

## Anthony Merlino review of Archie Roach, *Tell Me Why: The Story of My Life and My Music*

(Camberay, NSW: Simon & Schuster Australia, 2019), 384 pp., HB \$49.99,  
ISBN 9781760850166

On 25 January 1988, Archie Roach broke silences and unsettled history. Standing on a makeshift stage in La Perouse, Sydney—and armed with a guitar—Roach strummed one chord. And then he sang:

*This story's right, this story's true  
I would not tell lies to you  
Like the promises they did not keep  
And how they fenced us in like sheep.  
Said to us come take our hand  
Sent us off to mission land.  
Taught us to read, to write and pray  
Then they took the children away,  
Took the children away,  
The children away.  
Snatched from their mother's breast  
Said this is for the best  
Took them away.<sup>1</sup>*

Some people were crying. Others bowed their heads. But everyone was connected. Aboriginal mob from across the country were assembled as one people, unified by 'a collective sense of injustice' (p. 200). Ready to march tomorrow. Ready to proudly shout that 'white Australia has a black history, and that we have survived' (p. 202).

Through song, a personal story became a shared story, forging common emotional bonds that welded people together. In his deeply intimate and immensely moving memoir, *Tell Me Why*, Archie Roach explores this unique power of music and unmasks its role in uniting, healing, contesting, redeeming and saving. Revealing the potential for sonic biography to profoundly alter how we see each other, and ourselves. And yet, Roach considers it a miracle that we ever heard his music, let alone his story.

\*\*\*

---

1 Archie Roach, "Took the Children Away", 1990.

Born in 1956 at Framlingham Mission near Warrnambool, Victoria, Roach at age two was stolen from his family, with two sisters. Flung through institutions and abusive families, his third and final foster parents, Alex and Dulcie Cox, brought him into their Melbourne home after seeing him advertised by the government in a newspaper. Roach truly loved his Dad Alex and Mum Dulcie despite their complex relationship, remembering them as ‘two people who showed me love and kindness when I needed it most’ (pp. 138–39).

One way this family expressed that love was through music. Mary, one of his foster sisters, soothed the household with her organ playing. Roach revelled in singing gospels at church. And every evening, Dad Alex and Roach would blast Scottish ballads. Roach ‘took great joy in sharing those songs with Dad Alex’ because he ‘wanted to be close with him’ and ‘understand the power that the songs had over him’ (p. 11). At school, Roach not only loved art and poetry, but also knew how to stand up for himself and friends. Something that would continue. When Roach was inspired by the music of Hank Williams played at his Pentecostal church, Dad Alex bought him his first guitar. Roach played that instrument religiously by the record player, trying to follow the songs.

But one day, a letter arrived, and everything changed. His long-lost sister Myrtle had written. His mum, Nellie Austin, had just passed, the letter read. His dad, also named Archie Roach, was already dead. Johnny, Alma, Lawrence, Gladys and Diana were his brothers and sisters. Addressed to Archibald William Roach, the letter revealed, for the first time, his real name.

All else was now insignificant. Roach saw his foster family differently, his trust in government was eroded, and he ‘had problems seeing the need for deference’ (p. 28). At 15, Roach left school. Before long, he left home, never seeing Dad Alex or Mum Dulcie again. He went searching for family, and himself.

Roach learnt the streets. Sleeping rough, having a charge,<sup>2</sup> begging. Getting more grog. Meeting family, learning culture. Forming communities. Helping others, leaning on them too. Playing music. Working odd jobs. Boxing with a travelling troupe, ripping up pavement, fruit picking. Living itinerantly. Hitchhiking. Surviving. Drifting in and out of jail. A journey many know well.

After leaving Her Majesty’s Prison Pentridge, Roach made himself a promise. ‘I’m never going to prison again’ (p. 108). He pulled out a 20-cent coin from his pocket. Heads, Adelaide. Tails, Melbourne. Heads. Roach thinks ‘few men have gained more from a simple coin-flip’ (p. 112). In Adelaide, he discovered two lifelong loves: pie floaters, and Ruby Hunter.

---

2 Drinking alcohol.

Ruby was stolen too. Through her, Roach learnt more about Aboriginal history. His history. Travelling together, Roach went back to the mission, forming a bond with Uncle Banjo, who remembered him being taken away. But Roach was still on the grog, unable to quit. Seizures started capturing him, and a cyclone of self-destruction and self-loathing began. He tried to take his own life, spent time in a sanatorium, and was passed out when both his sons were born. Eventually, Ruby took the kids and left. Roach had left home to find family but seemed to only have found pain.

