‘WE CAN’T SLEEP IN THE MOVIES ANY MORE’

Talkies and the Legitimization of Australian Jazz

Bruce Johnson

Abstract

My interest in this essay is not so much in the way improvised music might be deployed in film, as in the way it has been represented. More specifically, I wish to investigate a transformation in the cinematic representation of the most durable and influential improvised music of the twentieth century: jazz. It is the transformation of jazz from being a despised foreigner to becoming a respected citizen, and this transformation took place in virtually every international diasporic destination. This enquiry began with the question: how and why did jazz, a music identified so closely with both ‘primitive’ blackness, and with US modernity, become assimilated to national identities in most of its diasporic destinations by the late twentieth century? In almost all those destinations jazz was initially regarded as deeply disruptive to the traditions on which local identity was built, yet within decades became fully at home in these diasporic ‘marginal’ sites. How was this radical reversal achieved?

Keywords

Jazz, improvisation, diaspora, The Sydney Harbour Bridge

When jazz first arrived in Australia towards the end of the First World War, it carried messages that were for many deeply offensive to the idea of ‘Australia’. These included its African or ‘negroid’ connections. The statement in the July 1918 issue of Australian Variety and Show World that jazz is “a Negro expression for noise, peculiar to music” (cited Johnson, 1987: 4) establishes jazz as an enemy to civilisation and refinement. For what appears to have been the world’s first jazz festival, the Jazz Week held at the Globe Theatre in Sydney in 1919, the publicity reflected a belief that jazz signalled the decline of western civilisation: Does the Jazz Lead to Destruction? The answer was clearly and defiantly yes (an early example of the marketing of transgressive alternativity). As in most diasporic sites, jazz was a bearer of a modernity that

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threatened local traditions and received values. Decadent and transgressive, its association with extravagant modern dance and the young female flapper carried the suggestion of degraded effeminisation. This had particular implications in a country that was so strongly masculinised. The extraordinary imbalance between the numbers of men compared to women from the beginning of European settlement (Blainey, 2003: 336) strengthened the masculinisation that is characteristic of frontier societies. National character was defined through rural narratives of outdoor labour through which a man realised his spirit and resourcefulness. The city on the other hand softened and feminised, exposing one to the depraved imported contamination of ‘jazz parties’. This dichotomy provided a structuring device in narratives of nation, particularly early film: the young country woman lured like a moth to the city or the young man throwing away his talents as a prodigal urban wastrel. Both risked destruction at jazz parties, but were then saved by a return to the solid values of the bush tradition that underpinned all that was heroic in national identity. Australia’s early prolific feature film output thus became a medium for the negotiation between jazz and national identity, the latter most frequently articulated through the values of the bush.

Film was a particularly effective forum for constructing and circulating these narratives. As a technology born with the twentieth century, film was among the most effective vehicles for messages about the modern world. For Australians it was from its beginnings one of the most powerful ways through which the collective consciousness was internationalised. In the earliest period there was a far greater range of foreign films exhibited than later became the norm as the US achieved dominance (Collins, 1987:46). Reviewing a film of the streets of Budapest in 1909, The Bulletin commented that it enabled people to attend “feeling quite suburban, and come away feeling wholly cosmopolitan” (cited Collins, 1987:42). Yet at the same time, the growing popularity of American westerns was, it was noted by the British vice-consul partly because the settings reminded Australians of their own “bush life” (Collins, 1987:46). It is easy to forget how close historically Australians were to the frontier experience in the early years of cinema. In 1923 an eighty-nine year old woman from rural Queensland reported that she made a special point of going to see the US film The Covered Wagon because it reminded her of “her pioneering days” (Collins, 1987:65). In the peak year of Australian film production, 1911, “the favourite subject was bushranging” (Collins, 1986:51).

