

Deportation Blues: Black Jazz and White Australia in the 1920s

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Abstract

The history of popular music in the twentieth century has been regularly intersected by outbreaks of moral panic regarding the debilitating influence of particular genres, for which the association between 'blackness' and degradation has provided especially inflammable fuel. In Australia this has been intensified by virtue of a strain of racism and xenophobia, most recently manifested in the government's refusal of entry to Rapper Snoop Dogg in April 2007 after failing a 'character test'. One case from 1928 resulted in a generic quarantine that affected the development of popular music in Australia for decades. Throughout the 1920s there were vigorous union lobbies against jazz, and especially the importation of bands from the US and England. The complaints drew their authority from the criteria of art and morality and the two obligingly converged when the first African-American jazz band toured with the revue 'The Coloured Idea' in 1928. During its season in Melbourne, collusion between the local yellow press tabloid *Truth*, the intelligence organization the Commonwealth Investigation Branch, and the local police, led to members of the band being caught in drug and alcohol-fuelled frolics with local women. In a unique act of censorship, the whole band was deported, and proscriptions introduced on black musicians made it the last African American jazz band allowed into the country for decades. This paper provides an account of this episode, and a discussion of the issues regarding popular music, race and gender on which it pivoted.

Key words: Australian jazz, early twentieth century, racism.

Introduction

I would like to begin by acknowledging the work of Australian record collector, and editor of the *Australian Record and Music Review*, the late Mike Sutcliffe. The *Review* was an invaluable compilation of primary sources on

Australian music, and I could not have prepared this paper without them. Mike died suddenly last year, the loss not only of a good friend, but an immeasurable loss to Australian music and record archiving. This is for him.

This story is about the most significant new popular music of the early twentieth century. It is jazz, and in this case it is in its diasporic form, in an encounter between the US and Australia. I want also to illustrate a 'feedback loop' model of cultural change, as opposed to one of simple linear causality. That is, how an event grows out of a context, then amplifies the context, from which further events are generated – how context makes text and text becomes context.

The traditional diasporic jazz narrative is that the music was 'invented' in a multi-racial US community, then copied more or less clumsily by the rest of the world. The first advertised jazz performance in Australia was less than a year after what are regarded as the first jazz recordings, made in New York in 1917. The first Australian recordings were made six years later, leaving that early phase – a long time in popular music – tantalisingly silent. The first jazz recordings which included Australian musicians have generally been regarded by Australian jazz historians as so embarrassingly *gauche* that a very influential lobby declares that the first Australian jazz records were not made until about two decades later.¹

The story I am about to tell is part of a larger argument, in which Australian jazz is not a tepid and inauthentic copy of a pristine US original, even in its most supposedly clumsy and corny forms. Like diasporic jazz across the globe, it is a distinctive and – if you like the word – authentic product of its historical and cultural context. I prefer to avoid the word, and question whether any jazz tradition is more 'authentic' than another. I have argued this in essays on the jazz diaspora in the *Cambridge Companion to Jazz*, and in the *Encyclopaedia of Popular Music of the World* where I suggest that jazz was not 'invented' in the US and then simply exported, but, as the first internationalised 'world music', was invented in the diasporic process itself in a meaningful and expressive collaboration with the local culture (see further Johnson, 2002a). Often dismissed as corny nonsense in comparisons with the US canon, Australian jazz makes perfect sense as an outgrowth of a cultural history that goes back to the earliest years of European invasion and settlement.

Comparisons between early US and Australian jazz reveal interesting differences. Unlike US jazz, the Australian version exhibits for example a remarkable racial and ethnic homogeneity. The emotional range of early Australian jazz is also extremely narrow. We do not have a tradition of the kind of jazz eroticism that virtually defines the work of singers like Billie Holiday, or the unembarrassed earthy physicality of Bessie Smith. The name of the New Orleans dance hall the 'Funky Butt', seemed not to be much of an embarrassment to its musicians and patrons. But can you imagine an Australian jazz musician, at least up to the late twentieth century, letting it be known that he had a gig in the equivalently named Smelly Arse Jazz Club? The whole attitude to sex and bodily functions reflects cultural histories that predate the development of jazz itself.

