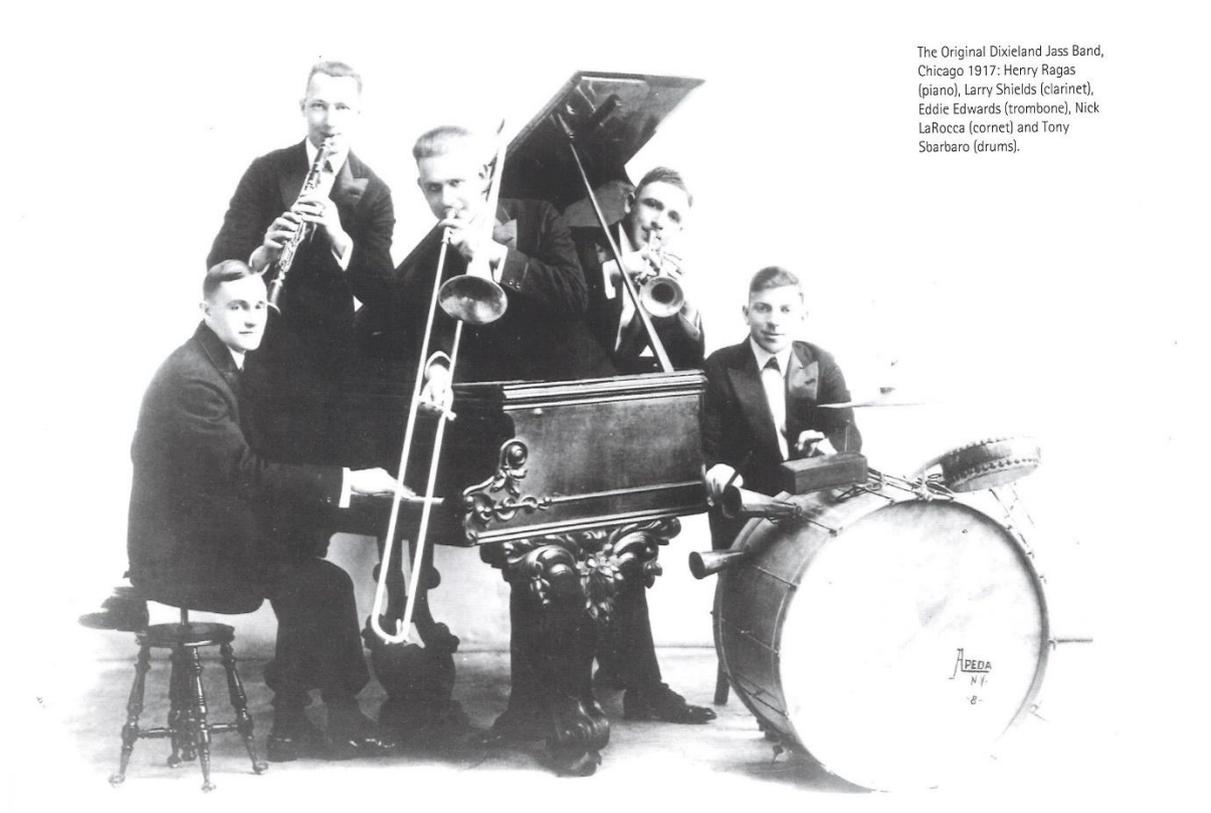


BLISTERED HEELS – JAZZ AND HOT DANCE MUSIC IN AUSTRALIA IN THE TWENTIES by Jack Mitchell. 170 pages, softback, illustrated, self-published in 2015. ISBN No 978-0-646-91264-6, 170 pp.

Reviewed by Nick Dellow

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Within two years of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band's first record being issued, jazz had driven its syncopated beat into every corner in every continent of the world. It swept across the globe in pandemic fashion, despite being ridiculed in the Press, derided from the pulpit and dismissed by musical traditionalists.



The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, Chicago 1917: Henry Ragas (piano), Larry Shields (clarinet), Eddie Edwards (trombone), Nick LaRocca (cornet) and Tony Sbarbaro (drums).

