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JAZZ AND NATION IN AUSTRALIAN CINEMA: FROM SILENTS TO SOUND

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This article grows most immediately out of the Scholars and Artists in Residence (SAR) Fellowship held at the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA) in October/November 2008, investigating the relationship between the history of Australian jazz and the formation of Australian identity. At that stage of the work-in-progress the primary source material was moving image and related materials such as shooting scripts, stills and promotional items. Around 60 moving image items were examined,¹ including feature films, newsreels and documentaries, as well as printed materials such as shooting scripts and treatments, covering the years 1919 to 2008. The broader background to this work was a professional interest in cultural history as an acoustic field, the particular example of music, jazz and especially its diasporic forms, and most specifically the deep interest in Australian jazz of a longtime active performer, and in policy development and administration. The research is continuing (including through a follow-up SAR Fellowship for 2009), with reference to other forms of primary material such as sound recordings and sleeve notes, memoirs, interviews, reviews and promotional material. This interim account of the negotiation between Australian jazz and discourses of nation confines itself to film and moving image.

Connections between jazz and Australian identity were made for and by witnesses outside Australia from the earliest phase, as for example in the case of Ross's Jazz Band from Melbourne. In 1924 they embarked on what became nine years' touring as the Three Australian Boys, embracing the UK and the USA, recording and playing prestigious engagements. In the early 1930s, Australian bandleader, Cec Morrison, visited the USA where his broadcasts of 'Kangaroo Jazz' prompted the suggestion that he should stay to 'educate our own jazz leaders into what jazz

might be'.² These are sporadic connections, but the link was particularly reinforced in the post-World War Two era, and especially among European commentators who identified what they felt was a generic Australian jazz style. The debate over such an assertion continues, but is a discussion for another place.³ The interest here is in the way this connection was constructed and perceived within Australia, with a primary focus in this essay on the first phase of our jazz history from 1918 to c.1929.⁴

The history of the internationalisation of jazz manifests a number of general patterns relating to its often ambiguous coding as both a primitive African-American expressive form, but also the major musical vehicle of modernity. Its African or Negroid connections were prominent in the public consciousness from its earliest appearance in Australia. The declaration in the July 1918 issue of *Australian Variety and Show World* that "Jazz" is a Negro expression for noise, peculiar to music⁵ conflates racist and aesthetic primitivity, and establishes jazz as the noise of savagery, antipathetic to civilisation and refinement. The modern face of jazz was underscored by the timing and means of its circulation. The year 1917 was a fulcrum. It was the year of Passchendaele which, for many, marked the point beyond which the war could no longer be justified by reference to the ideals of the 19th century. The French army mutinied, the generals began to realise that the heart had gone out of the armies and the Pope called for an end to hostilities.⁶ Germany's declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare and its first air-raids on London heralded the unchivalric era of total war. It was the year proclaiming a revolutionary new order, literally in the case of Russia, but also in the publication of T.S. Eliot's 'Prufrock' collection, the coining of the word 'surrealism' and the foundation of Mondrian's journal *De Stijl*, in Europe, and the advent of female suffrage in the 'New World'. The entry of the USA into the war in 1917 helped to end it, and also led to the closure of the red light area in New Orleans' Storyville district, accelerating the diaspora of musicians that catalysed the global spread of jazz. In this

pivotal year the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, from New Orleans via Chicago, opened sensationally at Reisenwebers's Café in New York, converting a puzzled crowd by declaring that jazz was for dancing. It was the year that the band made what are regarded as the first jazz recordings. Jazz was the first new musical form to be internationally disseminated by means of this modern technology.

The coding of jazz as the music of a new, USA-dominated era of urbanised mass culture, is central to its negotiations with Australian identity. The music gained an extraordinarily rapid global foothold, including in Australia. Already being spoken of by 1917, in August 1918 the country's first public jazz performance was announced, by a band led by singer Belle Sylvia as part of a theatre burlesque programme. Reviews of the performance refer to banging on kitchen utensils, effects of thunder and lightning, the firing of guns, and its concluding with the drummer throwing his instruments into the air while the pianist played standing on his chair and the brass players collapsed in apparent exhaustion.⁷ This anarchic performance would not have pleased conservative ears, setting the scene for the tone of what appears to have been the world's first jazz festival, the Jazz Week held at the Globe Theatre in Sydney in 1919. The title of and publicity for a (now lost) locally made film that was featured at the event reflected a belief that jazz signalled the decline of western civilisation: *Does the Jazz Lead to Destruction?* (Australia 1919). This was a

widespread international response to the music, but what is notable in this case is a swaggering defiance that actually played on this moral dubiety, a foreshadowing of the commodification of transgressiveness in popular music which has now become a standard element in such pop genres as metal and rap. A publicity campaign during the week featured a character called McWowse who, on hearing of the event, announced a horrified determination to avoid it at all costs. He also declared it his responsibility to protect his wife from exposure to a music that, at the time, had a particular association with women and forms of feminisation.⁸ By the end of the week, however, he had so far succumbed to the attraction of jazz as to announce that he would cheerfully 'jazz' his way to destruction, heedless of what 'the congregation' might say.⁹ Mr McWowse was evidently not alone, as the same advertisement announcing his apostasy also reported that 'by special request of thousands' the event would continue for another week.