Embedded in a tradition of anglo-saxon prudery, and in which popular culture is also at best trivial culture, singing about sex in a jazz setting simply cannot get beyond the wink and smirk of prurient innuendo.

This is a logical entry point into the story.

The Coloured Idea, Act One: Enter the band

In 1928, an African-American revue troupe, 'The Coloured Idea', arrived in Australia for a season in Sydney and Melbourne. Apart from being the two biggest cities in Australia, in the scale of the continent they are also relatively close to each other. Its singers included Ivy Anderson (aka Johnson), who would later achieve fame with the Duke Ellington orchestra, and the revue centred on its own jazz band, Sonny Clay's Plantation Orchestra.



Figure 1 – Advertisement for Sonny Clay's Plantation Orchestra's Sydney engagement

The season was foreshadowed in *Everyones*² magazine, January 18 1928. It referred to “Sonny Clay’s colored combination” and promised that they will “introduce a new idea to Australian vaudeville, & [sic] judging by the American success it should catch on here”; the article went on to refer to the band’s “syncopation, harmony and symphony” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 6).

The Revue enjoyed enormous success in Sydney, with the band itself prominent in the appreciations. Two features of the band were given special attention: that it was black and that it played jazz in a way that was new to Australian audiences. Every revue emphasised “coloured” in its description of the band, using either that word or some variant such as “dusky” or “black”. On January 25 *Everyones* wrote that the idea was to “give Australian audiences, jazz interpreted by the originators of this type of music” and declared that the vessel on which they arrived in Sydney had become, for the occasion of its arrival “a jazz ship” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 8). Apart from the theatre audiences, the band was heard by owners of radio through a broadcast on 2FC. In the words of *Everyones*: “It was then realised that jazz as played by a European and jazz as played by a real Negro are entirely different. It is all in the syncopation. One, brought to America by the original African Negroes – is natural – and the other, an acquirement, is artificial” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 8). The same issue carried a review of the first theatre performance. It was enthusiastic, although surprised by the fact that “Sonny’s jazz didn’t quite conform to the Australian idea, which demands a hot finish to each number with piano, saxes, banjos and trombones hitting on all eight, instead of the fade away that this combination effects. Personally, we prefer Sonny’s style, but for the gallery a switch to frenzied finishes may supply all the outfit needs. Because it can certainly put syncopation across” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 8).

Given what I have said about the narrow emotional range of early Australian jazz recordings, this is fascinating. Silent movie footage from 1926, as well as recordings made in Australia by white local and visiting musicians confirm that in a self-consciously jazz performance a comedic and often slapstick extravagance was *de rigueur*.³ The reference to Clay’s dynamic range, which is a key to emotional range, points to what might have become an important lesson in jazz possibilities. Another review in the same issue indirectly alludes to the point in expressing the hope that the band would be hired for dance venues while in Sydney: “Incidentally, if Sonny is allowed to depart without affording us a chance to strut our stuff to his syncopation, every cabaret and dance hall management deserves bankruptcy [sic]” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 9). The Sydney performances were so successful that the troupe was booked to do a return season after it had concluded its forthcoming commitments in Melbourne.

It was not to be. The Revue’s Melbourne engagement opened on February 20. The following day a review in the city’s main daily newspaper, *The Age*, was enthusiastic, emphasising the role of the band and referring to the “unrestrained, exotic quality to be expected from the originators of jazz” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 10). Thus far, the band had performed as a component of a Revue in vaudeville settings, as part of an established international touring circuit. On

February 29 a brief notice appeared in *The Age* announcing that the “undoubted sensation, Sonny Clay’s Coloured Idea”, had been booked to play the prestigious Australia Cup midnight dance, in late March at Melbourne’s premier dance hall, The Green Mill (Sutcliffe, 1997, pp. 10-11).

