

THE TROCADERO: A GLIMPSE INTO THE GLAMOUR OF A BYGONE TIME

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At 9 pm on the evening of 3 April 1936 in Sydney – the opening night of a sensational new palais de danse (nothing so common as a dance hall) – Monsieur François Stempinski and his Silver Sextette played the *Trocadero March*, especially composed for this very occasion, as guests milled into the exciting entertainment venue, the Trocadero. Half an hour later, trailblazing jazz musician and bandleader Frank Coughlan (1904-1979), dressed in white tails, led his thirteen-piece orchestra – also impeccably attired in white dinner suits – in a rendition of *Cowboy in Manhattan*.



Trailblazing jazz musician and bandleader Frank Coughlan with his orchestra in 1936... PHOTO COURTESY BLACK ROOTS WHITE FLOWERS

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Sydneysiders, still dealing with the long-term effects of the Great Depression, had flocked to the Trocadero to escape reality for a moment, enjoy themselves, hear the latest music and dance up a storm. They'd put on their glad rags and set out for a night of Hollywood-style glamour and revelry, and so began The Trocadero's siren hold on the city. In those first few weeks, more than 100,000 people went through the doors of the Troc, as it quickly became known.

Situated at 515 George Street between Bathurst and Liverpool Streets, the Trocadero was the brainchild of Canadian-born entrepreneur James 'Jimmy' Bendrodt.



Canadian-born entrepreneur James 'Jimmy' Bendrodt, pictured here with his future wife Peggy Dawe... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

Built at a reported cost of some £350,000 (there are other reported figures but this one seems to be the most plausible), the Trocadero was a striking art deco building that in its heyday, according to *Sydney Architecture*, 'attracted 5,000 couples a week to its public dances and could accommodate 2,000 people for banquets'. The sandstone tower at the entrance distinguished the building from others in the city and inside, it boasted a wide and welcoming marble-floored foyer and polished

granite walls. Potted palms added an air of the exotic. For a fee, photographers working from the foyer took photographs of people who wanted a souvenir of a great night out. Through the double glass doors inside the auditorium, the walls were covered in bas-relief murals of dancers from around the world. But the eye was immediately drawn to the clamshell-shaped revolving stage which was always vividly illuminated. The stage looked over the large dance floor which was made, writes jazz historian Andrew Bisset, 'of tallow wood set in rubber and covered over 14,000 square feet [1,300 square metres]'. This was where patrons who enjoyed ballroom dancing and jazz tripped the light fantastic each night.



The Trocadero, situated at 515 George Street between Bathurst and Liverpool Streets, Sydney ...

Surrounding the dance floor were scarlet-carpeted areas where people could sit on high-backed velvet-upholstered chairs at tables covered in cream tablecloths and adorned with striking floral arrangements and enjoy a drink. According to George Repin, the liquor laws of those early days didn't allow for dance halls to sell alcohol to their guests, so it was common for men to bring along their preferred tippie in brown paper bags which were always discreetly placed under the table. In fact, the Trocadero didn't obtain a liquor license until the 1960s.

One of the reasons the Trocadero established and maintained its extraordinary success was Coughlan's band. Bisset has written that American bands had offered Bendrodt their services – an attractive offer given the enormous popularity of American swing and jazz music as typified by bands like Glenn Miller, Count Basie and Tommy Dorsey – but Bendrodt was keen to hire the best Australian band he could get and the best band was Frank Coughlan's. Coughlan was a multi-instrumentalist whose 'sax playing was good, his trumpet was beautiful, but his

trombone was thrilling' (Bisset). Already a popular and somewhat flamboyant figure with the public, Coughlan was perfect for the Trocadero, his orchestra playing an engaging mix of swing and big band hits, as well as some of his own compositions and a bit of traditional jazz. The featured singer was Barbara James, a popular swing and jazz vocalist and an additional drawcard for audiences eager to hear the latest songs.



Frank Coughlan's 1938 Trocadero band (above) and a shot of Barbara James (below)... BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA



The size of the venue, its gorgeous décor, the fabulous bandstand and smartly dressed musicians also appealed to the makers of the 1936 film *The Flying Doctors*. When they needed a nightclub scene, the obvious place to shoot the scene was the Trocadero.