This publicity played to an attitude that was characteristic of international diasporic jazz; that is, that the new music was a bearer of aspects of modernity that threatened local traditions and received values. Its negative representations in Australian film of the 1920s, as documented below, were not improved by the fact that it came from the same country that was threatening the local film industry with its exports. This offense was also complicit with a widespread indignation

at the modern lifestyles glamorised by USA films, and their 'unwholesome' effect on Australian identity.¹⁰ As the main musical accompaniment to these lifestyles, jazz was decadent, transgressive, and its association with extravagant modern dance and its most notorious exponent the flapper, carried the suggestion of *louche* effeminisation. While this association was not unique to Australia, it had particular implications in a country that was so conspicuously masculinised. The immensely disproportionate ratio of men to women from the beginning of European settlement fortified the masculinisation that is characteristic of frontier societies.¹¹ To an inordinate extent, the physical development of this settler society was dependent on male strength and comradeship, and national character was defined through rural narratives associated with outdoor manual labour through which a man realised his spirit and resourcefulness and revalidated the work ethic and its associated values. In 1911, rural dwellers outnumbered the urban population by two to one: 'With bush subjects close to the lives and hearts of most Australians, the outback was to remain dominant on Australian film screens for almost half a century'.¹² The city, on the other hand, softened and feminised, exposed one to at best trivial diversions, and at worst the depraved imported contamination of 'jazz parties'. The dichotomy between rural and urban provided a foundation for various permutations of structuring devices in narratives of nation, particularly early film: the young woman lured like a moth to the city or the young man squandering his talents as a prodigal urban wastrel. Both edged towards destruction at 'jazz parties', quintessential sites of the rebarbative influence of imported modernity. Both were then saved by a return to the solid values of the 'bush' tradition that underpinned all that was redemptive in national identity.

Australia's early prolific feature film output thus became a medium for the negotiation between jazz and national

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identity, the latter most frequently articulated through the values of the bush. Film was a particularly effective forum for constructing and circulating these narratives. By its nature it has a greater graphic immediacy and explicitness than other popular cultural forms. Literature mediates its subjects through a complex symbolic system, the accessibility of which is also restricted by socio-economic factors including literacy. Popular music also carried, as well as often constituted, messages about jazz and modernity. Jazz itself was also imagined during its early history in Australia as a form of dance, perhaps the most intensely immediate form of self-expression.¹³ But the message of dance is pre-verbal, and that of instrumental music is oblique, while lyrics lack the visual impact of film. As a technology born with the 20th century, film was also among the most plausible vehicles for messages about the modern world. One of the recurring scenarios in Australian films of the 1920s was the set of moral and ethical dilemmas arising from a new range of possibilities in an era of post-war social emancipation, particularly in relation to gender politics.¹⁴ The 'modern woman' as portrayed in Australian film increasingly transgressed into and threatened sites of male power, and she did so to the sound of jazz, from as early as the 1919 film *Why Jessie Learned to Jazz* (Frederick Ward, Australia 1919).¹⁵ An advertisement for the 1926 film *Should a Girl Propose?* (P.J. Ramster, Australia 1926) proclaimed that 'The modern Girl jazes, smokes, indulges in athletes [sic], enters law and politics, and, in short, does most things a man does, and in most things does better'.¹⁶ In the 1920s, jazz was the music which embodied the glamour (in all senses) of urban modernity and the threat it presented to a bush-based *mythos* of Australian identity.

The antipathy was a staple of Australian films throughout the silent era. Charles Chauvel's long and distinguished career in feature film production was launched in 1926 in two films which present mirror images of precisely this tension.

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The heroine of *Greenhide* (Charles Chauvel, Australia 1926) is a young city girl, Margery Paton, brought up indulgently by her father, Sam.¹⁷ She hatches a plot to spend time on her father's distant station, Walloon, to sample the 'elemental' life, and in the meantime we see her conducting herself as a frivolous young flapper, idly strumming a ukulele and eating chocolate, or holding a garden party for her equally frivolous girlfriends. They smoke ostentatiously as Margery boasts of losing money on a horse race, while a jazz band performs in the garden. This footage, which appears to be the earliest surviving cinematic record of an Australian jazz performance, is central to an important character-establishment sequence, far longer than plot explication requires and clearly intended to identify her heedless life style. It shows Margery performing an improvised solo dance directly in front of the band; that is, in the terminology of the day, 'jazzing'. Dancing also features in what little footage remains of Chauvel's *Moth of Moonbi* (Charles Chauvel, Australia 1926), released a few months earlier.

Dell Ferris, a young country girl goes to the city in search of the 'liberty and happiness she had read of in books'. She falls in with a woman who eagerly helps Dell fritter away a substantial inheritance

in a milieu of pointless hedonism summarised in a seduction line from a young man on a yacht: 'Why try to understand the present – life is so short and full of good times – come let us dance'. Only when Dell returns to the country 'where she belonged', does she finally find 'sanctuary'.¹⁸

Although jazz or 'jazzing' (dancing) was clearly a relatively cheap and popular recreation, its association with reprehensible and dislocated irresponsibility is confirmed by its location in both these films, particularly *Greenhide*, of which more substantial footage survives. Margery's highly indulged urban lifestyle is parasitic upon her father's rurally-based wealth, a parable of a larger mythology. The distance between the sites of material production and aimless consumption is both literal and cultural, enacted in the unproductive hedonism of Margery's jazz party. Whatever the actual demographic that embraced jazz, it was not associated in the cinematic imagination with those classes whose value to the nation lay in their honest labour, whether it was the urban proletariat or the rural sector. Some actuality footage shot in about the same year emphasises the disjunction. *Santrey's Midnight Revels* (Australia 1926) consists of footage from a static camera set up inside the foyer of a performance venue

where, presumably, the USA band led by Henry Santrey was performing. Although known as his 'Symphony Orchestra', the ensemble was an all purpose modern dance band, trading on the jazz credentials assumed by visiting USA bands of the time.¹⁹ In the public mind, this was a jazz event. Through the entrance towards which the camera is directed the viewer sees a succession of evidently chauffeur-driven cars or taxis arrive, dislodging attendees in formal wear – dinner suits, bow-ties, and women in extravagantly sumptuous designer outfits. The most notable points to be made in this context about the film are, first, that this 'hour of jazz' was newsworthy enough to be worth filming for exhibition. And second, whoever the attendees were in their off-camera life, the film presents the event as the indulgence of affluent urban social butterflies. At this stage in the history of the conversation between jazz and nation, there is no leakage between the former and bush or urban labour values. At best, jazz belongs to a world of exultant sybaritic frippery.