While the Revue’s season continued with great acclamation and success, five days before the scheduled dance, *Everyones March* 21 reported that a group representing the Musicians Union met with the Prime Minister in Canberra “to urge that an embargo be placed on foreign musicians ... [to] ... operate while Australian musicians were unemployed. Discussion turned strongly on visiting American players rather than the Italian orchestra” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 10). The last sentence makes it pretty clear that what was meant by “foreign musicians” was in fact black American jazz musicians, rather than European concert musicians. Each term in that distinction is immensely significant.⁴ In an era of a much narrower range of entertainment than today, the Musicians Union was a powerful lobby, as is indicated by its success in securing a personal meeting with the Prime Minister.

The Green Mill engagement almost certainly did not eventuate. On March 28, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that “recently the police raided a flat at East Melbourne where a number of young girls were associated with Negroes” (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 11). The Negroes were members of Sonny Clay’s band. The story was amplified for the higher circulation weekend press, in the Melbourne *Truth* – “The People’s Paper”.⁵



Figure 2 – Announcement of the Coloured Idea scandal in the Melbourne Truth

The article revealed that this raid had taken place on the previous Saturday, which places it a few days before the Australia Cup dance. The timing

is as significant as the fact that the police raid was attended by pressmen. The front page *Truth* article, Saturday March 31, 1928, began: "Empty glasses, half dressed girls, an atmosphere poisonous with cigarette smoke and the fumes of liquor, and lounging about the flats, six Negroes". In order to be certain that they were not interrupting decent folks, the raiding party had kept the flats under surveillance for what might be called a prudent, if not prurient interval; the articles reported that they had watched "abandoned" behaviour through the windows "for hours" before entering:

Enter'acte: Historical Interactions

I want to explore some of the forces which underpinned the scandal, picking at the complex tapestry of Australian jazz history to concentrate on a couple of strands that were already on the loom before the music arrived.⁶ The first of these is to do with the history of the relationship in Australia between high and low culture. To a distinctive degree, from the moment of the first settlement in 1788, Australian popular culture was positioned outside the circle of artistic legitimacy. US society was founded on the principle of the freedom of action and expression of the ordinary man (though the ordinary man, of course had to be white). Consider however the status of the 'ordinary' people in the foundation of European Australia. Just over 1,000 settlers arrived. A small minority was made up of political, religious and military agents of the state, commissioned to maintain order. But most of them, the 'ordinary' people, the people who would make the culture of the popular, were convicted criminals. And few of them, including both rulers and ruled, chose to be here. Deeply lodged in the founding imaginary of this country is the equation between the popular and the criminal, and the nation as a prison.

Consider the environment. Both the US and colonial Australia were frontier societies. But in the US the drive inland was the road to abundance and wealth, a fulfillment of the American Dream. The land itself was a cornucopia, a confirmation of the rich possibilities in migration, of the wisdom of leaving behind the old world. The deep Australian inland compounded the punishment constituted by enforced migration, seeming to yield little of its own, at least until the gold strikes of the 1850s. The common man of the Americas found the idea of 'home' in the New World, celebrating its places and spaces in song and poetry. The common man of colonial Australia found a prison. US popular music could celebrate the authority of the common man. Australian popular culture was a defiance of an authority the common man was unlikely to achieve. "Every man a king", goes the US popular song from 1935.⁷ Everyman a criminal, said the early Australian clergy, military, bureaucracy, and folk music. Of course, social principle and social practice are rarely harmonious. But I am talking about powerful and durable strands in the foundational consciousness, assumptions on which each nation constructed itself and went about its business. I am talking about one nation that can invoke a Bill of Rights for the common man, and another that still hasn't got one.

