



Photo | Wayne Quilliam

LEAVING A MEMORY

by Dylan Henderson



UKARIA

Gravitas. It's difficult to think of a better word to describe the aura that surrounds Gunditjamarra Bundjalung singer/songwriter Archie Roach. It's a feature that photographer Wayne Quilliam – himself a highly respected Indigenous artist – captures with striking immediacy in his portrait of Archie, a master class in visual storytelling.

Every element contributes to something far more arresting than the sum of its parts: Archie stands like a benevolent sentinel under a charcoal sky, his gaze fixed on the horizon with a steely intensity, shrubs and lichen-speckled rocks evoking an arid but beautiful Australian wilderness. On his face Archie wears the expression of a man latent with experience, history, memory. With one hand bridged across the lapels of his blazer, his heart is almost literally on his sleeve, but because it's Archie – and *only* because it's Archie – there's nothing contrived or manufactured about it.

Since the release of his debut solo album *Charcoal Lane* in 1990, Archie has been one of Australia's most enduring Indigenous artists and storytellers. Forcibly removed from his family at the age of three under the Australian Government's brutal assimilation policy, his turbulent childhood found artistic expression in the ARIA award-winning song 'Took the Children Away', for which he also received an international Human Rights Achievement Award. Inherent in his art are the struggles of all Indigenous Australians and the story of a nation. Remarkably, his music contains no trace of bitterness or animosity:

it quietly disarms, transcending race, religion, gender and ideology to find grace in our shared humanity.

Being in the presence of Archie himself is to experience these characteristics acutely magnified. You lean in and listen closely to his fragile, husky voice, eager to catch every syllable. From the minute Archie walked on stage with Paul Grabowsky at UKARIA on 17 November 2018, a collective wave of dopamine rippled through the audience. That night, as Archie traced a life in song and stories against the quiet dignity of Paul Grabowsky's improvisations, something changed inside the hall.

'He held the audience spellbound here,' Paul recalls. 'The spontaneously joyful and emotion-laden reaction that followed was electric, really as if a switch had been thrown, and his current had directly animated each person in the room. That night we had a long talk. We discussed the knowledge that he had picked up in his many travels around this nation, and around the world, especially from First Nations people: knowledge about country, ancestry, the interconnectedness of all things, and the importance of this knowledge at a time when we are increasingly concerned about the health of the planet. Archie was looking at the splendid view from Twin Peaks, the stunning accommodation, indeed the icing on the UKARIA cake, that we musicians are fortunate to have at our disposal when performing here. He said he felt at peace here, that the country spoke to him, that here would be a good place, the right place, to write songs about that learning.'



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It's a bright and clear afternoon in February when I meet Archie and Paul at Twin Peaks, five days into their residency. When I arrive, they're deep in conversation, notebooks strewn across the dining table, a musical instrument nowhere in sight.

'We've just been talking,' Archie says, 'about life, what's important, things I remember.' Despite appearances, Paul reassures me it's been a very productive week: they've written – or started to write – four new songs to parallel a new memoir on Archie's life, scheduled for release later this year.

'Paul's been inspired to write some music, and I've just been putting down some lyrics,' Archie says. As a classically trained musician, I'm fascinated to hear about their creative process. Does the music come first, or the lyrics?

'The conversation has come first,' Paul explains. 'In the course of a conversation, all of a sudden Archie will land on something which for me really resonates. Like an idea, or a picture. There've been some wonderful moments where he's described things that have happened in such a compelling way, and I immediately have to rush off to the piano in the cottage to get it down before it all disappears.'

'If I can bring something to Archie that has a sense of shape and form, then his response will be a genuine response to that. He'll go, "I get it", or "mmm, not quite sure". There was one thing that I wrote down and played to him, and even as I was playing I thought... actually, this is not really it. That's not what he was saying. I went to bed and thought about, and during the night, somehow I knew what it was. I went back, rewrote it, and it was right.'

It's immediately evident that Paul and Archie share an artistic bond that goes well beyond mere collaboration. There's a curious synergy between the two, allowing them to feed off each other's creative energy. Such a relationship can take years – decades even – to develop, so I'm curious to learn how long they've known each other. When I ask Archie when he first met Paul, there is a pensive silence. 'Aw...gee...was it somewhere near a railway line?'

'Yes! Yes!' Paul exclaims, beaming. 'It was in very unusual circumstances. It was just before WOMAD [in 1996], and there was a train carrying WOMAD artists from Perth to Adelaide. I was making a TV show for the ABC called *Access All Areas* where we went around and just talked to musicians about various different aspects of making music. I ended up talking to Archie and to Ruby [Hunter], Archie's partner. We decided we would shoot this particular interview somewhere out there where the Stuart Highway crosses the railway line. So that was the first time we met, and then I approached Archie about doing a project with the Australian Art Orchestra a few years later. That developed into something called *Ruby's Story*, which told the story of Ruby Hunter and their love for each other – it was kind of a love story, really.'

'Yeah,' Archie says, 'that was a great experience with Paul. I remember he had to hear things first. I actually sung a song to him over the phone. He said, "Well, can I hear it?" I said "what, now?" He said yeah, so I sung it over the phone. I don't know how he did it, but he got it down, and by the time

we got to rehearsing, he'd already arranged it. I said: "This man's a genius!"