At worst, it is the music of dissolution and moral infirmity. It was evidently used precisely as such to set up the scenario in the film *Tall Timber* (Dunstan Webb, Australia 1926). The word 'evidently' is used here because no copy of the film appears at this time to have survived, but there is a version of a shooting script held by the NFSA.²⁰ The plot outlined in this script diverges in some details from the summary provided in Pike and Cooper, who refer to the 'wild jazz party' which opens the film as being broken up by a police raid which is not referred to in this script.²¹ While the moral trajectory from urban dissolution to rural redemption remains the same in both accounts, the specific details of the shooting script invite summary and analysis. With its erasures and revisions, it provides insights into the film's conceptual and creative development that would not have been evident in the finished movie. In particular, it discloses the evolving moral schema and the role of music in its articulation. In *Greenhide* a spoiled young urban flapper finds herself

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in the bush milieu. In *Tall Timber* it is a young man who initially loses himself in the temptations of the city, to find redemption in rural labour. The shooting script is a manuscript written in a hard bound ledger. There are crossings out and corrections in different inks, revisions often in green, and although it appears that there are different hands contributing, according to accompanying notes the treatment is by Dunstan Webb, who is also credited as author by Pike and Cooper.²² Something of the evolution of the moral framework is signalled in the opening title. This was originally 'Wild Oats', crossed out and replaced by 'Tall Timber' written in pencil in what could well be a different hand. The shift is of interest here, moving the emphasis from the apparently doomed prodigality of the opening to the redemptive imagery of wood felling labour. The new emphasis is on salvation, and it is achieved through nation-building rural labour.

The 'Foreword Title' sets the scene:

The gorgeous arc light of Metropolitan gaiety attracts more moths than the tallow candle of sober pleasure.

It's [sic] gilded halls of revel; are but palaces of mockery, wherein Bacchus reigns supreme, and rich men's sons scatter the golden grain of currency with prodigal hand and reap the husks of disillusion.²³

The word 'gorgeous' is crossed out, replaced by 'dazzling', which carries a more pathological and aesthetically ambiguous load. It is also more apt to the metaphor, as in Chauvel's *Moth of Moonbi*, of the singed wings of the vulnerable moth blinded by the attraction of the city lights. The image was a staple of this genre, along with the idea of the 'butterfly'. Following this opening title, we are taken *in media res* to

the site of the prodigality it summarises. It is a 'jazz party':

Fade in Interior 'Caberet'
[~~'Jack Wentworth'~~, crossed out, and replaced by:] Maxwell seated at head of table he is half drunk he is smiling at guests.

The explanatory intertext for this brief tableau follows:

The most reckless spendthrift among the city's fastest set: Jack Maxwell was not exactly a black sheep nor yet a white one his good impulses outnumbered the bad. Headwaiters hastened at his nod chorus girls loved him for his self alone.

For the sake of the moral development of the theme, these final two statements are important. They emphasise the potential for good as well as depravity, and the presence in the protagonist of some inherent value as a person. This is about the influence of place and culture on the formation of character.

This urban milieu and its jazz parties are not the preferred location for such development, however, as we see in the next sequence, in which Maxwell appears to enjoy the attentions of a girl next to him while drinking champagne. But in the course of a drunken speech, we begin to understand that his 'divinity' is not an actual woman, rather it is drunken dissolution configured as woman:

Friends, hobohemians and countrywomen, [~~'harken unto me'~~ is crossed out and replaced with:] lend me your ears.

He introduces 'the widow Clicquot' and describes her 'dainty golden head and delicately sloping shoulders. When she kisses your lips dull care flotes [sic] off in amber bubbles of delight. A sweet adler of

wits and burnisher of bald pates. Behold'. At this, we realise that the drunken Maxwell is not admiring a woman at the table, but 'Mme Clicquot': he points at the champagne bottle, from which a girl appears to emerge, and they walk off together. We next see Jack arrive home, where he confronts a burglar, offers him a cigarette and a drink, and gives him money. The burglar leaves by the window, somewhat disconcerted (likewise, it might be said, the reader, as the script makes no further explicit reference to this incident).

Next day Jack arrives late for work at the office of his father, who produces a newspaper. We are given an inset of the paper, and although the script does not indicate what it says, the father's next intertitled comment to his son indicates that some public scandal has compromised the family name:

Last night's disgraceful orgy is the last straw. You are no longer son of mine. Go wallow in the sty among the swine of your own choosing. You have made my name a target for the gibes of the gutter press. I never wish to see your face again.

He hands over a cheque for one hundred pounds, which the son insolently places in the hand of a statue as he leaves the office. The father then addresses a photograph of what is evidently the dead mother: 'Margret I did my best to make a man of the boy, I failed – I failed'. It raises the question: if a father cannot make a man of his son, who or what can?

Jack goes bush and finds a job with a timber mill. Various subplots ensue including flash townie/bush bully encounters, suggestions of some hidden secret, and a meeting with a wholesome country girl, Betty. Given the careful pre-meditation involved in planning the scenario for an expensive film production, it is worth noting in particular several details relating to the way the city/bush opposition is played out, and particularly in terms of music. At one point a bush character plays a banjo and sings:

I wonder who's dining there [?] now,
I wonder who's footing the bill
Some fool I suppose with a ring through
his nose being led like a calf to the swill.

The reference is to the song 'I wonder who's kissing her now', written for the 1909 show *The Prince Of Tonight*. It became a popular song in its own right (perennial enough for its title to resurface in the years of the Nixon administration as 'I wonder where's Kissinger now'). It became a classic modern musical statement about betrayal, loss and absence:

I wonder who's kissing her now,
I wonder who's teaching her now,
Wonder who's looking into her eyes,
Breathing sighs, telling lies;
I wonder who's buying the wine,
For lips that I used to call mine.
Wonder if she ever tells him of me,
I wonder who's kissing her now.

