

ICONIC SONGS ON SHOW

WITH THEIR SEMINAL WORKS, SHANE HOWARD, ARCHIE ROACH AND NEIL MURRAY CREATED SIGNIFICANT SONGLINES FOR AUSTRALIA.

BY TONY HILLIER

Few songs have captured the collective consciousness of the nation more cogently or more concisely than Shane Howard's 'Solid Rock', Archie Roach's 'Took The Children Away' and Neil Murray's 'My Island Home'. And so it is singularly appropriate that these seminal works relating to Aboriginal Australia will be presented to a coterie of international movers and shakers, a wide array of local music industry delegates and the general public by their creators in a prestigious showcase at the 2011 Australasian World Music Expo in Melbourne this month.

With their respective anthems, all written in the 1980s, Messrs Howard, Roach and Murray created songlines to guide the nation as it sought to better understand what it was to be Australian. These three soulmates and proud Victorians have dedicated their careers to the spirit of reconciliation. Howard, of course, founded Goanna, the folk/rock band that first brought the plight of Aboriginal Australia to mainstream attention. Murray was the whitefella who helped kick start one of the country's most popular indigenous rock groups, the Warumpi Band. Through his emotive songs, Roach has opened white society's eyes to misguided government policy of yore and other Aboriginal-related issues.

Distinguished author and journalist Martin Flanagan, who specialises in Australian culture with particular emphasis on the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, has no doubt about the importance of the three songmen, with whom he is closely acquainted. "Shane's 'Solid Rock' is a song by a whitefella telling a black story, and a lot of Aboriginal people regard it as their song... Neil's 'My Island Home' is a song written for a black man by a white man, that the black man sings as if it's his own... Archie's 'Took The Children Away' is the song that awoke Australia to the reality of the policy whereby children deemed to be of mixed race were taken away from their Aboriginal parents and brought up in orphanages and in foster families."

With Flanagan's assistance and the backing of publishers One Hill Day, Howard, Roach and Murray have released children's books in which the lyrics of their respective songs are matched with paintings of places and of experiences pertinent to the works. "These little books, in a very simple and evocative way, carry those stories to another generation and I think they are enormously important," Flanagan opines. A percentage of profits from sales of the books will be returned to Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth, which part-funded

the project, to support indigenous literacy and art programs.

The Iconic Songs presentation, a performance that involves monologues and dialogue as well as music, has evolved over a series of festival appearances. "We each know our yarn, but our collective yarn develops with each performance," Shane Howard relates. "It's not a scripted performance, so the story changes from place to place and time to time. Initially, I was doubtful that people would want to sit and listen to us telling the stories of where these songs came from and the social history that surrounds them, but I was wrong. We also learn new things about each other with each presentation."

SHANE HOWARD'S side of the story

When you wrote 'Solid Rock' back in 1981, did you have any inkling that it would become something of an anthem?

Not at all. Quite the opposite. The record company didn't want to release it as the first single. It's a heavy song. There are some heavy concepts inherent in the song, like genocide, and I didn't really think it would get much airplay, but I felt strongly about it being the first release from Goanna. No one was more surprised than I was that it achieved such commercial success.

What was the primary message you wanted to get across with 'Solid Rock'?

I was angry. I woke up to the great lie this country was living under. I wanted to live in a just country. I became ashamed of it. Once you know, you can't un-know, unless you choose to ignore. I wanted to shout at my country and say, 'We have no honour.' We stole this country from the rightful owners and profited on the back of their misery. Then we beat them down, took their children away and made them third class non-citizens in their own country. We said to them, 'Now go away and don't bother us and go and live with the criminal class. We don't want your culture. We don't want to have to work to understand your very different cosmology. You've got nothing to offer us except a bit of mumbo jumbo and you make us feel guilty just by existing, so could you just go away and be invisible.' Back in 1981, I saw something very beautiful in Aboriginal cultural reality and it made me angry that it had mostly been brutalised and ignored by mainstream Australia. W.E.H. Stanner called it a "cult of forgetfulness."

If you could add a verse, what would it say?

I've recently added the line, "Can we get it together in this country?" The third verse of the original song concludes with, "Someone lied,"

Photos by Ferne Millen



but now I just say, "Captain Cook lied," which he did and I still don't understand why he did, unless he had secret instructions from the British Government, that he destroyed. It wasn't until Eddie Mabo's challenge in the High Court that the lie of Terra Nullius was finally overturned.

Do you ever tire of singing the song?