Worse was coming. A grand mal seizure almost killed him. He was in hospital, fighting for his life. It was time to quit grog, for good. Roach entered a community-controlled rehabilitation centre called Galiamble. There, he started finding himself. He realised he had an illness called alcoholism, and ‘started to wonder if it wasn’t our blackness that got us drinking, but our trauma’ (p. 177). He reconciled his Aboriginal culture and Christian spirituality, recognising that ‘both could be access points for one truth, one spirituality’ (p. 178). He reunited with Ruby. And he learnt ‘the importance of affirmations and mantras’ (p. 179). With affirmations and mantras in mind, he started to hear his culture again, and songs came quickly.

Roach started performing for his peers in rehab, and his music started taking on a life of its own. He signed up for the Victorian Aboriginal Country Music Festival, recorded his songs on cassettes, played radio gigs and performed on *Blackout*. Paul Kelly discovered him on the television and got him to open for his band at Melbourne Concert Hall. So impressed, Kelly secured him a recording contract, and produced his debut album, *Charcoal Lane*, to roaring success.

Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) Awards followed, and relentless touring began. More albums followed. He jammed with Paul Simon and opened for Tracy Chapman. He toured North America with Joan Armstrong, receiving praise and flowers from Alice Walker. Alongside Ruby, he visited remote Aboriginal communities, blending music with social work. He produced documentaries, scored film soundtracks and joined theatre and dance productions. He loved his family. Roach and Ruby performed together at the 2008 National Apology, their stories and suffering recognised at last. This was his life.

But not long after, Ruby died—and he lost part of himself. Along the way, much of his family had died too. Roach soon suffered a stroke, and doctors discovered lung cancer. He almost let go. But he chose life. So he got the surgery and started slowly practising guitar again. A comeback album came. And to this day, Archie Roach still tells stories.

\*\*\*

Documenting a search for family and culture, *Tell Me Why* navigates intricate questions of identity. Especially, the interplay between personal and collective identities. Sociologist Chris Rojek locates an identity split between the veridical self (I) and the public self (me) as undergirding celebrity culture, with the former grammatically denoting a subject and the latter an object.<sup>3</sup> Celebrities are public constructions, their identities objects of creation, depending upon the *I* vanishing beneath the *me*.

*Tell Me Why* reveals how Roach helped transform celebrity culture by performing new identities. Untypically, Roach located his veridical self as time passed, beginning to shed one publicly constructed identity from the moment he first heard his real name. While homeless, and particularly in Fitzroy, Roach heard stories about Aboriginal lives and history. That was ‘undiscovered country for most us, with any morsel of information becoming a new coordinate, a new place name—new terrain on the stark, empty map of ourselves’ (pp. 85–86). Music became a compass for Roach to chart his map.

And not just for himself. Through music, Roach instructed identities. By uniquely honouring the veridical self—amplifying his identity—he shared a new avatar to be collectively thronged. When returning to Framlingham Mission after releasing *Charcoal Lane*, Roach discovered that, by honouring his identity, the songs were profoundly ‘impactful for Aboriginal people’ (p. 236). Roach’s public identity resisted erasure. After nearly every gig at the height of his fame, Roach was hammered with questions from journalists. ‘Are you a voice for your people, Archie’, they would often ask. To this day, Roach says ‘if you really want to know me, listen to my songs’ (p. 228).

Societal selves exist too. People demand more than knowing ‘me’ or ‘I’, but also require a sense of ‘us’. Like songs, lives have rhythms. A shared choreography is therefore essential. In *Tell Me Why*, Roach reveals the power of music to emotionally amplify this shared script. After performing at La Perouse on 25 January during the 1988 Bicentennial protests, people ‘from all across this Aboriginal nation came up to me at the front of the stage to tell me that my story, my family’s story, was also their story’ (p. 205). Banding the protest contingent together, his music helped make Aboriginal people ‘visible’ and ‘audible’ to ‘the three million people’ attending the Bicentennial celebration. Music enabled empathy. Celebrities, and their sonic creations, become common cultural denominators, a shared moral compass, a communal soundtrack. But one wonders whether they also become the fault-lines on which our shared selves are contested.

---

3 Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 11–12.