It is not by today's standards a jazz song, but a rather sentimental waltz in the tradition of *After the Ball*.²⁴ The sense of what constituted jazz in the 1920s, however, was broader than would be sanctioned by later purist discriminations, and in fact the slow $\frac{3}{4}$ tempo of this song would have fitted it into a substantial category of songs referred to as 'jazz waltz'.²⁵ In any event, the significant point here is that, in this script, a rural Choric voice sardonically desentimentalises the lyric of a popular song as a mordant commentary on the fatuous gullibility of the people 'there' – in the social whirl of the city. This musical deconstruction of an enfeebled urban sensibility stands in clear contrast with the straightforward robustness of rural life, especially in a reference to a party with a 'real bush welcome', where one of the guests, Agnes, asks Jack, 'Don't you find it rather dull here after Sydney and it's [sic] distractions?' The word 'distraction' is pointed, suggesting as it does a diversion from the main objectives of life.

In due course Desmond, the mill-owner, announces that he will retire, and that he will take Jack into the business: 'It needs new blood and I am losing my grip'. The appointment of Jack as a partner in the business activates various resentments whose deeper origins are disclosed as the plot develops. But rural decency prevails in a way that was conspicuously absent in the city. In the course of a fight, local blackguard Steve is about to kick Jack while the latter is down, but another

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prevents this with an appeal to a 'Fair Go.' The ambience gradually brings out the best in Jack, and when his bush mate Dan asks him if he's getting fed up, 'Jack smiles, looks at Dan and replies "No Dan, it's a man's job. I'm going to stick"'. The change in Jack's disposition is reported by a detective whom the father hired to track his son's movements, only to be astonished when told, 'By sheer hard work and steady application he has worked himself up to a senior partnership'. And, demonstrating a form of Juvenal's *mens sana in corpore sano*, in addition to his managerial skills, Jack also demonstrates labour prowess by winning a log chopping contest.

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are the work of a mysterious sundowner who is seen walking off into the sunset:

Dawn, pearly and luminous, creeps out of the grey like an angel out of the arms of a ghost. Slowly, sadly, the stranger moves along ... Out of nowhere he came, Into nowhere he goes. His work is done.

The final scene is of a double wedding of Jack and Betty and of Dick and Agnes. Redemption is achieved in the values of the bush, in a brotherhood of nation-building labour and the love of an honest country woman. It is acted out in the fellowship of bush parties and articulated musically through a rough bush band and a rough diamond MC. It has been a long journey from the economically parasitic and morally enervated world of alcohol-hazed jazz parties.

The antipathy during this period between jazz and the world of honest, nation-building labour has been so firmly lodged in the understanding of Australia's Jazz Age as to have been retrospectively confirmed in a film made as recently as 2008. *The Tender Hook* (Jonathan Ogilvie, Australia 2008), is a film noir set in a stylised version of Jazz Age Sydney. It follows a young woman's progress to power in a netherworld that links jazz to crooked boxing and mobster criminality. In the opening, an establishment shot of the half finished Harbour Bridge carries over it the text: 'Sydney, The Jazz Age', with shots of Sydney streets at night in out-of-focus black and white, suggestive of the blurred and shadowed activities of an

underworld. At 00:04:15 we are introduced to a band (trumpet, banjo, drums, string bass) with arch-villain Hugo Weaving singing into a microphone, all in a boxing ring. Although the actual music has little or no resemblance to the 'jazz' composition or vocalising of the period, which must be between about September 1929 and September 1930 (judging by state of completion of the Bridge), the framing text and plot-line make it clear that we are to think of this as a jazz band of around 1930.²⁶ When he finishes, Weaving joins friends in the audience who make some comments about problems in the music. The girl claims the drummer, 'missed a few beats'. The singer replies contemptuously, 'It's called syncopation'. The connection between jazz and the seedy world of rigged boxing is confirmed rather implausibly by the suggestion that the boxer who loses the match that follows Weaving's performance suffers from poor footwork that could probably be improved with dancing lessons, presumably of the energetic type associated with jazz. Throughout the film the jazz connections are insistent, though not strictly required by the plot, and therefore all the more self-consciously intended to locate the milieu (the Jazz Age) in association with urban underworld betrayal, violence and murder, alcohol and bootlegging, drugs (taken by the heroine), dubious recreations (boxing), and the argot of prostitution. The set and costume design are very self-consciously modern urban, from slums to modernist domestic architecture. This is the modern Australian city of the 1920s, feral and depraved, permeated by the sound of jazz.

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In cinematic representations, jazz and the ideal of nation are unambiguously at odds over this early period in the history of the music in Australia, and given the broader codings of jazz, this relationship is instructive to any attempt to articulate the evolution of the sense of Australian identity. This is the primary finding of this particular enquiry, and given a larger public discourse of that time, it is not especially surprising, though the stridency of the antipathy is notable. Yet, as will be documented in future publications, from the end of World War Two Australian identity and the bush mythology reached an increasingly congenial accommodation with jazz, and indeed by the end of the 1950s, they will be well on the way towards an active synergy. This discussion concludes with a preliminary account of the beginnings of this transition, and some hypotheses, yet to be explored, as to why and how it occurred. As an early stage in a work-in-progress, this is speculative and a relatively informal tone is appropriate. An apparently unconnected detail in the opening of *The Tender Hook* is suggestive in a number of ways. As an ‘establishment shot’ for both place and period we are given the image of a half-completed Sydney Harbour Bridge. An intensively focussed viewing of Australian feature films of the late 1920s to early 1930s shows this image to be insistent, and entangled with an array of liminalities and ambiguities in the development of the Australian film industry, the idea of Australia, and the location of jazz. This image of an uncompleted Bridge is both an element in, and a trope of, a repertoire of synchronicities which, along with a gradual shift in the representation of jazz, suggests a significant transition in the discourses of nation.

