

Lunch with Jack Charles

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Australian actor, musician, potter and Aboriginal elder Jack Charles. Photo: Wayne Taylor

The story of Aboriginal actor Jack Charles is almost legendary now; after the success of the 2008 documentary *Bastardy*, and the many stage productions that followed, his story has come full circle – from pioneering actor in the early 1970s, to homeless heroin addict and back again to acting – and then some: when we meet at the John Curtin Hotel, Uncle Jack, as he's widely known, is out front having a ciggie with his "giggle juice" (a pot of stout) and being approached by strangers for photographs.

Two women walking past have just seen his appearance on ABC's *Anh Doh's Brush with Fame*, and ask if he'd mind being in a photo.

"Not at all. If you're a celeb, you've gotta play the part," he says, giving me a wink.

After *Bastardy*, which shared his story from his childhood as a member of the Stolen Generation, through to the end of his career as a petty crim, Charles' profile has steadily grown, in part from the success of the stage production *Jack Charles v the Crown*, which has toured nationally and internationally, and his recent role in the ABC's groundbreaking Indigenous sci-fi series *Cleverman*.



Jack Charles says he's in pretty good nick, thanks to a healthy diet and just the occasional 'giggle juice'. Photo: Wayne Taylor

The women asks if Charles is allowed to keep his Anh Do portrait and with typical irreverence he tells them he's donating it to the Immigration Office.

"I'm going to write a sign under it that says 'this Aboriginal bloke welcomes you to his country'."

He's chosen the Curtin Hotel as he's done a run of shows here over the last year – "me talking, and a Q and A" and says the "tucker's good".

Sonny's fried chicken – brined for 24 hours, pressure fried and "crispy AF!". Photo: Wayne Taylor

It's home to Sonny's Fried Chicken and Burgers, offering 24-hour brined chicken, pressure fried and "crispy AF!".

"Crispy as f--k, eh? Yeah, I'll have some of that," says Charles, ordering chicken pieces and chips. I order the crispy chicken burger and a beer and we move inside.

Charles, who still lives in the same block of flats we saw him qualify for at the end of *Bastardy*, still lives alone, but cooks for himself.

"I'm one of those that's comfortable with my own ... loneliness," he says. "But I love cooking – mainly I do a variety of stews; some meat, some not. All depends how I feel."

If he's on tour, though, he often eats out.

"I'll go to the best restaurant and have a humungous steak – although mostly I'm a vegetarian when I'm travelling."

In the past few years he's travelled a lot, having performed *Jack Charles v the Crown* in Canada, New York and Britain – or "the motherf--kin' country" as he calls it.

New York was a highlight: "We had first nations people coming in droves because they see their own lives unfolding," he says. "We got standing ovations every night – same in Dublin and at the Barbican in the motherf--king country."

In 2014, aged 70, he was the first Aboriginal person to win a lifetime achievement award at the Victorian Green Room Awards for the show.

"I was the first blackfella, so it's a big honour – I've been barging my way through the theatre since I was 19."

In 1972, as a fledgling actor, he co-founded our first black theatre company, Nindethana, with the late Bob Maza, and, despite a career interrupted by 22 jail terms (all burglary related, driven by addiction), he's had roles in films including *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* and *Ben Hall*, TV programs and dozens of theatre productions. Many a night he'd perform on stage, head out to do some "burgs" and then score.

But the heroin, to which he was addicted for more than 20 years, rarely affected his acting. Although he often landed roles in unconventional ways.

He was offered a gig in playwright Jack Davis' *No Sugar* for the Black Swan theatre company while "hiding out" at the Melbourne University library.

"That was the only place where the Melbourne police can't go unless they're invited," Charles recounts (although it seems this belief about only federal police being allowed on campuses is a long-held myth).

Instead of coppers, he was "discovered" by a theatre director he knew.

"Ernie Dingo had dropped out and this bloke remembered me performing at the Union Theatre – he said we were obviously meant to meet!"

After a mini-audition in the library, he asked Charles to join the production in Perth.

"I wasn't living anywhere so I said I'd love to do it."

He often balanced homelessness with acting gigs, alternating sleeping rough with couch-surfing. "The dealers always looked after me. I never did burgs when I was in Perth or homeless in Sydney."

Neil Armfield was directing *No Sugar*, and was aware, says Charles, of his "raging Brer Rabbit (habit)". "They forgave my little foibles," he says, adding that he nearly didn't last the weekend until he met someone he knew who "took one look at me and within five minutes I had something up the 'Warwick Farm' and I could cope".

Even though he was a high-functioning addict and never "on the nod" – "I nod nowadays through rehearsals but it's because I'm an old man," he cackles – he regrets not heeding the advice of friends back in the day.

"People have said they used to tell me, but there are things you prefer not to remember," he says. "I recall Neil (Armfield) saying, 'Oh Jack, I'd like to see you performing without any of that shit in your system'. He was one that expressed it."

What Charles would have liked is someone "like himself" coming into prison to help him – something Charles is himself now doing with youths in juvenile detention.

He's teamed up with fellow Aboriginal elder Archie Roach to go into youth prisons and offer healing programs; the catalyst for his own turnaround was the Marumali healing program by elder Auntie Lorraine Peeters, herself a survivor of the Stolen Generation.

"That relit, you might say, my f--ked-up, locked-up dreamings," he says. "Sometimes it takes a program like that, delivered by Aboriginal people, to actually work. From that moment on I left that jail intending to make my community better."

That was more than a decade ago and Charles has been itching ever since to get back inside – he's had to wait the mandatory 10 years before he can do so.

"White man's rules," he says. "In Aboriginal lore, once you've done your time, your banishment ends, wounds heal, and you come back into the fold. You might be limping, 'cos you've had a spear thrown in your thigh, but the point is, you're welcome back."

Now though, with the Archie Roach Foundation, he's regularly back inside, determined to keep the next generation out of adult prisons.

"Archie and I have developed a council of elders, and we intend to keep a 'black watch' on prisoners and the policies that lock them up," he says.

They hope to meet with regional councils where local community centres have closed down, and where ice is often more plentiful than employment.

"Paranoia allows an old bastard like me to think they make it easy for us to get drugs so you can contain the 'wild black' – keep 'em drugged up, keep 'em locked up – so they can't ever get a sense of their own inheritance," he says, with his trademark smirk.

He's also fighting to have his lengthy criminal record expunged.

"I want to go into these prisons and say 'look at me, fellas – if you take yourself seriously, whether you're black, white or red, in 10 years hence, you can have your criminal record expunged. Or do you wanna be a crim the rest of your life, trapped on this island, never be able to get a passport?'"

He's currently on screen in the new series of *Cleverman*, playing Uncle Jimmy, but Charles says his priorities will change after this year.

"*Cleverman's* terrific, eh? We all need a superhero. But I am pulling back. I'll do the occasional (acting) thing, but I want to source our future generation of performers, they're in our jails right now," he says.

"I'm in pretty good nick – I think the heroin, because of the opium, lengthened my life somewhat; when you're on it, you don't get the common cold – and rewired because I'm living a good life. No bread, very little sugar, the occasional giggle juice. Everything in moderation."

But he won't be retiring from public life. "There are too many locked up, too many that wanna hear my words."

Then there's the memoir he has planned. "I'm thinking of calling it *The Big Black Book of Little Jack Charles*."