No. I can't half-sing that song. It asks something of you every time you sing it. It always has. It's always something different. There's so much embedded history in that song now, so many faces and places. So many of those older faces are gone now. Many were my brothers and my sisters, my uncles and aunts. Many of them died too young, in a world that didn't care. The song means a lot to me. It carries a spirit. It carries a lot of people and their dreams. It won't lie down, that song, even though there's a lot of angry and broken stuff around it. It's tough as nails. It wants to smash all the lies of all the knockers and the pretenders and of all the cynics and the re-writers of history. After thirty years, it still says to them all, "I can see straight through your lies and your falsehood. I am carrying the truth of a thousand generations and I'm coming to sort you out properly and separate the false from the true."

Is it true to say the song changed your life?

Look at me now. There are no illusions left. My dreams are still intact because they were the right kind of dreams, but I'm completely broken by that song. It threw me headfirst into Aboriginal Australia. I was heartbroken by what I saw. The wreckage, the damage, the hurt, the waste, the neglect. "For lives that never stood a chance..." as Archie Roach sang. I live on the bridge, between a Western reality and an Aboriginal reality. Sometimes it feels like no man's land. A lot has changed but it's largely cosmetic. As I said in the song, 'Near Utopia', "You broke my heart, you made my heart." But I don't want to go back. I want to keep going forward.

Tell me about the children's book based on 'Solid Rock' and what you hope it will achieve.

The idea for doing the book came from Bernadette Walters at One Day Hill publishers. I worked on the book with Queensland artist Peter Hudson and the kids from Mutitjulu, Imanpa and Kaltukatjara communities. Peter and I went out again to Uluru over a year ago and worked with the kids. Pete did a series of paintings. We worked in the schools with the kids painting as well and Ruby James translated the song into Pitjantjatjara. We've already raised several thousand dollars from the book to take back to the communities for art and music and literacy supplies. It gives the communities the song in their own language and it raises a few dollars for some practical out-

comes.

Can you recall where you were and how you felt when you first heard 'Took the Children Away'?

It was at the Punters Club Hotel in Melbourne in the late 1980s. It was heartbreaking. Archie was singing about something that happened in my childhood, in my hometown. It hollowed out my core. Something that I'd heard about, all around the country, was suddenly laid at my feet, from the country of my childhood.

What in particular about the song focused your attention?

As a songwriter, I was captured by Archie's articulate and poetic voice. In terms of the content of the song, though, Archie and I are from the same area. His story is from my hometown, so it's particularly poignant. This was happening where I lived, but I never knew about it. As an adult, it makes you ask all sorts of questions. Who knew about this and was silent? Why didn't people speak up? There are lots of unanswered questions, still. In the local school sports, I was competing with his cousins.

Can you recall where you were and how you felt when you first heard 'My Island Home'?

I do remember being very moved by the Warumpi Band's version. I remember thinking, "This is the song that's going to put an Aboriginal voice on mainstream radio." Sadly, it wasn't. We had to wait some years until Archie Roach and Yothu Yindi. That was a dreadful oversight by Australian radio.

What in particular about the song focused your attention?

It's a song of longing. Longing for home, for country, for your people. But even more than that, I think it's a beautiful song from one brother to another. Neil wrote it for Kuminje [Warumpi Band] to sing. There is a gift within the song. Particularly when you know those two fellas and their story.

ARCHIE ROACH

'Took The Children Away' speaks to all those who suffered during the Stolen Generation era, but particularly to your own story. Was writing it a cathartic experience?

Yes. But it wasn't just written about kids being taken away; it's also a song about the people left behind to wonder.

What did you primarily hope to achieve with the song?

I just wanted to write it for us, for the Stolen Generations and the families of those stolen children and to let people know what took place.

Did you have any inkling that it would become something of an anthem?

No, I had no idea. It was just a song I wrote

for myself and others.

You must have performed it a thousand times since. Do you ever tire of singing the song?

No, because each time I sing it, I let a little bit of the pain go.

Do you recall when you first performed the song in public and how you felt?

It was for ABC Radio National's Music Deli program in 1988. I had written the song just a couple of days before that performance. It was new, fresh and sung by a younger me. I really had no preconceived idea of how a song should be sung and arranged, so it was a pretty honest recording.

Is it true to say the song changed your life?

Yes, the song travelled around Australia and overseas to highlight the despicable practice of removing indigenous children from their families and bringing them up according to foreign standards.

If you could add a verse what would it say?

"Never to happen again."

From 'Took The Children Away' a book for children has been published, featuring your lyrics. I guess the fact that it also contains artwork created by your late wife Ruby makes it particularly special to you.

Yes, it's particularly special. The book has made me realise that the song is actually a love song; a story not so much of being taken away, but the love that we were taken away from.

Can you recall where you were and how you felt when you first heard 'Solid Rock'?