In the course of this research the film called *The Cheaters* (Paulette McDonagh, Australia 1930) was viewed at the suggestion of Graham Shirley, Senior Curator of Moving Image at the NFSA. He had a recollection that the film included some party footage that might have a bearing on this work, and this

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is confirmed by the Pike and Cooper synopsis which mentions ‘a fancy-dress party’ as well as another music sequence.²⁷ *The Cheaters* was one of a number of films that were made on the cusp of the shift from silent to sound film. A crime story in an often highly Expressionist noir style, it was completed as a silent film in 1929, a production from the hitherto successful McDonagh sisters. Timing worked against it. In the words of Shirley and Adams, ‘Produced at the time American talkies were making their initial impact on the Australian market, *The Cheaters* had no chance of repeating the success of its predecessors’.²⁸ Sound technology overtook the film while it was awaiting an exhibitor, and so extra footage was shot and sound-on-disc music was added, partly in the hope that this would make the film more competitive both to the public and as a candidate for the production contest established by the Royal Commission of 1926–27.²⁹ Although these details were originally peripheral to this investigation into the film and its possible jazz content, they become more central in an enquiry into the transitions under examination.

The possibility of some jazz content in a party scene became increasingly mysterious, but in a way that is instructive. The NFSA holds several versions and fragments of *The Cheaters*. The version identified as *The Cheaters: [Reconstruction: NFSA Product]*³⁰ is a reconstruction of the original silent version. *The Cheaters: [Sound Version]*³¹ is a compilation of sound footage sequences. At 00:12:34 to 00:14:45 there is footage of a hotel dining room which is also in the silent version, but here with the background sound of an out-of-shot dance band with a certain pepiness. It does

not appear to be a fancy-dress party. The version identified as *The Cheaters*³² is dated 1930. There are several mysteries. One is that in none of the versions, including those with sound added, is there the fancy dress party referred to by Pike and Cooper. This research was not wasted, however, since a second mystery opened up a line of speculation that has a bearing on the more general subject of this enquiry. It concerns footage of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The film was completed as a silent in 1929, and the extra footage with sound-on-disc was shot in Melbourne in March 1930. By May it was ready for the first Commonwealth Film Competition (in which it was unsuccessful), and had a trade screening in June 1930, followed by a few commercial screenings. Here is the puzzle: although the extra footage was supposedly shot in Melbourne, following an intertitle ‘20 Years of progress’ (covering the incarceration of the film’s villain, Bill Marsh), at 00:10:45 there is a shot of the gap that would later be filled by the Sydney Harbour Bridge, with some construction work apparently about to start (cranes are at both landfall points). At 00:10:54 the completed Bridge is shown, including the hanging deck, which was certainly not completed before September 1930, and probably not until the end of the year.³³ At the very earliest, it at first appears that this footage must have been added after the competition and the trade screenings. However, in an email dated 29 October 2008, Graham Shirley recalled:

Jack Fletcher, the McDonagh’s cameraman, was something of a whiz with in-the-camera optical effects. I’d need to take another look at the scene that you have in mind, but I have a memory (from viewings of

the film) that this was an optical effect that Fletcher achieved for the film in anticipation of the deck being hung etc.

This might also be connected with a continuity problem: somewhat later in the film and the chronology of its plot, at 00:65:00, in the background are visible the two ends of the span barely begun. The NFSA holds a further version of the film – *The Cheaters: [Sound And Silent Version]*³⁴ – which also incorporates added sound footage. The film's opening scene, in which embezzler Bill Marsh pleads unsuccessfully with his boss John Travers not to turn him over to the police, is spoken dialogue, corresponding generally to the intertitles of the silent version; likewise the news of Bill Marsh's wife's death, and the jewellery store swindle. The 'Twenty Years of progress' footage is now simultaneous collage, and this time the jump from the early stages of the Bridge is to the Bridge with the hanging deck still under construction. The stages in the Bridge's construction are discussed further below in connection with *Showgirl's Luck* (Norman Dawn, Australia 1931).

Any disappointment at being unable to find the party footage was more than compensated for by the other lines of speculation which these collection works opened. The anomalies speak at the very least of a period of great upheaval in the film industry, but also in other areas which overlap with the question of nation and the music of modernity. The new footage

in *The Cheaters* reflects more than some tergiversations during the transition to sound. The fact that the filmmakers would take the trouble to film or simulate film of the Bridge as establishment footage is a reminder of its importance in the public imagination. And the medium of film was an excellent vehicle through which to represent the Bridge and what it stood for. Among these was a sense of national pride in the possibilities of modern technology in literally and culturally mobilising the nation, 'bridging' the gap between rural tradition and modern mass culture. Or, to lead to another movie from this transitional period, from the recreational spectacle and sound of a rural tent show to contemporary film – as in *Showgirl's Luck*, generally regarded as Australia's first full talkie.

Although *Showgirl's Luck* was directed by USA cinematographer Norman Dawn, it is from the outset an aggressive advertisement for a modern Australia, but with its roots in rural tradition. It opens with a fluttering Australian flag filling the screen, and the following voice-over:

Hello everybody. I'm broadcasting a little event in the history of our country. The first Australian talkie. Made with Australian capital, Australian actors and recorded on Australian-made recording machinery. Can we make talkies in Australia? We are sure of it. Not even the Depression and an enormous number of technical

difficulties could stop us. Lacking the tremendous resources of money and machinery of our overseas competitors, we have naturally suffered the trials of all pioneers. Last year, over one million pounds went overseas for films. We say, let's keep some of that money at home. In presenting this first effort we do so with the utmost confidence that any defects or shortcomings will receive your kind indulgence. You will find this picture is not perfect but it's a step in the right direction. Your appreciation would enable us to make more immediately and put more Australians to work.

We want you to see the ideals behind this picture: the desire to found a new Australian industry and to keep Australians in employment.