The popularity of cinema as an influence on the Australian imaginary has been amply documented. In 1921, entertainment receipts from movie attendances outnumbered by more than four times those for both theatre and horseracing combined (Collins, 1987:3), and during the 1920s in a population of just over six million, there were over some two and a quarter million attendances each week (Collins, 1987:17); “on a per capita basis, Australians were once the keenest filmgoers in the world” (Collins, 1987:4). And as Pike and Cooper’s overview demonstrates, from the pre-WW1 period through the 1920s, they had an abundance of home grown product that was still not matched by the late 1970s (Pike and Cooper, 1998). While the movie-going demographic embraced all classes (Collins, 1987:19), it was women who made up the great majority. With the weakening of Victorian constrictions, and new infrastructures ranging from public transport to street lighting, with the increase of women in the work force – giving them both a greater measure of economic independence and assured hours of leisure – women enjoyed increasing mobility in every sense. A witness in the 1912 Piddington enquiry
into female factory labour declared that “The first thing a girl does on leaving a factory is to clear home, swallow a cup of tea and go out to a picture show” (cited Collins, 1987:24). According to the royal commission into film of 1927, women constituted seventy per cent of Australian cinema audiences, further encouraged by special matinees with crèche facilities, pioneered in 1910 by the exhibitor J. D. Williams who advertised his theatre as a “ladies’ rendezvous” (Collins, 1987:23). It reflects the association between young women and progressive modernity that the women’s toilets in the dress circle of a number of opulent cinemas were labelled ‘Futurists’ (Collins, 1987:116). It is incidentally also significant that the equivalent in the stalls were marked ‘Butterflies’ — there are instructive extrapolations to be drawn about both class and gender politics in the cinema, that the stalls woman was seen through this common trope of the flighty modern city girl (as celebrated for example in Chauvel’s film Moth of Moombi (Charles Chauvel, 1926) the companion film to his Greenhide (Charles Chauvel, 1926) discussed below).

Movie publicity was also heavily targeted at women, both through explicit advertising and in collateral channels as in movie journals, from Australasian Moving Picture (1913) to Women’s Weekly, launched in 1933 and including regular film fare that covered life style from clothing to cooking (Collins, 1987: 172, 175).

At the movies the young female could explore the full range of possibilities and choices that were increasingly opening up to the New Woman. One of the common scenarios in Australian films of the 1920s was the set of moral and ethical dilemmas arising from a new range of life-style possibilities during post-war social emancipation, particularly in relation to gender politics (see further Johnson, 2000:69). 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. An advertisement for the 1926 film Should a Girl Propose? informed the reader that, “The modern Girl jazzes, smokes, indulges in athletes [sic], enters law and politics, and, in short, does most things a man does, and in most things does better” (Pike and Cooper, 1998:131). The reference to “jazzes” reminds us that this was the music of modernity and transgression — and also that it was a verb that applied to what was in Australia a highly gendered activity, dancing. In the 1920s, jazz was the music that embodied the dangerous glamour of urban modernity and the threat it presented to masculine bush-based myths of Australian identity.

Thus it functioned in the 1926 film Greenhide, which is traversed by all the lines of force I have been sketching. The heroine of the film is a young city girl, Margery Paton, described in a press synopsis as “the only child of old Sam — her mother died when she was a child. She, of course, is heiress to all the Paton stations. Margery is almost of an ultra modern type, and is just passing through the chocolate cream and ‘sheik’ stage”\(^2\). The reference to “sheik” is in itself an intertextual testimony to the extent to which cinema infiltrated social discourse. It derived ultimately from the publication in 1919 of the ‘lust in the dust’ novel The Sheik by English writer Edith Maude Hull. But it was the 1921 film starring the ill-fated Rudolph Valentino that gave the word currency as an evocation of sexual experience. The film was massively influential on the imagination of young women, and nowhere more so than in