Perhaps eternal spirits exist beyond the ephemeral self. Romanticism, growing alongside nationalism in the late eighteenth century, celebrated and understood national character in spiritual terms, through the soul or spirit of the people, often expressed through song. Roach, too, believes music captures a 'divine spirit' (p. 214). Growing older, and searching for his veridical self, he ventured to Framlingham more often, listening for 'the spirits that Uncle Banjo used to talk about' (p. 235). Roach vehemently believes music enlivens those spirits, allowing 'the story of those absent ... impatient spirits' to be heard (p. 83). Through song, Roach let spirits free, quietly contesting a homogeneous national identity that depended upon erasure. Especially when performing in *Murundak*, an Australian Art Orchestra production that catalogued popular Aboriginal protest songs, which expressed 'the collective power of our songs and our indomitable spirit to survive' (p. 301). When travelling to Broome in 2007, Roach wrote a song, inspired by Pat Dodson, called 'Liyarn Ngarn' in Yawuru, translating into 'the coming together of spirits', which spoke 'about reconciliation' (p. 293). *Tell Me Why* shows how music can unearth and renew spirits of all kinds, often for the first time, and reimagine national character.

The memoir deals with the unconscious, those memories submerged just beneath the surface. Perhaps a hidden self intimately connected to the spirits Roach speaks of. Reading the letter that changed his life, Roach felt 'something deep' that 'whispered in his ear' and tried 'to tell me about another world and another life' (p. 2). Looking at the name Archibald William Roach on the envelope, he knew it was his: 'I had it in my head. It sounded familiar' (p. 24).

Initially, Roach drank grog to silence memories. He found alcohol 'flattened everything—loss and fear, sound and light, time and space' (p. 47). But slowly, through searching, the unconscious was roused. When sober, Roach visited Framlingham 'with different eyes' and 'saw visions on the mission and heard voices' of 'Mum and Dad, and my brothers and sisters, and my uncles and aunties and cousins' (p. 193). When Uncle Banjo found out Roach was writing songs, he recommended writing 'a song about how they took the children away from here', since things had gone 'quiet' after they were stolen (pp. 192–94). Roach wanted to break that Australian silence.

Sounds expose and reveal truth, those unconscious and disremembered memories lurking and protruding from the surface. But they also heal. For Roach, 'Took the Children Away' is his 'healing song'. Every time he sings it, he lets 'a little bit of the hurt and trauma go' (p. 357). That is why Roach performed that same song at the National Apology in 2008. 'It wasn't final justice and it didn't bring ultimate comfort, but it was a small step towards both' (p. 298). Storytelling mended. Recovering from lung cancer surgery, Roach enlisted the help of Associate Professor Louis Irving, a leading respiratory physician at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre,

who considers ‘a person’s spirit when it comes to healing’ (p. 328). This is not coincidence. *Tell Me Why* shows, too, how songs have power to heal, personally and collectively. A person, and perhaps national spirits too.

\*\*\*

Historians and biographers have only recently begun paying close attention to the soundscapes that echo through the past and into the present. Yet *Tell Me Why* shows how our sonic world offers insights into the most potent historical questions of our time. How are our collective identities constructed and negotiated? In what ways does colonialism permeate the present? What are the mechanisms of Aboriginal survival? Where can we locate historical memory not captured in ink? In the present world, Roach believes, we have lost our ‘sense of interconnectedness’ by retreating from our senses—‘sight, smell, hearing, taste, touch, spirit, everything’ (p. 275). Returning to the senses may just be the most powerful thing biographers and historians can do.

Music is biography, *Tell Me Why* reveals. Each chapter opens with a song from Roach’s catalogue, unveiling how music powerfully captures life stories in their emotional complexity, orienting us in space and time. Roach shows, too, how songs, by nature of their biographical function, can divide. Playing at the Annandale Hotel after releasing *Charcoal Lane*, Roach was confronted by a patron. ‘Am I supposed to sit here and feel bad?’, she asked (p. 229). Still, one wonders whether *Tell Me Why* fully explored the extent to which songs function as sites of biographical contestation—especially with their immense power to uphold or reject certain life stories. After all, crowds mobilised by song can be as diverse as human emotion itself.

Song exposes the history of ourselves: personal and shared, conscious and unconscious, luminous and sinister. Its dazzling and dangerous emotive dimensions express the contradictions of human experience, memory and transformation. In *Tell Me Why*, Roach shows how this power can be harnessed for truth-telling and redemption; how songs are a vessel to express our rights and wrongs, our joy and pain. Since millennia ago, Aboriginal people have gathered around fire to commune and share stories. We have the chance, Roach believes, to come back to that place of fire, and ‘discover there’s far more that connects us than separates us’ (p. 353). Sonic biographies may be that fire. Our opportunity to listen. And heal.

This text is taken from *Australian Journal of Biography and History*:  
*No. 5, 2021*, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National  
University, Canberra, Australia.