

THE AUSTRALIAN

Jazz doyen's happy feat



Australian jazz bandleader Frank Coughlan (centre) and his band at Sydney's Trocadero...

HAPPY FEET: DANCING & SWINGING IN AUSTRALIA IN THE THIRTIES

by Jack Mitchell

Independent, 124pp, \$35

Eric Myers

The roaring twenties were a time of prosperity and raucous high spirits in post-war Australia, just as in the United States. That explains why jazz-influenced dance music - so-called “hot music” - was the popular music of the day, and why the decade was also called the Jazz Age.

It was also a decade of emancipation for young women. Modernism was in the air, and the “flappers” wore short skirts, listened to jazz, did the Charleston, and flaunted their disdain for what was then considered acceptable behaviour.



Flappers in the 1920s: they flaunted their disdain for what was then considered acceptable behaviour...

The Wall Street crash in 1929 put an end to that delirious party. The Great Depression took Australia’s unemployment rate to over 30 per cent, one of the highest in the world. Unemployed men were visible everywhere, queueing for scarce jobs, roaming the countryside looking for work, and camping in rural showgrounds.

Given this unprecedented gloom, the evolution of jazz in Australia, despite great strides in the twenties, stalled in the first half of the thirties. High-spirited jazz music was now regarded as unacceptable, if not irresponsible. Popular music became dominated by sweet, tuneful, commercial music palatable to the masses, but of little interest to those professional musicians who preferred to play “hot music”. In effect jazz was dormant until the mid-1930s, when the advent of the swing era enabled the pendulum to swing back.



Discographer Jack Mitchell, now 93: His research has been an indispensable aid to jazz buffs for decades...

Jack Mitchell's book *Happy Feet*, a history of popular music in the 1930s, runs through all of this, courtesy of his tireless capacity for compiling minutiae. Variousy described in the jazz community as an "anecdotalist" and a "documentationist", Mitchell, now 93, is the doyen of Australian jazz discographers, best-known for his monumental works *Australian Jazz On Record* (1988), *More Australian Jazz On Record* (1998), and *Even More Australian Jazz on Record* (2002). The latter are now combined onto an all-encompassing CD-ROM, being continually updated. His research has been an indispensable aid to jazz buffs for decades.

Happy Feet documents in exhaustive detail the music world of the thirties, concentrating on the swing and dance bands which blossomed everywhere, particularly in Sydney and Melbourne: who played with whom, which bandleaders drifted to the top of the pile, and most importantly, which players kept alive the spark of "hot music", which was often in danger of being diluted, owing to the weight of more popular forms of dance music.

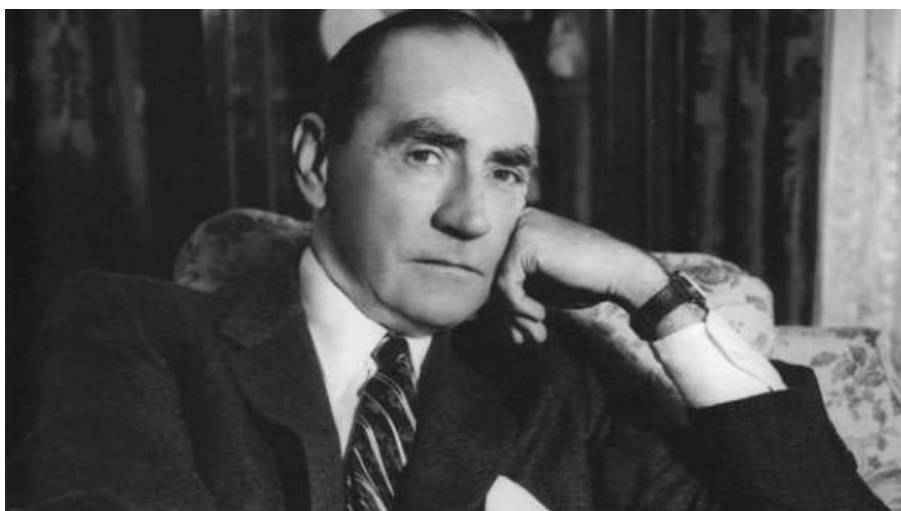
The scenario Mitchell describes is more positive than in some previous accounts. The music industry already survived its most recent crisis, the advent of talking pictures in 1927, when hundreds of musicians, no longer required in the cinemas, were thrown out of work. That setback was now exacerbated by loss of employment during the Depression.

Oddly though, according to Mitchell, the Depression was a positive force. To counteract the gloom, thousands of ordinary people around Australia flooded the dance halls to be entertained. “People sought relief from everyday worries by dancing their blues away”, he writes.

The dancing boom was so great in Sydney that ballrooms opened in leading department stores, such as Farmers, Nock and Kirby’s, and David Jones. At Mark Foy’s four stories and a roof terrace were added, with the top storey occupied by the Empress Ballroom. Leading bandleaders became celebrities, and were featured in Australian films. In 1933 the band led by Jim Coates, Mark Foy’s musical director throughout the thirties, appeared in *The Squatter’s Daughter* and *The Hayseeds*.

In the absence of today’s ubiquitous rock music, jazz dominated many people’s lives. The music industry was, in many ways a ‘get rich quick’ avenue for investors. Jazz in the 21st century might be relatively insignificant in relation to other musics, but in the 1930s it was intermeshed with big business and the media, particularly in the second half of the decade, with the arrival of the swing era craze.