\(^2\) The ‘Music and Drama’ section of Figaro, incorporating Punch, Flashes and Bohemian (Brisbane), Saturday 29 November 1926. This is held by NFSA as part of its press file on the film. Other quotes regarding Greenhide are from the same file, though not all are fully sourced.
Australia, where its six-month run at The Globe in Sydney was a world record (Collins, 1987:56). Inspired by this image, Margery hatches a plot to spend time at Walloon, her father’s distant cattle station, to sample the “elemental” life, and hoping to be “sheiked by a bushranger” as one inter-title has it. The image of the bush in this film must be noted in relation to the transformations I chart in the course of this essay. Apart from the imagery in what survives of the film as held by NFSA (National Film and Sound Archive), the publicity provided graphic foretastes. From Figaro again: “It was a bachelor station, and tough; where anything not known to recognised law could happen, and at any time”. And the embodiment of this rugged spirit was the station manager, Gavin, aka Greenhide for his toughness, “the embodiment of all that the real West stood for — strength, wholesomeness and positive magnetism”. In another advertisement for the movie, we read:

Primitive man he was — but big and handsome and — oh, she’d tamed a dozen men before! .... But Margery Paton found more difficulty in taming Greenhide than he found in breaking a lashing, kicking devil-horse to his iron will!

In the meantime we see her conducting herself as a frivolous young flapper, idly strumming a ukulele, eating chocolate, or holding a garden party for her equally frivolous girlfriends at which she performs a lengthy improvised solo dance in front of the jazz band that is entertaining them. As ‘the jazz’ was at that time understood to be a dance (like ‘the tango’, ‘the waltz’), this means that in effect this young woman was acting out her liberated progressiveness by performing a jazz solo (see further Johnson, 2000:69–76). Dancing also features in what little footage remains of Chauvel’s companion film Moth of Moonbi, 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 into a social circle of pointless and self-indulgent decadence, summarized 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” (see further Johnson, 2000:69–76). Similar antitheses between decadent jazz-drenched urban modernity and the solid decency of the bush are to be found in other films of the period, including Tall Timber which, although never completed, still exists as a rough shooting script in NFSA (see further Johnson, 2009).

Although jazz or ‘jazzing’ (dancing) was clearly a relatively cheap and popular recreation, its association with decadent irresponsibility is confirmed by its location in these films. Margery’s highly indulged urban lifestyle is parasitic upon her father’s rurally based wealth, a parable of a larger mythology: that is the cities as parasitically living off rural labour. The distance between the sites of material production and aimless consumption is both literal and cultural, enacted in the unproductive self-indulgence of Margery’s jazz party, while her father is seen working in the garden. At this stage in the cinematic imagination there is no exchange between jazz and the nation-building labour of the bush. At best, jazz belongs to a world of unproductive and over-indulgent consumption. At worst, it is the music of moral degradation, from which it was necessary to rescue its devotees and restore them to decent

3 The shooting script was rather bolder, adding the words ‘or two’, which were also retained in some of the press publicity as held by NFSA.
Australian values. In cinematic representations, jazz and the ideal of nation are unambiguously opposed over this early period in the history of the music in Australia, and given the broader cultural significance of jazz, this relationship is instructive to any attempt to study the evolution of the sense of Australian identity.

Yet from the end of the Second World War Australian identity and the bush mythology increasingly converged with jazz, and indeed by the end of the 1950s, they would be well on the way towards an active synergy. I want to turn to a preliminary account of the beginnings of this transition, and some hypotheses as to why and how it occurred. Jazz was the music of a modernity originally seen as decadent, especially in opposition to the bush tradition and the agricultural sector that had sustained both our economy and our national mythology. The rehabilitation of jazz was enabled by two significant socio-cultural shifts. From the onset of the Great Depression in October 1929, income from wool and wheat exports collapsed. With public expenditure slashed, Australia’s unemployment rate rose until it became the world’s second highest after Germany. Australia had relied on the flow of agricultural exports and this now let them down. This contributed to several shifts in orientation. First, the growing recognition that Australia’s future lay in the highly technologised secondary industry sector and public works investment. Second, a sense that there therefore needed to be some rapprochement between the city and the bush. One of the major tropes of this legitimation of modernisation within the discourses of nation was to be found in the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The Bridge represented and enabled a new sense of national cohesion, as the Mayor of North Sydney declared at the turning of the first sod on 28 July 1923:

*The direct route to Queensland, the northern towns and districts of New South Wales will be via the bridge, our northern shores will be requisitioned for shipping, then our manufacturers and other commercial pursuits will follow, to say nothing of the opening up of large areas of residential lands*’ (cited in Lalor, 2006:89)

As construction proceeded into the parlous times of the Great Depression, the importance of the Bridge in alleviating unemployment led to its being referred to as the Iron Lung (Lalor, 2006:321). The Bridge connected the city with the northern regions up to Queensland, enabled the development of commerce and manufacturing, and embodied a shift towards a unified modern economy. A nine or ten year old boy from a remote farm decided to ride his horse hundreds of kilometres to Sydney for the opening. In his highly publicised pilgrimage, two extreme strands in the Australian identity converged: the tradition of the enterprising bush pioneer, and the growing importance of industrial modernity; primary and secondary industry, the rural and the urban — and in a young boy who represented the future.

At the same time the Bridge brought to a head tensions between conservative and radical forces that shook Australia in the early years of the Depression. Given the parlous times, the New South Wales political leader, Jack Lang, refused to honour massive debts to the UK, and to forestall any attempt by the Commonwealth to seize the money, physically emptied the banks and hid the money a week before the opening of the Bridge. This placed him not only
at odds with the nation’s Prime Minister, but also with the far right fascist organisation known as the New Guard, who therefore planned to kidnap Lang and mount an armed insurrection. A member of the New Guard, Francis de Groot, declared that what was at issue was the Australian “way of life”, and the opening of the Bridge became the occasion at which these conflicts crystallised. Lang planned to open the Bridge himself, rather than His Royal Majesty’s representative, the Governor General (“It’s our show, not his”, declared Lang — cited Lalor, 2006:314 — opening up issues of nationalism versus imperialism). On the day De Groot, in military uniform, pre-empted Lang by galloping on horseback (a telling symbol itself) to cut the opening ribbon with a sabre. There was much more at stake here than the opening of a new piece of public infrastructure. *The Sunday Times* in London announced that Australia had come of age:

> **Standing where the first settlers erected their huts in 1788, it is both a superb achievement and symbol of another superb achievement – the making of a nation.** (cited in Lalor, 2006:334)

The importance of the Bridge in the national imaginary is confirmed by an intensive viewing of Australian feature films of the late 1920s to early 1930s, where its insistent image is entangled with other forces in the development of the Australian film industry, the idea of Australia, and the location of jazz. This image of a bridge under development is, along with a shift in the representation of jazz, a metaphor of a significant transition in the discourses of nation. *The Cheaters* was one of a number of films made during the shift from silent to sound film. The surviving versions reflect the intensity of this transitional moment in Australian cultural history. It was completed as a silent in 1929, and extra footage with sound-on-disc was shot in March 1930. Its first trade screening was in June 1930. Yet although the extra footage was supposedly shot in Melbourne, following an inter-title “20 Years of progress” 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, followed by a shot of the Bridge nearing completion. Yet the Bridge did not reach that stage of completion until at least three to six months after the first trade screenings in June 1930. That means that the makers added this footage after the trade screenings (see further Johnson, 2009). To take so much post-production trouble to introduce this image of ‘progress’ proclaims the way Australia was re-imagining itself as an industrialised, modernised urban society.