These attitudes to popular culture were in many ways intensified during the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries. The discovery of gold in the 1850s produced the widespread affluence on which middle class sensibilities could find a material foundation. In the late nineteenth century we find the intensification of a disdain for popular, as opposed to 'art' culture, for this established clearly the space between a first generation of a criminal lower class, and a second generation of a genteel and refined middle class. It is an astonishing fact that during that period, the Australian per capita rate of domestic piano ownership was among the highest in the world. It became important to install in one's house a musical proclamation of gentility, of having climbed out of the gutter of popular culture, into the realm of European art music. Apart from sporting prowess that ritualised the capacities for physical survival, popular culture would degrade us. High art could redeem us. The determination with which the emerging Australian middle classes tried to scrub out the 'Stain' of the criminality of our founding community, right through to the late twentieth century, reminds us of how dark and durable it was. The last convict ship arrived on our shores as late as 1868 (Hughes, 1987, p.161). Its 'slaves' thus continued to prop up the economy well after the abolition of slavery in the US. They continued into the lifetime of my own grandparents, one of whom was a direct descendant of a convict woman. And they were certainly a social presence while our earliest exponents of jazz were forming their own consciousness of themselves and their music.

So: what has all this to do with our understanding of the history and character of Australian jazz? I suggest that it casts a shadow across the history of our popular culture, of which jazz was the first new musical expression of the modern era. How we think about, discuss, and even play jazz, grew out of these deeply embedded assumptions:

- popular culture is criminal culture;
- the aspirations and appetites of the common man are likely to be reprehensible and degrading;
- the only art that can redeem us from these tendencies is European high art, or that which derives from it.

Of course the divide between high and low culture also existed in the US, and many Americans capitalised on the link between jazz and its supposed early connections with prostitution and with the later prohibition ethos, to try to keep the music in the low-life category. But there are other significant differences from Australia which have distinguished own jazz and its history.

First, the division between high and low culture was a relatively late development in the US, forming gradually over the 19th century (Levine, 1988, *passim*). The first settlement, on the other hand, was explicitly founded and structured on antagonism between the high and the low. That antagonism was institutionalised in architecture, law, religion, education and above all in the arts, including music. Second, while jazz began in both countries as a form of low culture, in the US there was less of a moral obstacle to its ascent into aesthetic

significance, and indeed its 'common origins' finally guaranteed that significance. Only six years after the first recordings proclaimed the emergence of jazz from its provincial folk origins, in the US, jazz was toying with 'symphonic form' through the premiere of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* with Paul Whiteman's Orchestra in 1924. In 1939, Benny Goodman presented the *Spirituals to Swing* Concert in Carnegie Hall, continuing the upward aesthetic trajectory for the music, leading to the first annual jazz festival at Newport in 1954 to commemorate jazz as America's 'only original art form' (see further Johnson, 2002b). This historical profile was scarcely evident in Australia until perhaps the late 1960s. Low culture in Australia was far more irredeemably 'low' than it was in the US. There is little evidence of any courtship across the divide for perhaps the first fifty years of our jazz history.

I mentioned America's Newport Jazz Festival. Australia had one also, in fact it appears to have been the world's first, in 1919. However, far from being the celebration of an art form, it took over the themes of convict and treason songs, defiantly presented as the opportunity to throw off middle class decencies and take the road to degradation.