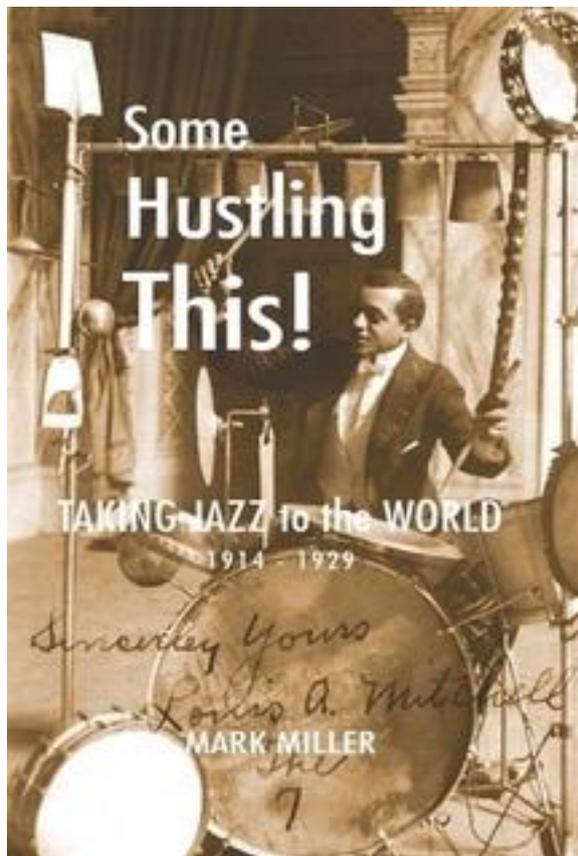
The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, 1917... PHOTO COURTESY THE CHRONICLE OF JAZZ

The fact that jazz spread out so far and so quickly from its American epicentre may seem surprising, but we should bear in mind that, as with ragtime before it, the 'jazz music' that the Old World had foisted upon it was sieved, sorted, processed and packaged through the mighty publishing houses of tin pan alley, which always had international markets in mind. As a result, jazz - or rather

jazz-influenced popular music - could be readily assimilated by disparate cultures around the world through recordings, sheet music and pioneering expeditions by bands and musicians.

This is not to say that true jazz - played by real jazz musicians - didn't percolate through the tin pan filters. Indeed, even before 1917 - that most pivotal of years for jazz – many pioneering jazz musicians had taken the music far beyond the Mason-Dixon line.

The geography of jazz has become an increasingly popular subject amongst jazz historians in recent years. As Mark Miller says in his excellent book *Some Hustling This! – Taking Jazz To The World 1919-1929*, “The theoretical implications of these encounters [with jazz] - in Canada, England and France before 1920, and elsewhere in Europe, South America and the Far East during the 1920s - have been a popular subject for critical analysis”.



Mark Miller's Some Hustling This!: The geography of jazz has become an increasingly popular subject amongst jazz historians in recent years...

It is therefore surprising that it is only with the publication of this book that the history of jazz in Australia during the early years has been examined in any detail, and it's surprising considering the country's strong cultural ties with the USA and Europe. In *Blistered Heels*, author Jack Mitchell – a man who has

devoted much of his life to the history of jazz in Australia - traces the footsteps of the visiting and indigenous jazz/dance bands that followed hot on the (blistered) heels of Australian dancers keen to test their terpsichorean efforts against the strains of the new syncopated music.

It seems that Perth probably hosted the first American jazz band to play in Australia when, in the summer of 1919, a contingent of eight musicians of the San Francisco division of the Young America League played there as part of a world tour. The group was described by a local newspaper as being a 'genuine jazz band'. The question is - did these proselytisers of syncopation play genuine jazz? The answer is almost certainly "no" though as it's highly unlikely that anyone in the audience would have known what genuine jazz was, it hardly mattered!

Thanks to the author's dedication to research, we learn by way of an advert in the June 1918 edition of the *Sydney Sun* that the delightfully named "Belle Sylvia and Her Jazz Band" was designated "Australia's First Jazz Band". In July 1918 a revised advert in the *Sydney Sun* more accurately named these primogenitors as "Fuller's Original Jazz Band", a quintet organised by Ben Fuller, a theatrical promoter, and led by American-born violinist Billy Romaine, who became an important bandleader in Australia during the 1920s.

The press notices that Fuller's Original Jazz Band received were predictably similar in their pejorative tone to those afforded its more famous trailblazing namesake, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. In fact, reading through the press cuttings that the author reproduces throughout his fascinating book one finds oneself constantly thinking "I've read that line somewhere else" and, indeed, similar descriptions of early jazz band performances are to be found in contemporary newspapers the world over. Criticism of jazz was as international in its condemnation as the music itself was popular.

