stories so as not to perpetuate the hurt they'd been caused. Mum, like Archie, was a living and walking masterclass of grace and dignity, in a world of pain.

Mum's story wasn't unique. There are thousands of stories stored in the hearts and minds of families right across Australia. But it took a man living on the other side of the country to gently stand and tell his story through music, before this nation started to really have any idea of the practices that had broken so many families and traumatised so many children.

We would later discover that Archie was a great friend to Mum's big brother, Uncle Noel, and his family who'd been living in Victoria for years. Archie was so surprised and happy when we made the connection. When he met my Mum a couple of years later, he and Mum shared stories of many times when he and Uncle Noel would sing and have campfire jams.

The campfire was important to Archie. At a concert, while we were supporting him on tour in New South Wales, Archie observed that, 'At some point we've all been at the same campfire, and all we are trying to do is find our way back.'

To Archie it was never about what separated us; it was always about the things we shared.

We sure did share some things. Archie and I were both foster kids. We laughed when we discovered we even ate bowls of ice cream the same way! The method is simple – you mix it in the bowl to soften it, then gently go around the edges and pick up the melted bits, because it makes the ice cream last longer.

We also had a shared love of older songs. I loved the old jazz standards, singing along to Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday. I desperately wanted to be Sarah Vaughan when I grew up. Archie loved the old gospel songs from his childhood, where he and his family would go to church. We both believed that songs should be written in a heartfelt way and sung and played with great

passion because music is a form of storytelling, and it has a way of connecting our hearts and spirits when words fail.

I loved Archie as a performer and my inner-journalist deeply respected his ability to turn interviews into conversations, to impart deep wisdom with a warmth and a generosity that never made you feel like you'd asked him something silly. I thought he was brilliant. And I wasn't alone in that adoration.

It wasn't until we started to share stages as performers that Guy Ghouse and I really saw the depth and character of the man who became a mentor and dear friend to us.

Our first experience with Archie as performers happened at the Nannup Music Festival in south-west Western Australia. Guy and I were on stage at the Nannup Town Hall and overwhelmed by the jam-packed venue and the suffocating heat. I was struggling to tell the story about losing my much-loved adopted dad, Cyril Williams. In that moment my truth had become too painful to speak about.

Cyril taught me to sing by listening and here I was, all these years later, doing what I loved. But my emotions had spilled over to a point of no recovery and my voice kept betraying me, choking my words and threatening to reduce me to a blind panic. As I paused and looked down at my trembling hands, big tears falling down my face, barely able to breathe, a voice called out from the audience.

'It's all right, Sis, we're all here with you.'

I looked up and saw Archie sitting there, halfway down the venue in the audience. His head was bowed but his fist was raised in unity and strength. It changed my life – I realised in that moment that we are all connected, we all understand love and loss and the power of unity, regardless of language.

Not long after that day, we were invited to come and support

Archie on tour with an opening set. Every night, you could feel the audience waiting for Archie to sing his iconic song. Every night, his voice would soar across the audience, the words never losing their impact.

On tour, Archie would always thank us for opening at his concerts. He would always say something kind to acknowledge us. One night at a performance in Kincumber in New South Wales, Archie thanked us, and then started to say, ‘You know, she reminds me of one of those old singers ...’

My heart skipped a beat. I couldn’t believe it, I sat there wishing and willing Archie to compare me to Sarah Vaughan, and in silent prayer I said, ‘Please be Sassy, pleaaaaase say Sarah Vaughan, please, please, please say Sassy ...’

And then he said it.

‘Edith Piaf ...’

Oh my stars, I nearly fell off my chair! Edith? Really?

But then he continued.

‘She takes this old language and sings it and makes it beautiful and we can’t help but fall in love with the romance of it.’

I had to laugh. It was one of the best backhanded compliments ever. Archie really did have a way with words. Words that healed a world of hurt. Words that brought people together in a world that seemed determined to make us other than. Words that spoke truth to a world that didn’t want to listen.

The last time I got to interview Archie was in 2019, for an ‘in conversation with’ event as part of a national tour to promote his book *Tell Me Why*. Gracious and funny, generous with his stories, he was the consummate talent and I was in my element being able to tease stories out of him.



One of the last questions was about his most played and loved song. Did he ever get tired of singing that song? It meant so much to so many people, but every time he sang that song, did it hurt him to relive the trauma of it?

Archie leaned back in his seat, looked out to the ether as he gathered his thoughts. Collectively, the audience leaned forward, knowing that whatever he was going to say next was going to be deeply considered and utterly profound.

‘This song ... this story, I tell this story, and I sing this song, and each time I heal a little bit ... and I think one day, *one day*, just maybe I’ll sing this song, and it won’t hurt me anymore.’

And that was Archie. The artist, the musician, the poet, the leader. Gently, quietly telling his story through spoken word and song, uniting people from all walks of life.

We counted ourselves lucky, to bear witness to his genius, whether it be on a stage or in an interview or even in a living room. His ability to walk into a space – armed with songs and a guitar to strum – and silence even the rowdiest of crowds was unparalleled.

To speak of devastating things, the suffering, the humiliation and trauma he and his family had endured, without anger; he was the epitome of grace and dignity. We all wanted to dip our toes into the wells of healing Archie had dug so deeply to share with us.

There will never be another Archie. Not in this lifetime anyway. There will be those who continue to carry his legacy, on stage and off. But nothing will ever compare to the gentle man who simply stood on a stage, guitar in hand, calmly telling his story and inviting our nation to understand and walk in healing into a better future.