'I'm just like a dog to a bone, that's all,' Paul laughs. 'Look, I could go on. We played *Ruby's Story* all over Australia and at various other places, recorded it...and here we are. That's it.'

Trust, I learn, is fundamental to their conversations. 'We've done things in the past and we've talked,' Archie says. 'There's a lot of trust involved, because I probably wouldn't talk to too many people about the things we've talked about, because they're pretty private. I think when we had that discussion just after we played that night at UKARIA, I got a better insight into Paul. We've got some music and some lyrics already from those conversations, and from that night.'

'This has been very much a continuation of that night,' Paul says. 'It's a big commitment in itself, to stop what you're doing and sit around the table and talk about your life and the big questions and really drill down into the meaning of it all. And this place has really allowed us the space to do that. We're two ageing blokes sitting out here chewing the fat, shooting the breeze, and that's very special. There's a certain intimacy about that. It's like we've picked up from where that night left off. And that's got to say something about the place, surely.'

Among the topics of conversation, place and country are recurring themes. 'It's a very important thing – important for everybody,' Paul says. 'We've been talking a lot about



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how in contemporary culture, people have forgotten about country, because they don't have the same connection to it in their lives.'

'It's been great to talk about how I feel about that,' Archie says. 'In all seriousness, we all come from the same place, the same story. Some people stayed close to that story and that place, and others just moved away slowly. My spirit is a bit lonely sometimes because I miss the people that have gone from my side, and the relationships and conversations that I've had with people that have left. So that's something I want to say through one of the songs, that people just need to retrace their footsteps. Hopefully, some people might come back – still live their life as they had but just come back and take the time to sit down around the fire again, and just remember that we're all from the same story, the original story, the first story.'

Softly spoken, Archie is in person exactly how he appears in Quilliam's portrait: devoid of artifice, dignified but not pretentious, didactic but never sanctimonious. Sitting as we are in the heart of Peramangk country, his words have a particularly powerful resonance.



On a day like this, you can see for miles. The hills are parched and yellowing, the Mount Barker summit is covered with the dense green foliage of Stringybark eucalypts, and all you can hear is birdsong. There isn't a cloud in the sky. I can't help wondering what kind of an impact being here has had on their conversations, whether it's had a direct influence on their new songs.

'I'm sure it's something that I'll think about when we've gone,' Archie says. 'Places like this leave a memory. I go out there on the veranda just looking at this country – it's beautiful. Being here has been so idyllic. It couldn't have happened in the city where

there are cars and traffic and people walking past. There's too much interference. There's none of that out here. We're tuned in a bit more, there's less static.'

'Yeah, that's a nice way of putting it, that's exactly right,' Paul says. 'It's got a very calming energy about it. We know the world's going on out there, but everything feels a bit easier to deal with. It's like the land is helping us to do what we're doing. It's talking to us. And really – that view, it's kind of extraordinary, it really is. That's Australia – they are the colours of the Australian summer, in all its glory, I would say. That's as good as it gets.'

There's not many places on Earth like this really, that embrace the country, that are a kind of celebration of the country and an invitation to interact with it. It's definitely had a big influence. That concert with Archie was an amazing experience for everybody, including me. It had such a powerful presence in that space. As I listened to Archie tell his stories, sometimes I almost just had to stop. I couldn't go on. It was too much. I think we all got very inspired and had it occurred somewhere else it might not have had the same effect.'

'Music is a part of storytelling,' Paul adds. 'And the origins of music go right back to what Archie mentioned earlier – the 'original story' from which we have all sprung. Music is a part of that. Music was always about telling that story.'

He explains how the combination of voice and piano will form the basis of the new album, but stops short on ruling out other instruments altogether. 'I do hear the odd other instrument but I don't hear massive production,' he says. 'I would really love to hear a bit of violin on something, and of course Archie can play the guitar if he wants to.'



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I've always loved not just being able to tell stories but to sing, just with very minimal orchestration or instrumentation,' Archie tells me. 'It's different to when you're singing with a band or a couple of guitars – it just has a completely different atmosphere about it. You can take your time and really emphasise your words differently.'

For inspiration, they've spent many hours just listening to music together – specifically the late American albums of Johnnie Cash. 'He just trawls through all these songs by all kinds of people,' Paul says. 'There are Beatles songs, Simon & Garfunkel songs, there's some stuff associated with Roberta Flack, country music, murder ballads – you name it, it's all there. But there's hardly any production on these things. It's so discreet. It's just all about *him*, and his amazing presence. His *gravitas*. That's what Archie has.'

'It would be great if we could somehow capture that – if we could really nail it. A great musician once said to me that Archie as a songwriter is a master of minimalism, and that is a really beautiful way to describe what a person can do taking an idea – one idea – and every word in the song works to hold up that idea. That's what we're intending to do. It's a real "less is more" approach. Something that we could maybe perform here.'

An hour into our conversation, I sense that it's time for me to leave so the artists can get back to work. As a final question, I ask Paul and Archie to pick one word, or 'idea', to sum up this new album. Paul answers without hesitation, as if the word has been on his lips throughout the entire conversation: 'True'.