In 1938, Coughlan formed an additional ensemble – a small Dixieland band featuring members of the Trocadero Orchestra complemented by the addition of a tenor saxophone. That same year, he also engaged an all-female show band to play the Troc. Called the Trocadero All-Girl Band, this fourteen-piece ensemble was, according to Bisset, the ‘first attempt to put a female band into the big time’, although he also comments that it was largely a gimmick. It did, however, pave the way for a second all-girl band formed in 1942 by drummer Dick Freeman. That band entertained patrons for the next year or two. By that time, Freeman had taken on the role of conductor because Coughlan had taken over the Melbourne Trocadero band. Coughlan went on to serve in the armed forces during World War II, but in 1946, he returned to Sydney and the Trocadero and remained there until the palais de danse finally closed its doors.



Some members of the Sydney Trocadero All-Girl Band in 1938, posed holding the wrong instruments. L-R, Betty Gilles (violin), Pat White (bass), Edna Robinson (tenor), Renee Krejick (drums), Bernice Lynch (guitar)... PHOTO COURTESY BLACK ROOTS WHITE FLOWERS

The Trocadero was well known for its public dances – including a weekly jitterbug jive – and its fine dining. Food was served on specially made scarlet-edged crockery featuring the Trocadero crest showing a man and woman dancing. The venue was also known for the superior quality of the music. In October 1943, famous American clarinettist and bandleader Artie Shaw and his band appeared at the Trocadero. Unfortunately, most Sydneysiders were denied entry to the two performances, the *Sydney Morning Herald* reporting that: ‘Tickets for these dances have been confined to [Australian and US armed forces personnel] on leave from operational areas and all the tickets have been distributed. No civilian men will be admitted.’ As you might imagine, this fuelled resentment among young Australian men who weren’t at all happy about American soldiers monopolising the single girls.



The Artie Shaw Navy Band at The Trocadero in 1943... PHOTO COURTESY MIKE SUTCLIFFE & JAZZ MAGAZINE

Coughlan not only conducted the house orchestra, he also hired other bands to entertain the crowds and he made maximum use of the revolving stage. On a number of occasions in 1957 and 1958, my father, trumpeter Bob Barnard, then in his mid-twenties and living in Melbourne, was invited to perform with the Port Jackson Jazz Band. He told me that as one band finished its set, the stage rotated and the next band would immediately begin to play. It was a finely tuned operation designed to make sure the music, dancing and merriment continued without a break. It’s no wonder the Troc was such a magnet for Sydneysiders keen for a fun night out.

The Trocadero was also the place to be seen – it was modern, classy, trendy – and over the years, it received a number of distinguished visitors including the young Queen Elizabeth who dined there in 1954 as part of her first official royal visit to Australia, and US President Lyndon Johnson, who visited here in 1966 to thank Australia for its support in the Vietnam War. Radio stations 2CH and 2GB hosted children’s Christmas parties and youth events; and the ABC broadcast the music of

the Trocadero Orchestra twice a week, so even if you couldn't get there yourself you could hear the music, tap your feet and perhaps dance in your own living room.



A 2CH Christmas party, held in The Trocadero in 1937... PHOTO COURTESY STATE LIBRARY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

But there was more to it than just dancing. The Trocadero also accommodated various other events, such as fashion shows, award nights, trade shows, school formals, exhibitions and apparently even the early finals of the Miss Australia quest. The Rotary Club of Sydney held their meetings there. It was also the preferred venue for lavish balls, some where young women could be presented as debutantes.

The Dragon Ball, for instance, was an important fundraising event for Sydney's Chinese community, intended to raise money to support particular charities, such as orphanages and aged care homes, both in China and in Australia. It was also an opportunity for young Australian-Chinese girls to come 'into society', to meet other young people and for Australians and Chinese people to get to know one another. The Troc was the venue for, among other organisations, Sydney University's Law Ball, the Hardcourt Tennis Association Ball and the annual Black and White Ball, the latter being a high point on the social calendar for so-called A-listers.



The Dragon Ball, Sydney Trocadero in 1946: the crowning glory of the Sydney Chinese community's social calendar...