Two other films in which the new bridge was given striking prominence were *Showgirl’s Luck* (Norman Dawn, 1931) and *The Squatter’s Daughter* (Ken Hall, 1933) In the former the image of the bridge was smuggled in at the post-production stage, while in the latter the camera lingers on it as a component in a potential new era of nation-building prosperity. In both cases, although prominent, it was entirely surplus to the basic requirements of the plot (see further Johnson, 2009). In the present context it is highly suggestive that these two films also draw together three elements that structure *Greenhide*: the independent New Woman, jazz and the encounter between tradition and modernity. But they do so in a way that manifests a very different valency. Along with the medium of cinema itself, the New Woman and jazz embodied urban modernity in terms of technology, gender and music. As such, up to the end of the 1920s, they represented a convergent threat to all that was embodied in traditional values, especially as symbolised by the bush. But then came the Great Depression, which happened to coincide with the
transition to talkies and with the massive capital investment in the Harbour Bridge. It is conventionally believed that the Depression chastened the ‘roaring twenties’, and to an extent that is in fact so – the parlous and in many ways more austere times, saw the decline of the ‘jazz age’, in the sense it had been understood in the previous decade. But at the same time, modernisation began to appear as the potential saviour of the country. The old mythic centres were challenged: the rural economy and its heroes (above all, the labouring male) had not in themselves proven to be adequate to sustain the economy. Some kind of reconciliation with modernity was needed.

But there were also important changes going on in the embodiments of modernity itself. The fecklessness of the independent New Woman gave way to a more responsible image, especially as she became increasingly the centre of the family, even if only psychologically and logistically, in an era of massive male unemployment and the absent husband trekking for work. Technology, secondary industry and urban infrastructure, especially as represented by the Sydney Harbour Bridge, became the potential economic salvation of the country. And the music of modernity – jazz – achieved a greater gravitas. One of the reasons was that its more vaudevillian excesses and its emotional shallowness were being dissipated by increased exposure to the source material through recordings and films. Until the early 1930s, most of what was available as ‘jazz’ in Australia was very distant from the ‘classic’ corpus that had been produced by King Oliver, Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong through the 1920s. It was rhythmically and harmonically limited and its emotional range generally confined to good time ‘pep’ or novelty items (see further Johnson, 1987:3–13). The ‘classic’ body of work was only becoming available in Australia from the 1930s as well as by being mediated via the increasingly sophisticated and urbane popular music corpus, which would incorporate jazz effects (syncopation, blues scales, timbral ambiguities and modernist lyrics) to new compositions by such composers as Gershwin and Porter, whose music was also being heard on sound film. There was, however, a more indirect but equally powerful connection between the legitimisation of jazz and the coming of sound to cinema, and I shall now turn to this.

Whatever its level of perceived artistic merit, jazz and improvisational music-making had always been associated to a greater or lesser extent with the cinema. At the most obvious level, in smaller cinemas where the film was accompanied only by a solo pianist, much of the music was improvisational in the sense that the performer (and, it is worth noting, it would most likely be a woman), was often responding *ad hoc* to the images on the screen, with what might be called unplanned musical collage or pastiche (see Whiteoak, 1999:14, 66). But jazz itself was also an explicit element in the music for silent movies. In the synopsis notes for *Greenhide*, Chauvel suggested that the song ‘That Certain Party’ be played by the pianist over the garden party scene in which Margery dances to the jazz band, a song that had been recorded only two months earlier by the visiting US hot dance band the Royal Palais Californians which was billed as the latest thing in jazz (see further Johnson 2000:72). But apart from this special purpose number, jazz was evidently a ubiquitous component in silent film accompaniment. The movies themselves were described as the vehicle of the “jazz culture of the U.S.A” (Collins, 1987:181), and cinema orchestra leaders took pride in the quality of the jazz they presented, declaring that it “refuted the claim that ‘only America musicians can play jazz’”(Collins, 1987:117). They recognised the music's
popularity with audiences, even if some orchestra leaders felt it necessary for the sake of their dignity to play their jazz ‘straight’ (Collins, 1987:93). But cinema itself gradually gained prestige for a number of reasons. These included its contribution to the national spirit and economy, ‘trying to do something in Australia for the benefit of all Australians’ (cited Collins, 1987:118), as well as the development from the late 1920s of the more opulent picture palaces which provided an atmosphere of “culture and artistic appreciation” (cited Collins, 1987:117). But one of the most significant forces in the cultural legitimation of the cinema was the advent of talkies, which ultimately converted many previously hostile people to the cinema. Sound made film a genuine rival for the theatre and concert hall, and in so doing, gave movies a new prestige. Almost overnight, editorialists in previously snooty papers began to speak of the fine arts “among which the moving pictures must now be included” (cited Collins, 1987:33).