As was the case elsewhere in the world, the growth of jazz in Australia is set against a backdrop of a boom in dancing and dance venues.

The author notes that "1920 was the year it really exploded". On the first day of January *The Sydney Morning Herald* wrote: "Afternoon tea dances are more popular than ever. No doubt, the 'jazz mania' has something to do with this." "Jazz mania" was certainly taking hold in Australia: that same month the Gramophone Company released four titles by the ODJB and shortly afterwards the Columbia Company started distribution of the 12-inch 78s the band had recorded in London. This boom in dancing was spurred on by the return home from Europe of many Australian army troops - a number of whom, as Mitchell points out - travelled back "via London where no doubt many heard the Original Dixieland Jazz Band."

This book unveils the names and personnel of antipodean dance bands of the 1920s who mean little today but who, in their day, satisfied the dancing needs of a large number of young Australians. One wonders what Jim Pasfield's Original sounded like, or for that matter, the band led by one Violet Morrell, described in an advert of the time as a "full jazzy Orchestra". The pages of *Blistered Heels* are replete with such bands, which the author contextualises and illuminates through press articles and advertisements.

Amongst the visitors who brought the message of jazz and syncopated dance music to Australia in the 1920s, the most outstanding must surely be saxophonist Bert Ralton, whose successful tour of Australia (and New Zealand) in 1925 emphasised Britain's important role in disseminating jazz and syncopated dance music throughout its Empire. Born in America Ralton found fame in the UK as leader of the Savoy Havana Band at the Savoy Hotel, but nothing could have prepared him for the adulation of the adoring crowds that greeted him and his "Havana Band" when they arrived in Australia in November 1923. Ralton was feted wherever he went. It therefore must have been something of a rude awakening to discover upon his return to London in 1925, that others had filled his shoes (see *Bert Ralton And Havana Band*, VJM 166, 2013). A few years previously, ODJB had found themselves in a similar position after their European sojourn ended, and in fact many long term jazz emigres suffered a similar fate through being 'left behind'.



Bert Ralton's Havana Band in November, 1924. Ralton (reeds) is fifth from the left... PHOTO COURTESY MIKE SUTCLIFFE OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ

By the end of the 1920s, visiting bands no longer held the novelty appeal they had done earlier in the decade. Moreover, the importation of foreign musicians was becoming a contentious issue in Australia, just as it was in the UK and other countries. In symbolic fashion, the General Secretary of the Australian Musicians Union stated in September 1929:

“There are no orchestras of any foreign nationalities here now. The fight is over.” Black musicians had felt the effect of this pugilistic attitude many years before white musicians did, with the Australian government regularly preventing visiting black bands from obtaining work licences. The chapter on these black bands is notably slender, but given the prevailing attitudes of the time this is not entirely surprising. There are several examples of blatant racism, including the implementation of a poll tax of £100 on each black performer of a visiting revue, and a police raid on the apartment block where Sonny Clay and his Plantation Band were staying, leading to the headline 'Australia wants not another coon’.



Sonny Clay's Plantation Orchestra: a police raid on the apartment block where members of this group were staying was an example of blatant racism...

Racism would continue to have implications for visiting bands for many years after this, though Australia was no worse than many other countries, and in comparison to the birthplace of jazz, considerably better!

The country's protectionist attitude was not so rigorously applied to musicians from the UK due to Australia's status as a dominion of the British Empire. For the same reason, top Australian dance band musicians found employment in Britain a relatively hassle-free experience. Having absorbed much of the art of playing jazz from visiting bands and gramophone recordings, a number of

Australian musicians became well established in their own right and travelled to Europe to ply their trade. Amongst these was Frank Coughlan, who played in Arthur Rosebery's and Fred Elizalde's bands in London during 1929, recording excellent hot trombone solos with these outfits (Jack Mitchell previously published a book on Coughlan, *Coggy: The Life and Career of Frank Coughlan.*)



Frank Coughlan: he played in Arthur Rosebery's and Fred Elizalde's bands in London during 1929 ... PHOTO COURTESY OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ

The amount of research work that has been undertaken by the author in assessing Australia's role in the worldwide spread and assimilation of jazz is commendable. The lives of pioneering Australians and visiting jazz musicians spring from each page, illustrated by numerous rare photographs of the bands and the venues they played in.