The opening credits which follow include the words 'Australian Talking Pictures LTD.', and 'The first Australian All Talking Picture with a cast of Famous Australian Players'. It is not only the first 'Australian all talking picture', it is a film about the arrival of the talking picture – one of its featured songs is the ironic *We Can't Sleep in the Movies Anymore*.³⁵ The heroine and her rival journey from a rural tent show to participation in the production of a sound movie. A more detailed analysis of the film in relation to the issues under discussion is for another essay. It is instructive, for example, to consider the accents of the actors and the music, both of which are sites of provocative ambiguities.

The fact that the filmmakers would take the trouble to film or simulate film of the [Sydney Harbour] Bridge as establishment footage is a reminder of its importance in the public imagination. And the medium of film was an excellent vehicle through which to represent the Bridge and what it stood for. Among these was a sense of national pride in the possibilities of modern technology in literally and culturally mobilising the nation, 'bridging' the gap between rural tradition and modern mass culture.

In relation to the present discussion, there is a further anomaly concerning the Sydney Harbour Bridge. According to Pike and Cooper the movie was ready for a trade showing in January 1931, and premiered in December 1931,³⁶ but at 00:33:50 there is a shot of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, which was not opened until March 1932. Of course the Bridge was finished before its opening, but not as early as the date of the trade showing in January 1931, fifteen months earlier. Might the Bridge footage have been added later, before the official premiere? That would mean the Bridge had to have *appeared* to be finished before December 1931. The image of the Bridge in the background of the dialogue in *Showgirl's Luck* corresponds to its appearance by September 1931, having come to that point of completion sometime after September 1930.³⁷

The main visual change is the hanging of the deck over that year. A photograph from December 1930 shows the decking still incomplete.³⁸ The trade showing of *Showgirl's Luck* was in January 1931, according to Pike and Cooper. If the Bridge was completed in the footage of the trade exhibition print, it would require that the decking had been finished within two months, but probably less. This is possible (although the whole decking required nine months).³⁹ But it is a little unlikely that the interval between the two images was the maximum possible of two months. The Bridge could have reached that stage by the time of the trade showing, but it is unlikely. In that case, the footage was added between the trade showing and the premiere of the film in early December 1931. On the basis of this, the more likely assumption, it raises the question of what, if any, dialogue did the Bridge footage replace. The information provided in the scene incorporating the Bridge may be regarded as superfluous, since it tells the viewers what they have already worked out, that an imposter has displaced the heroine from her film opportunity, and that the latter needs press photographs to prove her identity. The point of these eye-glazing and pedantically labyrinthine speculations

is a simple one: by some extraordinary and painstaking post-production labour, the image of the apparently completed Bridge was added to the film, and without contributing any essential plot information. The scene involved, with the Bridge so conveniently framed, suggests to us the enormous imaginative power of the new Sydney Harbour Bridge as a cultural accessory to the plotline about major transitions in mass culture which were generating changes in the discourse of nation.

What the Bridge brought to that discourse was the image of technology and secondary industry as a path to the future.

So too in one more film that is to be considered here. *The Squatter's Daughter* (Ken G. Hall, Australia 1933) was Hall's second feature film, adapted very loosely from a play which had also been filmed in 1910. It premiered at Sydney's Civic Theatre to inaugurate an all-Australian policy, and, appropriately, it is pervaded by a nation-building agenda that is announced at the opening with the following rolling text over a bombastic brass dominated extended fanfare:

THE PRIME MINISTER.

I believe that Cinesound, in producing "The Squatter's Daughter," has created a picture that will redound to the credit of Australia wherever it is shown. The picture breathes the spirit of the country's great open spaces and the romance, adventure and opportunity in the lives of those who in the past pioneered, and are today building up our great primary industries.

Australia, scenically, is unparalleled – it has the breadth and atmosphere of health, optimism and progress – and I sincerely hope that viewing this picture will create in the minds of its audiences added interest in the Commonwealth and the great future that undoubtedly lies before her.

Joe Lyons

This kind of chauvinist message is reminiscent of the opening of *Showgirl's Luck*, and may reflect (and attempt to deflect) the pain of the Great Depression, to restore confidence simultaneously in tradition and modernity, past and future, and the state of Australian cinema. The plot (which in broad outline would later serve Baz Luhrmann in *Australia* (Baz Luhrmann, Australia 2008)), centres on young Joan Enderby who manages her own sheep station in rivalry with Clive Sherrington the manager of another station, Waratah, on behalf of his supposed father who, as the film opens, is returning from England where he had sought medical treatment for encroaching blindness – treatment which though initially promising, turns out to have failed as the film proceeds. Joan receives assistance from a stranger, Wayne Wridgeway, and following a series of plot developments culminating in an extraordinary bushfire sequence, it transpires that he is the true son of Sherrington Senior, while Clive's father was a station hand. The marriage of Joan to Wayne thus unites the two stations.

There is much else that is brought together harmoniously. At 00:23:12, Sherrington Senior and his friend Cartwright, from London, are on board ship as it comes through the Heads:

Cartwright: There's a thrill in seeing it all again eh Sherrington?

Sherrington: When I left here 2 years ago Cartwright, I never thought I should see that bridge finished. I never thought I'd see Waratah again. My eyes were dying in their sockets.

Cartwright: It's all magnificent.

Sherrington: Yes, but aren't those magnificent.

Cartwright: Tramp Ships?

Sherrington: No, treasure ships, carrying our wool to the world. Wool. The spirit of Australia's in it.

Sherrington Senior's eyesight survives long enough for him to link the symbolism of the new Bridge with a rural tradition,

and international modernity with the bush. On arriving at Waratah, the now-blind Sherrington Senior is outraged to discover that cross-bred sheep have been brought onto the station, and distinguishes 'pure Merino' by touch – a parenthetical discourse about purity of breeding and domestic quarantine which reflects a continuing tension between two stages of Australia's economic development.