I wish to argue that this technological development had the same effect on the jazz which was so much a part of the ambience of modernity generated by film. The movie in which this transitional moment was most strikingly dramatised was Australia’s first full-length talkie, Showgirl’s Luck, released in 1931. The film commenced shooting in April 1930, and finished on 1 September of the same year (Dawn). Showgirl’s Luck is from the outset an aggressive advertisement for a modern Australia, but with its roots in rural tradition. Even though it was directed by an American, Norman Dawn, and starred an Irish actress, Susan Denis, who had reportedly already made four films in Hollywood, a press advertisement proclaims that it stars “Australia’s favourites” and continues, “They didn’t think it could be done! But Australian grit and resourcefulness won over tremendous difficulties” (Dawn). It opens with a fluttering Australian flag filling the screen, and a voice-over trumpeting Australia’s modern technological savvy. This is not only the first “Australian all talking picture”, it is a film about the arrival of the talking picture and much was made of this technology in the publicity. One advertisement linked it with the showgirl image: “Lips and Hips — Microphones and Movies” (Dawn) and the working title for the movie even up until mid-October, six weeks after its completion, was still given in The Bulletin as Talkie Mad (The Bulletin, October 15, 1930, p.33, see Dawn). It includes extensive footage of the sound-on-film technology, including during one of its featured songs, the ironic ‘We can’t sleep in the movies any more’.

The film opens with what might best be described as a country music number performed in a rural tent show in Queensland, although this was shot in Balmain, with the background matted out and replaced by a “second exposure of beautiful mountains and big trees” (Dawn). The musical transition in the film is thus from a form of ‘bush ballads’ to contemporary jazz-based songs about new cinema technology, which is the subject of ‘We can’t sleep in the movies any more’. The heroine and her rival travel from the

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4 The reference ‘Dawn’ is to the document file held on Showgirl’s Luck in NFSA, which includes the typewritten journal on the film kept by its director Norman Dawn, as well as some brief notes by researcher Joan Long.

5 A style of music more common referred to as ‘hillbilly’ at the time of the film’s release.

6 Curiously, the visible instrumentation does not correspond with what we hear. I was also surprised at the character of the music, which seemed far more sophisticated in its genre and production quality than I would have expected from an Australian band of that time. I raised this with Australian film historian Graham Shirley, based at NFSA, and he understood that Dawn had in fact used a US recording for this and some other sequences in which there is a similar disjunction between vision and sound. My thanks to Graham for this and other invaluable discussions.
tent show in response to an invitation to star in the production of a sound movie. In relation to the present discussion, there is a further anomaly concerning the Sydney Harbour Bridge. The movie was ready for a trade showing in January 1931, and premiered in December 1931 (Pike and Cooper, 1998:156) but like *The Cheaters* it also includes an image of the bridge as it would not be until over a year later, and in a scene that is surplus to plot requirements. The point again is that by some extraordinary and expensive post-production labour, the image of the apparently completed bridge was added to the film, emphasising its enormous imaginative power as a visual addition to the plotline about major cultural transitions 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. And the musical ethos that provides the sonic supplement to these visual images is hinted at in the film’s publicity, which asked, “Can our flappers act? Too right” (Dawn). The incidental music to the positive potential of modernity is jazz.