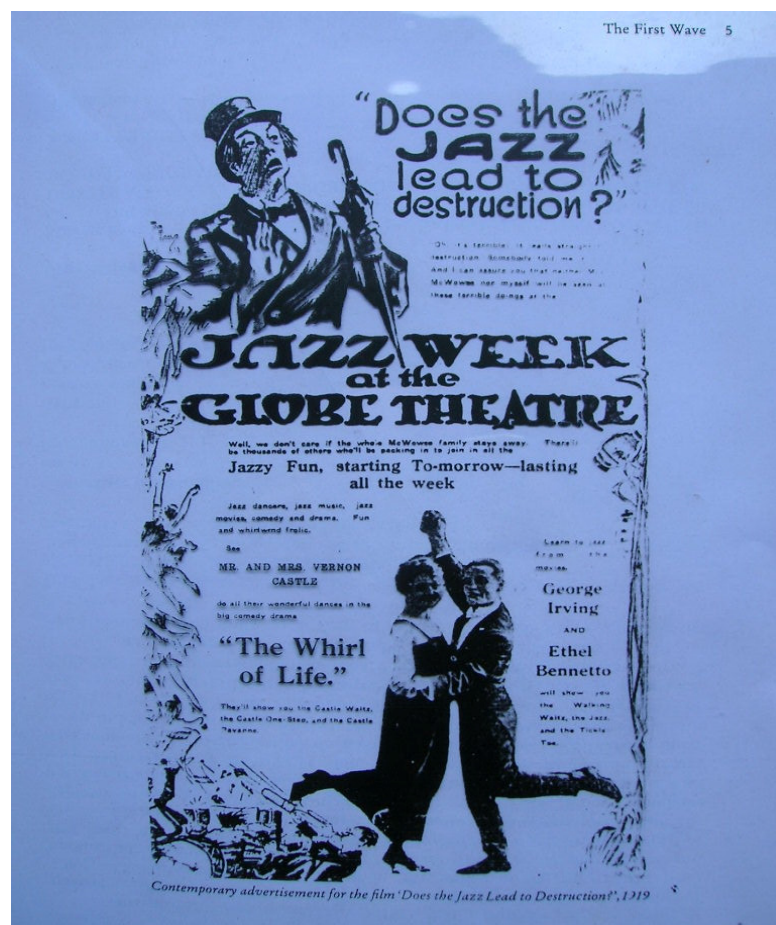


Figure 3 – Does the jazz lead to destruction?

“Does the jazz lead to destruction?” asked the posters for this lowbrow event, and throughout the week of publicity it concluded with defiant triumph that, indeed it does.⁸ Far from seeking to escape moral and aesthetic stigma, jazz arrived in Australia embracing it. The Jazz Week at the Globe is an early example of the mass marketing of oppositional subcultures.

Divertissement: Melbourne and Sydney

Let us now take this particular strand of Australian jazz and see how it itself is actually made up of smaller and distinct threads. I suggested that the marketing and perception of the 1919 Jazz Week appealed to a deeply embedded cultural memory of a powerful underclass. This underclass was defined by such features as criminality (convicts), nationality (the Irish) and education and economics (urban and rural proletariat), established in an antagonistic relationship with the rulers and with a middle class emerging from the mid-nineteenth century. But, of course, this event was in Sydney. I wonder how it would have gone in Melbourne. We can form some answer to this question when we return to The Coloured Idea scandal

What Geoffrey Blainey famously called “the tyranny of distance” in his study of the same name (Blainey, 1966) made this country a far more heterogeneous entity than a simple term like ‘Australian jazz’ conveys. In a transport era of sailing ships and horses, the enormous distances between our major cities quarantined them to a large extent from mutual influence, leaving them with only their own histories to feed off as they developed. And those histories were very different. While Sydney was built from 1788 by a criminal and largely Anglo-Irish underclass, Melbourne evolved out of settlement by pastoralists from Tasmania and Sydney, as well as England, becoming a municipality in 1842. After an abortive attempt to establish a penal colony on the shores of Port Philip Bay in 1802, the next attempt to land convicts, or ‘Exiles’ as they were now euphemistically known, was in 1844. The free labourers were not pleased at this influx of cheap competition, and the burghers of Melbourne were not pleased at the idea of the convict stain spreading from Sydney to their fair city. Their objections gained force as a depression in England and the European revolutions of 1848 produced a rapid increase in the numbers and national diversity of free settlers. When the convict ship *Randolph* entered Port Philip Bay in 1849, public outcry led to a prohibition on anchoring, so she sailed north to Sydney where she unloaded her 295 convicts who were absorbed into the community without fuss (Hughes, 1987, pp. 553-7). The gold discoveries from 1851 provided the economic leverage for the emergence of a prosperous bourgeoisie, and nowhere more so than in Melbourne, the city that most benefited from the immensely rich Ballarat diggings. In a decade or so from its establishment as a municipality, Melbourne became Australia’s biggest city, and one of the world’s wealthiest and most technologically sophisticated.