Sydney was soon ready for a major mass dancing venue, and the entrepreneur Jim Bendrodt came to the party with the famous Trocadero in George Street. It opened in April 1936, interestingly financed by Ezra Norton, publisher of the *Truth* weekly newspaper, “not a man to put sentimentality ahead of profits”, writes Mitchell.

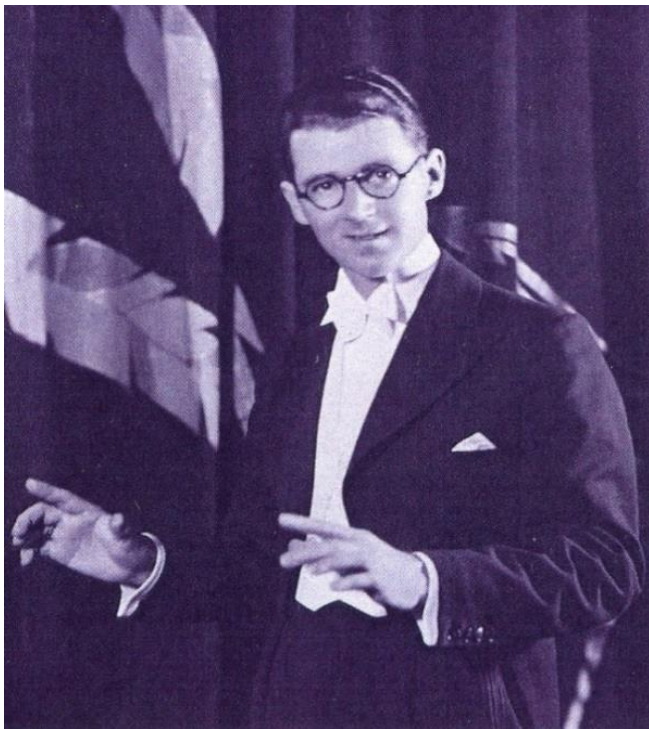


Ezra Norton: he financed the famous Trocadero in George Street, Sydney, which opened in April 1936...PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

Norton subsequently began the influential tabloid *Daily Mirror* and was a bitter rival of Kerry Packer's father Sir Frank Packer. The two press tycoons were perhaps best-known for their fist-fight on AJC Derby Day 1939 in the members' enclosure at Randwick racecourse.

Reflecting the popularity of swing music the *Australian Woman's Weekly* in August 1936 jumped onto the bandwagon with an article entitled "Swing is the New Rhythm". An anonymous writer said: "Swing is the newest thing in dance music that captivates, syncopates, invigorates and stimulates". Jazz was now fashionable again, and widely adopted by young people, much to the despair of their parents. The re-emergence of lively modern music at this time, and the advent of dancing styles such as jitterbugging, foreshadowed the alarm that occurred in the next generation with the advent of rock and roll in 1954.

Significant social events form the backdrop to Mitchell's narrative. None was more important than the establishment of the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) in 1932. It became a big employer of musicians. Jim Davidson, who later became known as "Australia's dance band king" was first signed by the ABC in 1934. In 1936 his band was placed under contract and became Jim Davidson's ABC Dance Band.



Jim Davidson: Australia's dance band king...PHOTO COURTESY JACK MITCHELL

By 1939 this 26-piece outfit had become the most successful and best-known orchestra in Australia. Its Regal Zonophone disc, featuring *Shuffle Off To Buffalo* and *Forty Second Street*, sold 95,000 copies over the decade.

On December 1, 1939 they played for open air dancing in Martin Place and Phillip Streets, Sydney from 7 to 11 pm to raise funds for the Lord Mayor's Patriotic Fund. A massive crowd, estimated at 100,000 arrived, and the streets were so crowded that couples were unable to move, let alone dance.

Along the way Mitchell provides fascinating glimpses of seminal musicians vital to Australian jazz history. For instance Graeme Bell who was the first Australian to take our music to the rest of the world in the immediate post-World War II era. While he is often described as the "father of Australian jazz", it is worth considering Bell's own opinion that this badge of honour should go to the multi-instrumentalist Frank Coughlan who features prominently in Mitchell's narrative.



Frank Coughlan: the father of Australian jazz...PHOTO COURTESY OXFORD COMPANION TO AUSTRALIAN JAZZ

Coughlan, who emerged in the twenties, was a superb musician, equally proficient on trumpet and trombone, and was still bandleader at the Trocadero when its doors closed on December 31, 1970. He is one of the stars of the

Australian Jazz Museum's two-CD collection, also entitled *Happy Feet*, which is a companion to Mitchell's book. Its 45 tracks over 127 minutes, were selected by Mitchell himself, in his capacity as Australia's leading retrievalist of pre-World War II music.



The Australian Jazz Museum's double-album Happy Feet: selected by Jack Mitchell himself, in his capacity as Australia's leading retrievalist of pre-World War II music...

On Radio National recently the ABC's Andrew Ford made the point that historians deal with many aspects of a society's history but, when it comes to popular music, their accounts tend to stop short. This important social phenomenon is apparently not on their radar. Jack Mitchell's *Happy Feet* provides a valuable compensatory account, rounding out the historical scenario, and filling in the gaps left by academic historians.

Eric Myers writes on jazz for The Australian.