The current US hit ‘We can’t sleep in the movies any more’ is the central set-piece number. It consists of a live outdoor rehearsal performance at Lapstone Hill Hotel where most of the film was shot, but the ontological status of what we see and hear on the screen is highly ambiguous. In terms of the diegesis we are watching a rehearsal, but the sequence is interspersed with footage from various other films that complement the lyric — lions, a building on fire, crowds. That is, what the narratology tells us the participants in the film are seeing cannot be the same as what we are seeing, all because of the ‘magic’ of film editing. This deployment of sophisticated film technology is a feature of the movie, which includes a famous sequence in which the heroine, after smoking a cigar, experiences a form of nausea which is visually represented by her eyes moving out of her face. The film is thus very much ‘about’ the sophistication of contemporary cinema technology. The ‘We can’t sleep’ collages also include footage of the sound recordist at work, his eyes glowing with pride, and the equipment strongly foregrounded in the shot. They also include a number of shots of the band accompanying the song, to which I shall return. But the immediate point is that jazz is now positively aligned with an Australia whose future lies in technology and contemporary urban culture.

So too in one more film to be considered here. *The Squatter’s Daughter* premiered in September 1933 at Sydney’s Civic Theatre to inaugurate an all-Australian-made film policy, and, appropriately, it opens with a nation-building agenda, scrolled up the screen:

*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 provenance of the story is instructive in the present context. The title The Squatter’s Daughter was originally that of a play from 1905 by Edmund Duggan and Bert Bailey (of later ‘Dad and Dave’ fame), the success of which led to a movie version The Squatter’s Daughter or Land of the Wattle (William Anderson, 1910. No copy survives, but the plot involved the rivalry between two sheep stations, one of which was managed by young Violet Enderby, and the other by a young man who is being manipulated by his unscrupulous overseer. Consistent with the movie-going appetites of the period, the plot incorporated scenes from the career of the bushranger Ben Hall, including his death, as well as a shearing competition and an aboriginal subplot (Pike and Cooper, 1998:10). The changes evident in the 1933 version underscore the developments I have been tracing here. Apart from one ‘gumleaf band’ number, the aboriginal theme has vanished, likewise the bushranger subplot. The emphasis is now wholly upon the young Enderby girl (now Joan rather than Violet). The plot (which in broad outline would later serve Baz Luhrmann for his recent film Australia (2008) centres not on the heroic labour of men, but on young Joan Enderby. Joan 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, and following a series of plot developments, we discover 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. Sherrington Senior and his friend Cartwright, from London, are on board ship as it arrives in Sydney. They survey Sydney Harbour and Sherrington proudly points out the cargo ships, “treasure ships”, that carry Australian wool (“the spirit of our country’s in it”) to the world. Again in the final shot of this sequence, we see a view of the bridge that is not required just by the plotline. Sherrington Senior’s eyesight thus survives long enough for him to link the symbolism of the new Harbour Bridge with a rural tradition, and international modernity with the Bush. There follows a party at Waratah Station. The sequence is surprising, a clear and deliberate rewriting of the rural mythology, and a long way from the tough and gritty stereotypes of the harsh but redemptive bush life. Here, city comforts come to the bush: a swimming pool in a space traditionally seen as tending to aridity, leisure fripperies, and women who are at ease with the menfolk, who in turn negotiate good-humouredly with comparatively immodest modern fashions – and hedonistic clowning around in the pool by a young man with the supreme jazz instrument of the day, the saxophone. Then, indoors, we see jazz-based music transposed to a rural
recreation setting for dancing. The bridge between primary industry and modern internationalisation, which Sherrington described as his ship entered the heads, is being constructed in this party scene.