It became the temporary commonwealth capital from Federation until Canberra took over the role in 1927. From the earliest years of its foundation,

Melbourne exuded a different state of mind from Sydney: the differences included a transplanted English gentility against Sydney's vulgar US-oriented hustle. This was aggravated as Melbourne gradually lost its economic and political supremacy, with the goldfields being worked out late in the century at the same time as the Depression of the 1890s took effect. By the early twentieth century, assisted by protective policies introduced at Federation, Sydney became the country's business capital. Melbourne's competitive relationship with Sydney developed an edge that was often bitter and combative.

These dynamics are registered much more immediately and explicitly in popular culture than in high culture. This is because Australian high culture is embodied in imported European canonical works which remain relatively unaffected by local dynamics. In musical terms, the ballet, opera and symphonic repertoires in both Melbourne and Sydney are dominated by the same European canon. But popular culture, especially in the earlier twentieth century, assumes the complexion of local history and current conditions. In musical terms, obvious examples are the strong Irish and criminal strains in our earliest folk music (see Anderson, 2000, *passim*). Cultural history does not simply produce popular music, however; it also contains and constrains it, imposes limits on what and where it might be. Thus, in Australia as a whole, popular music for most of our history has simply not been able to gain a foothold in the idea of serious art. In Sydney, this is manifested in the physical proximity of popular music to transgressive activity. Sydney's gambling culture made it the first capital city to license gaming machines in clubs in 1957, which in turn subsidised popular music to such a level that the city became the national magnet for jazz musicians. This jazz demographic in turn helped to fuel a conviction in some Melbourne circles that Sydney was an Americanised centre of mammon, sucking decent folk into its vice driven whirlpool of unrepentant hedonism.

The rivalry that accompanies these local differences is a thread throughout Australian jazz history. It remains a factor in any attempt to talk about 'Australian jazz', and confounds attempts to create national jazz infrastructures. That rivalry cannot be ignored as a distraction to a national agenda. To a great extent it *is* the agenda. One lesson I brought away from eleven years of close involvement with jazz policy, as opposed to weekly performance, is that you cannot make sense of its past, nor nurture its future, without recognising that historically entrenched cultural assumptions and regional politics are a shaping principle, not after all, a 'diversion', in trying to understand Australian jazz. We cannot ignore its tensions in any attempt to create a national jazz community, whether as a performer, historian, policy maker or educator.

The Coloured Idea, Act Two: Exit the Band

Let us now return to the hapless Coloured Idea. The musicians caught in the police raid no longer appeared at the theatre with the Revue. A week's engagement for the band at the Green Mill was cancelled. Strictly speaking, no

law had been broken. The remedy was reported in the press (*Sydney Morning Herald*, March 28):

A recommendation has been telegraphed to the Home and Territories Department at Canberra [sic] recommending that the permit for the band to remain in Australia should be cancelled, thus giving the department the power to deport the men if they do [n]ot leave voluntarily (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 11).

The next day, the *Daily Telegraph* reported: "No more Negro entertainers are to be admitted into Australia. This decision was reached today by Federal cabinet. On occasion however some special person may be permitted to enter" (Sutcliffe, 1997. p. 11).