There follows a bush dance at Waratah, which includes a number of musical acts. At 00:57:00 to 00:57:31, a strongly jazz-inflected modern dance band plays for dancing guests. At 00:59:17 to 00:60:10 Sherrington's 'abo boundary riders' perform a gumleaf item. They are dressed in traditional dress and ochre paint, but the song is a popular item of the period. Again, we have here a negotiation between two versions of 'Australia'. More footage of the peppy dance band follows in the background of the dancers. This is a very modern version of bush-life, with a swimming pool, good food, stylish costuming, an up-to-the-minute dance band, and an independent minded young woman taking charge of her own fortunes in a masculinist environment. From 00:61:55 while the band continues to be heard in the background, there is dialogue in which Joan reveals that she has sold 3,000 sheep and plans to drive them herself, 'and feel what it is to be free'. This is followed by a speech by Sherrington Senior to Cartwright about the spirit of Australia, still backed by the music of the band throughout:

That's how we breed 'em in the bush ...
The spirit grows to match those skies ...
I've laid out there, a stone's throw from
the stars, searching behind the veil to
find out what makes this country. It isn't
the land. That fought like the devil
before it yielded. Not brute strength of
men and women battling with nature.
But spirit. Why man, in a hundred years
it built a nation.

This is literally nation-building rhetoric, and its musical accompaniment is not jazz, but it's not a bush band either.

This is a very modern version of bush-life, with a swimming pool, good food, stylish costuming, an up-to-the-minute dance band, and an independent minded young woman taking charge of her own fortunes in a masculinist environment.

It's a modern dance orchestra that the audience has heard playing jazz as a sign of the voguishness of this version of the bush. This is the bush tradition that is modernising itself and taking on the trappings of contemporary sophistication, 'bridging' rural and urban.

The new Sydney Harbour Bridge was not simply a massive technological object. The chronicled process of its construction was a narrative about transition. It was a landscape-dominating proclamation of the power of modern technology to alleviate unemployment, an industrial and urban-based alternative or supplement to primary industry. It 'bridged' the country's highest density commercial and industrial urban centre with its more rural northern outskirts. It was a bridge to modernity, to technology, and its image was circulated through the most powerful medium of 20th century mass culture: film, which was 'bridging' sound and vision at exactly the same time. The Bridge, as both national object and national trope, as transformer of infrastructure as well as imagination, has great explanatory potential in the attempt to trace the evolution of 'nation', the reconciliation between tradition and modernity, between the bush and jazz. Its cinematic representations invite further research.

This particular discussion takes the arrival of the talkies as its cut-off point. Their arrival and impact coincide with a range of other transitions in material culture and the national consciousness, including some already touched on such as the nadir of the Great Depression and

the soaring construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. In cinema narratives at least, one gains some sense that the idea of economic renewal through investment in contemporary technology and its urban infrastructure was beginning to overtake the dominance of the rural myth, not to displace it, but to sit comfortably alongside that tradition. The fascination exercised by the new Bridge in these narratives suggests that it was both a literal and metaphorical manifestation of this *rapprochement* between two mythic spaces. The coming of sound to film is also an appropriate transitional point to pause in a discussion of jazz and nation. A simple and as yet undeveloped hypothesis illustrates possible connections.

That hypothesis begins with the fact that, in its earliest Australian phase, jazz was regarded as a form of dancing. It appears that there is no surviving film of the 1920s in which that connection is not explicit. Gradually that connection weakens, and by the time Rolf de Heer made the jazz film *Dingo* (Rolf de Heer, Australia 1991) with Miles Davis – largely in an outback setting, be it noted – there is no link. There are many reasons for this shift, but one which has not been explored is the coming of sound to cinema. Hitherto the portrayal of jazz in silent film required extravagant visual effects, like prancing musicians and dancers. The advent of the soundtrack enabled film to present music directly, and this almost certainly contributed to the shift in the way jazz is conceptualised, from visuality to sonority, a shift also accelerated by the sudden arrival of electrical amplification in live

jazz performance.⁴⁰ This in turn might well be one of the factors that nudged jazz into a more congenial alignment with national identity: apart from the fact that vernacular dance does not carry the same cultural capital as instrumental skill (the former appears to be abandoned corporeality, the latter is disciplined and more cerebral), dance is also more feminised – the stereotypical image of the irresponsible ‘Jazz Age’ is the dancing flapper.

Originally conceived as separate from and in opposition to the rural *topos*, does jazz become one end of a ‘bridge’ between the city and the country that holds the promise of self-generated national economic renewal? Further research into the history of this relationship will add nuance to the model by, for example, a finer articulation of the importance of various jazz styles in shaping the relationship, particularly with reference to how modalism and the avant-garde were situated in the narrative of ‘Australia’ in the postwar era. It is also necessary to recognise the internal heterogeneity of responses to jazz and tropes of nation in different regions and cities. Other factors appear to include disillusionment with the Anglo-American axis of economic and

political influence during the 1930s, and the arrival of USA service personnel from 1941 was ambiguous, often generating resentment at patronising attitudes. This appears to have been duplicated in the jazz community whose members often felt ‘we could do it as just as well’. A nationalist spirit enters Australian jazz during World War Two becoming more aware of its own robustness, as evidenced particularly in the burgeoning revivalist or traditional jazz movement. Somewhere between the early 1930s and the end of the war there is a transition from antipathy to symbiosis in the relationship between jazz and established models of Australian identity. The jazz enthusiast crossed a line from being at best an effete champagne debauchee, to at worst a masculine beer larrikin, and with a greater affinity for the bush mythology. By the late 20th century, jazz had become so internalised as one of the most pervasive musics of Australian identity, that it has largely gone un-noted as such. The contrast with the 1920s is radical, and further enquiry will be instructive regarding the evolving Australian self-consciousness and its place in a global context throughout the 20th century.

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Originally conceived as separate from and in opposition to the rural *topos*, does jazz become one end of a ‘bridge’ between the city and the country that holds the promise of self-generated national economic renewal?