One popular event was the Artists' Ball. Since the 1920s, thousands of revellers had attended these balls, many coming from the art departments of East Sydney Technical College and the University of Sydney. In the 1930s and 1940s, the balls were held in several venues, one of which was the Trocadero. Quite outrageous parties considering the times, there are plenty of juicy stories about Artists' Balls. For example, the artist Jean Isherwood once earned the newspaper headline 'Cleopatra in Kitchen Array' when she wore a transparent dress and used soup strainers as breast plates.

At another ball, one partygoer's distinctive headdress – a bird's nest with a live chicken secured inside – resulted in someone calling the RSPCA. Cross-dressing men caused something of a furore, the average person on the street barely able to even conceive of such a thing. A report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted that the Artists' Ball held in November 1949 was a memorable occasion, where some 1,500 people, including 'cartoonists, artists, actors, models and radio personalities' jostled one another on the dance floor. 'Some dancers were in elegant evening clothes, some in street wear, but the majority wore the "fanciest" of fancy costumes that their ingenuity could devise' while the tables were elaborately decorated with palm trees, large model ferries and scarecrows.

By the early 1960s, however, the Trocadero's management had had enough of the often unruly behaviour of the artists – at the 1961 ball, the fire brigade had to be called when the decorations on one of the tables caught fire – and the Artists' Balls moved to another venue.

Costume cavalcade at Artists' Ball



BACK TO SCHOOLDAYS. Charles Carney (left), Noel Kalacy, Pam Shaw (who is slightly obscured by a hockey stick), and Adele Forbes went to the ball as "girls of St. Trinian's" as drawn by the well-known London artist Ronald Searle. In the background is Leo Schofield wearing a red wig.

Well-known artists and their friends showed great ingenuity in devising the clever and unusual fancy costumes which they wore to the annual Artists' Ball at the Trocadero, Sydney, on Friday, November 6. Nearly 2000 people attended the ball, and their arrival was watched by a large crowd of onlookers.



PRIZEWINNERS. Artist Hottie Lahm and his wife, Joan, won prizes in the "most authentic" section at the ball. Hottie went as a realistic self portrait by Van Gogh, complete with closer facial make-up, and Joan dressed as a barmaid from the Folies Bergere as painted by the French artist Manet.



STARS AND STRIPES. Coach Stan Martin shouts instructions to "American All Star" footballers, Jack Larkin (left), Jim Swanson, and at back, from left, Ken Biddulph, Frank Merchant, Bill McNamara, Barry Trengrove.



LEFT: As a pair of Javanese temple dancers Mrs. Mercia Kingham (left) and Matthew McDonnell wore elaborate, colorful dress.

ABOVE: Well-known cartoonist-illustrator Wep (W. E. Pidgion), as Van Gogh's portrait of Dr. Gachet, strikes a pensive pose.

By this time – the 1960s – the Trocadero had been doing its best to keep up with the times. During the 1950s, many crooners and popular musicians had been engaged to entertain patrons, among them ostentatious American pianist and singer Liberace who appeared at the Trocadero in 1958, but things were changing. In 1955, pubs were permitted to open in the evenings and a year later, television arrived in Australia, marking a shift in the way people thought about entertainment. The Trocadero continued to maintain its house band but it also hosted rock and pop concerts.

Over the years, dancers had kicked up their heels to swing music, the jitterbug and foxtrot, the tango and waltz, but as the 1960s came into being, the old music – and dancing – gave way to the new. The Bee Gees performed there in 1964, and not long before they disbanded in 1969, The Easybeats also appeared there. But as young people were inevitably drawn to newly established music venues in the city, the appeal of the Trocadero began to fade and eventually, on 5 February 1971, it closed up shop. Historians estimate that in its 35-year career, well over one million people danced at the Troc.



Over the years, dancers had kicked up their heels to swing music, the jitterbug and foxtrot, the tango and waltz... PHOTO COURTESY STATE LIBRARY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Sadly, and somewhat cavalierly some might say, the building was demolished not long after and today a cinema complex stands in its place. The Troc was remembered in the 1977 song *Deep Water* from Australian musician Richard Clapton:

*They closed down the doors to the Trocadero
and I came back looking just like a ghost
Posters were scattered all over the stairs
Nobody reads them, nobody cares.*

The Trocadero was a special place in Sydney, a place that symbolised glamour, excitement, escapism and fabulous music; a place where Sydneysiders and tourists could don their best clobber and dance the night away. We'll not see its like again.

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