



Jack Charles: BASTARDY “saved my life”

This is an extract from an article on the ABC website by [Simon Leo Brown](#) (published 09 August 2017) after the late Uncle Jack Charles (who passed away 13 September 2022) spoke to [ABC Radio Melbourne](#) on the 10th anniversary of [BASTARDY](#), the acclaimed feature documentary about his life that world premiered as part of the first-ever [Premiere Fund](#) slate at MIFF 2008

In one of the first scenes of 2008 feature documentary *Bastardy*, Jack Charles shoots up heroin, declaring it is what he “lives for”.

Speaking ahead of a 2017 re-screening at the Melbourne International Film Festival (**MIFF**), the acclaimed actor and Stolen Generations member said neither he nor director Amiel Courtin-Wilson knew then how the film would end. Courtin-Wilson followed Charles for six years “existing on the streets of Collingwood and Fitzroy, a struggling homeless, addicted, well-known cat burglar”

“We never knew whether I’d survive,” Charles said matter-of-factly. “I do remember having to con \$50 out of him so I could get a whack.

Bastardy could have been the story of a human tragedy, but when Charles quit heroin it became a story “with a wonderful happy ending” that resulted in an “outpouring of love” for Charles, Courtin-Wilson said.

The man the people of Melbourne now know as Uncle Jack was humbled by the experience and he recalls that “People contacted me, on the street, tripping over themselves on the street to engage with me, speaking to me on public transport, writing me little notes saying that they saw *Bastardy*.”

“It was **the documentary that actually saved my life**, and I’ve often embarrassed the poor bugger Amiel by saying he was my saviour,” said Charles adding that the documentary became “a useful tool” for him to reinvigorate his acting career. “People in the industry ... realised that I was performing nowadays, from the time of *Bastardy*, with no poo in my system.

Charles, who described himself as a “self-proclaimed *Cleverman*”, became Facebook friends with one of the police officers who used to pursue him for burglary. His play, *Jack Charles Vs The Crown*, documented his struggle to return to prisons as a mentor for Aboriginal inmates, a struggle which eventually succeeded through his work with the Archie Roach Foundation.

“It’s only come to light in the last year that I’ve been allowed to sneak in under the radar on the goodwill of the governors of prisons, management, staff and crims,” he said. “We want to make a play to have a permanent presence of paid elders to go into our institutions ... to re-light the burning embers of many a blackfella’s Dreaming — drugged-up, grogged-up, locked-up, mucked-up dreamings.”

So now that he is free from heroin, what does Charles live for?

“I live to be the keeper of culture and law, and to return to prisons.”