Interviewed by *Everyones* magazine of April 4, Sonny Clay was quoted as saying that the band had been "hounded ever since we landed in Australia". Prior to the arrival of the Revue, the Australian Commonwealth Band – a much enlarged brass band - had been denied entry to perform in the US in the course of a world tour. Clay believed that the current harassment was an act of revenge engineered by the Musicians' Union. He spoke of being "harassed" in Sydney, of the band apartments being broken into "at all hours of the night. Somebody was trying to get evidence against us. The same party dogged us to Melbourne" (Sutcliffe, 1997, p. 12). The identity of the "party" who dogged the band from Sydney to Melbourne is not known. It is hard to imagine the Musicians' Union, however hostile, in a position to conduct such activities. A member of a state police force has no official interstate authority. But a member of a federal agency would have. Recently released documents indicate that it was the Commonwealth Investigation Branch (forerunner of the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation) that was behind the operation. They had originally sought to activate the raid in Sydney, but later complained that the NSW police had not been eager to act, and even after the scandal erupted, it was reported that Sydney police did not feel that the musicians had "put themselves outside the law". Melbourne proved to be a more compliant setting for their victimisation (Hall, 1997, passim).

Conclusions

The carefully engineered scandal concluded with the first African-American jazz band ever to visit Australia being forced out of the country. While other black entertainers performed in Australia throughout the 1930s, none of them was billed as a jazz musician. The official ban on 'negro' bands lasted until the tour of Louis Armstrong's All Stars in 1954, although Graeme Bell just managed to sneak Ellington cornettist Rex Stewart under the barrier in 1949, simply by not disclosing his colour in the various entry permit applications.⁹ After it became known through press photo reports of his arrival that Stewart was a 'negro', Bell bumped into the Secretary of the Musicians' Union, Charlie

Wheatland in the lift of the Musicians' Club. The following exchange was reported by Bell in his autobiography:

Graeme, you didn't tell us that this fellow Stewart was black.' I said, 'Well, Charlie, I didn't think it was necessary, and surely it wouldn't have made any difference.' He looked me straight in the eye and said, 'It could have Graeme, it could have' (Bell, 1988, p. 128).

In the event, Stewart was required to perform as a soloist *near* a band, but not as part of it, and therefore required to stand at least sixty centimetres in front of Bell's group.

There was thus no official or direct public exposure to African-American jazz musicians for another quarter of a century, a long time in jazz, and one of its most dynamic periods). I emphasise 'official' public exposure. There were scattered wartime contacts between Australian and black US jazz musicians, and I could illustrate how deeply influential these were. The glimpse these provide of what would have been a very different jazz history, is sharpened further by any comparison between levels of exposure in other diasporic sites, like France where 'negritude' was an enriching aesthetic rather than an abhorrent stain. In light of these isolated contacts, and of the press reviews' comments about the Coloured Idea's musical revelations in 1928 which differed so strikingly from 'the Australian approach', consider how different Australian jazz history might have been with continuous live exposure to African-American jazz musicians during those decades.

Notes

1. I make this observation on the basis of scores of conversations with what I would call 'first generation' historians and archivists of Australian jazz over at least four decades. Since that historiography emerged from the 1940s in such journals as *Jazz Notes*, key figures have identified the six sides made by Graeme Bell for Regal Zonophone in 1947 as Australia's first 'true' jazz recordings
2. The full title was: *Everyones, with which is incorporated Australian variety & show world*. It did not carry an apostrophe.
3. The silent movie footage referred to is from Charles Chauvel's *Greenhide* (1926). The sequence is discussed at length in Johnson 2000, pp. 69-76.
4. As the effects on musicians of the arrival of talkies and later of the Great Depression, all foreign musicians would come under a Union embargo. For a detailed discussion, see Dreyfuss 2009, *passim*.
5. Copy from author's collection.
6. The following section derives in part from Johnson 2004.
7. "Every Man a King", by Governor of Louisiana Huey Long, and Castro Carazo, 1935.
8. The poster is reproduced in Johnson 1987, p.5.
9. On the Coloured Idea incident, see further Bisset 1987, pp. 23, 43-45, 85.

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