I was sitting with friends somewhere in Fitzroy watching TV when I first heard it. This is when I was still drinking. I remember thinking how great it was to see a young white person addressing the issue of Aboriginal land rights. I remember defending him to some of my people.

What in particular about the song focused your attention?

The lyrics.

What did you think when you first heard 'My Island Home'?

Oh that's a good song – it pretty much sums up how I feel about living in this country.

How's your health these days?

Not too bad considering I'm not long out of hospital after having had surgery to remove half a lung.

NEIL MURRAY

Do you consider 'My Island Home' to be the most important song you've written?

I don't and I never have. But I couldn't make that call about any single song. Except perhaps, only in the moment it comes to me.

However, without that song – at least without its commercial success – I may not have been able to keep making music as long as I have. It's certainly helped get a lot of other songs out there!

Do you ever tire of singing it?

Of course, and all those singers that say they never tire of singing their hits are lying. But who can resist pleasing their audience? It often feels like a chore to have to sing it, but when I'm in there performing it, it can still surprise me; sometimes I find new nuances or reach different emotions with it.

What did you primarily hope to achieve with the song?

That the lead singer of the Warumpi Band would want to sing it.

Did you have any inkling back in 1985 when you wrote it that the song would become anthemic?

No. But there is selflessness about it, in that I never wrote it for myself to sing. That, from this distance, suggests perhaps a rightfulness to why it has been taken by so many.

If you could add a verse what would it say?

I did add a verse, for the Sydney 2000 Olympics version, it went, "Our home is Australia, we are a land bound by sea, and though I may travel far across the ocean, it will never forget me."

Tell me about the children's book based on 'My Island Home' and what you hope it will achieve?

The book has illustrations by children from Papunya and Galiwinku in Northern Territory, the Warumpi Band's singer's home. It sets out the story behind the song in that I was writing about a person who came from a seaside community and went to live in a desert community and got married and had a family there. Yet this person still thought about and missed the place he was originally from and still belonged to. I wanted kids to understand and relate to the story in the song about how we all come from different places yet we all have feelings for our home and that if we really feel we belong to a special place, then that place knows us and always waits for us.

Can you recall where you were and how you felt when you first heard 'Took The Children Away'?

I'd done a gig at Dee Why with Paul Kelly. For the last song of Paul's set he sang 'Took The Children Away' and told the audience it was

written by Archie Roach. I sensed an awful gravity in it. At the end of the show Paul asked me if I'd heard of Archie. I confessed I hadn't.

What in particular about the song focused your attention?

The sheer weight of the subject matter would overwhelm most songwriters but there is a masterful skill in the lyric – the deft, matter-of-fact recollection that compels the listener to witness painful events and deeply know they are hearing the truth, then the final triumphant revelation that the narrator himself has survived to have 'come back' from whence he was taken. Coupled with this for me, is the certain knowledge that the songwriter as a child was removed from a mission less than an hour's drive from where I'd been born and raised. And yet I knew nothing of him. I should have known him. Should have found him in my teens. What did I do? Went roaming away to the Territory without a clue to what was happening to blackfellas in my own area. So I have to say, it was an important spiritual validation for me when Archie lent his vocals to the recording of 'Tjapwurrung Country'. I wept when I first heard his voice on that song. Afterwards he told me his grandmother's people were Tjapwurrung, and that's whose country I come from and came back to.

Can you recall where you were and how you felt when you first heard 'Solid Rock'?

I can't remember exactly where I was, but suddenly it was everywhere on the airwaves and my initial reaction was, "Damn, someone's got there before us." I was in the Warumpi Band, singing the blackfella truth and we were frustrated – well, at least I was – at not getting attention. Then all of sudden this band, Goanna, explodes on the scene singing of the injustice done to Aboriginal people. I had to concede, it was a hell of a song. When I finally met Shane, I realised that he was as surprised as anyone that 'Solid Rock' had broken through.

Apart from the subject matter, what in particular about the song focused your attention?

It had all the elements that we in the Warumpi Band were aiming for... punchy songs in a hooky, rock style so that young people would dig it but leave them with a message they can't dismiss. 'Solid Rock' has a great guitar riff, terrific chorus harmonies, an impassioned plea of a vocal with a lyric that is a call to the conscience of everyone in this land. **R**



Shane Howard, Archie Roach and Neil Murray will perform their Iconic Songs show at the Melbourne Recital Centre on Friday November 18 as part of the 2011 Australasian World Music Expo.

Archie Roach's 1988 album and Sing The Song – The Essential Neil Murray CD compilation are available through ABC Music. Shane Howard's albums, including Retrospect, are available through Goanna Arts.

Their children's books are published by One Day Hill.