- 1 The deployment of such devices as the passive voice and the avoidance of first person pronouns for purposes of authorial effacement is in accordance with current editorial protocols.
- 2 Cited in Bruce Johnson, *The Inaudible Music: Jazz, Gender and Australian Modernity*, Currency, Sydney, 2000, p. 147.
- 3 See for example Johnson, *The Inaudible Music*, pp. 141–163.
- 4 The rationale of this periodisation is argued in Bruce Johnson, *The Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1987, pp. 3–13.
- 5 Cited Johnson, *Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz*, p. 4.
- 6 Lyn McDonald, *They Called It Passchendaele*, Penguin Books, London, 1993 (first published 1978), p. 166; Johnson, *The Inaudible Music*, p. 20.
- 7 Johnson, *Oxford Companion to Australian Jazz*, pp. 3–4, 64–65.
- 8 Johnson, *The Inaudible Music*, pp. 59–76.
- 9 The first reference to ‘Wowser’ in Australia is dated by Wilkes at 1899 (G.A. Wilkes, *Stunned Mullets & Two-pot Screemers: A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms*, Fifth Edition, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 406). Its emergence at this time may be seen as reflecting growing tension between a dour conservatism (the prefix ‘Mc’ in this case is significant) and the increasingly transgressive profile of modern recreations. Apart from any jazz content, the popularity of film was ominously noted in *The Bulletin* as early as 1909 as ‘a habit, not to say a vice ... there are people going around who would sooner miss 2 meals a week than their regular ‘picture night’ (cited by Graham Shirley and Brian Adams, *Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years*, Revised Edition, Currency Press, Sydney, 1989, p. 23). McWowses’ defiance of ‘the congregation’ is also notable, given that by that year, 1919, cinema attendance had outstripped church attendance in Australia (see further Johnson, *The Inaudible Music*, p. 68).
- 10 Shirley and Adams, *Australian Cinema*, p. 96. Shirley and Adams provide an extended account of the threat posed by the US domination of the film industry, see particularly Chapter 4.
- 11 See for example Geoffrey Blainey, *Black Kettle and Full Moon: Daily Life in a Vanished Australia*, Viking/Penguin, Camberwell Victoria, 2003, p.336.
- 12 Shirley and Adams, *Australian Cinema*, p.25.
- 13 See further Johnson, *The Inaudible Music*, pp. 64–66.
- 14 See further Johnson, *The Inaudible Music*, p. 69.
- 15 Andrew Pike and Ross Cooper, *Australian Film 1900–1977*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1980, p. 118.
- 16 Pike and Cooper, *Australian Film*, p. 170.
- 17 The absence of a mother represents a deficiency in the model of the contemporary family which itself is worth noting. The ‘deficient’ motherless family is surprisingly common in this category of films, as also in the case of *Tall Timber*, discussed below. The urban melodrama *The Cheaters* from 1930 is another apparently motherless child scenario; in fact in this film a central character, Paula, manages to be the motherless ‘daughter’ of two fathers: the one she thought she was, and of the real father she discovers at the end. The same elements are present in *The Squatter’s Daughter*, of which more below. The pattern invites comparison with the tradition in Australian folklore of the ‘lost child’.
- 18 On the function of jazz and dance in both films, see further Johnson, *The Inaudible Music*, pp. 69–76.
- 19 This tends to be confirmed by its inclusion in listings of visiting acts in Bisset’s history of Australian jazz (Andrew Bisset, *Black Roots, White Flowers: A History of Jazz in Australia*, Revised Edition, ABC Books, Sydney, 1987, pp. 23, 28).
- 20 NFSa Collection, 561128: [*Tall Timber: Handwritten Shooting Script with Inter-Title Text and Annotations*].
- 21 Pike and Cooper, *Australian Film*, p. 174.
- 22 Pike and Cooper, *Australian Film*, p. 174.
- 23 Because the work is in manuscript which is not always completely legible, the detail is sometimes a matter of conjecture. In order not to break the flow, however, the reader is asked to trust this transcription and the pedantic [sic] in what follows will be omitted unless it appears to be particularly needful.
- 24 Charles K. Harris, *After The Ball*, 1891.
- 25 In the author’s own early activity as a musician in the 1960s this was referred to in Adelaide as a ‘modern waltz’, a suggestive reminder that in speaking of ‘Australian’ culture, internal heterogeneities should be borne in mind.
- 26 The music is composed and performed by highly regarded Sydney contemporary jazz musicians; the composer is Chris Abrahams of The Necks, and the performers are Jonathan Zwartz, Tony Buck, Hamish Stuart, Carl Dewhurst, Todd Hardy and Phil Slater.
- 27 Pike and Cooper, *Australian Film*, p. 202.
- 28 Shirley and Adams, *Australian Cinema*, p. 85.
- 29 Shirley and Adams, *Australian Cinema*, p. 85; see also Pike and Cooper *Australian Film*, pp. 201–2.
- 30 NFSa Collection, 322990: *The Cheaters: [Reconstruction: NFSa Product]*.
- 31 NFSa Collection, 40768: *The Cheaters: [Sound Version]*.
- 32 NFSa Collection, 7361: *The Cheaters*.
- 33 The source for the following information on the construction of the Bridge is Peter Spearitt, *The Sydney Harbour Bridge: A Life*, UNSW Press, Sydney, updated edition of 2007; thanks to Graham Shirley for this reference.
- 34 NFSa Collection, 56033: *The Cheaters: [Sound And Silent Version]*.
- 35 Jones and Hare, *We Can’t Sleep in the Movies Anymore*, c.1929.
- 36 Pike and Cooper, *Australian Film*, p. 207.
- 37 Spearitt, *The Sydney Harbour Bridge*, p. 57.
- 38 Spearitt, *The Sydney Harbour Bridge*, p. 69.
- 39 Spearitt, *The Sydney Harbour Bridge*, p. 69.
- 40 This is traced in Johnson, *The Inaudible Music*, pp. 81–105.

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