I finish by returning to the representation of jazz in each of these three movies, to advance a hypothesis about the relationship between the coming of sound to film, and the legitimisation of jazz (and I believe that this will apply internationally to diasporic jazz). In its earliest Australian phase, jazz was regarded as a form of extravagant and rather inelegant dancing. I have seen 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, 1991) with Miles Davis — largely in an outback setting, be it noted — there is no link between jazz and dancing. This in itself is significant: detaching jazz from dancing shifts it away from effeminacy and also from what was seen as the untrustworthy corporeal to the greater intellectual discipline of instrumental performance. There are many reasons for this shift, but one that has not been explored is the coming of sound to cinema. My interest is in how this might have helped to legitimise jazz. Before the talkies, the way jazz was represented cinematically was too undignified to achieve this legitimisation within the discourses of nation. Furthermore, these representations were sonically extremely heterogeneous. The choice and quality of musical accompaniment for silent movies was extremely varied (Collins, 1987:93). Although synopsis notes with musical suggestions might accompany the film, there was no way of being sure if, and to what extent, they might be observed, especially in non-metropolitan picture houses. For this reason it would have been all the more important that the visual image of the musicians unambiguously conform to assumptions about jazz throughout the silent era.

The arrival of sound both homogenised the sonic cinematic experience of jazz, and shifted the emphasis from zany visual antics to sonority. _Greenhide_ includes the earliest surviving cinematic representation of an Australian jazz band, at the garden party held by Margery and her circle of irresponsibly emancipated ‘New Women’ friends. To establish her character she must be shown as a woman who ‘jazzes’. In a silent movie, how does a band display its jazz credentials? The answer is by extravagant visual tomfoolery and even a kind of vulgarity. Thus, the musicians wave their instruments and stand up and down gesturing grotesquely, just as Margery herself dances in an abandoned and even inelegant manner. How else are we to know that this is a jazz band? At one point it even appears that the drummer spits across his kit. The casual spit is also seen later in one of the lead male characters in _Showgirl’s Luck_, and perhaps this is another residue at a transitional point in the representation of popular cultural practices. Although this is a sound film, it is Australia’s first, and the grammar of silent film performance has not yet addressed the new sonic order. Thus, while on the one hand the film flaunts at every opportunity the possibilities of the new sound technology, at the same time its performers are bringing with them the conventions of silent film (and vaudeville) in which they have all been trained. This is particularly apparent in those older actors who had made the transition from the earlier traditions, like Arthur Tauchert who had established his reputation as a silent film actor in such movies as Raymond Longford’s _The Sentimental Bloke_ (Raymond Longford, 1919).
It is also evident in the jazz band that is seen accompanying the rehearsal of ‘We can’t sleep in the movies any more’. There is little attempt to marry what is seen with what is heard, as for example in the disjunction between the instrument seen to be played and the one heard. The musicians are still performing a music that, hitherto, has not been heard on film, and which has to identify itself visually. And the solution is the same as the jazz musicians in Greenhide: zany actions and waving instruments about so wildly that one fears for their safety, gestures and grimaces that fit the description ‘real gone’ (and it would be an instructive exercise to explore the emergence of this term at a later stage of popular music history). These musicians are literally ‘performing’ jazz, in a way that has yet to come to terms with the advent of sound.

It is a transitional moment between the visual nonsense of Greenhide, and the more visually composed and dignified jazz demeanour of later sound films like The Squatter’s Daughter. In that film, at the party scene described above it is some of the guests who are behaving with abandon. The contrast between the two young men in the pool, one making noises on the saxophone while his friend playfully pushes him under the water, and the musicians playing for dancers inside, cannot but have been intentional, since the one directly segues into the other. We move indoors, to see a band playing jazz for the dancing guests. The ‘bridge’ between primary industry and modern internationalisation, which was described as the ship entered Sydney Harbour, is being constructed in this party scene. In a lengthy shot of the band, the physical demeanour of the musicians is notable. Unlike the clown-like antics of earlier cinematic representations of Australian jazz musicians, they are in dignified dinner suits and play without any extravagant gestures, as would any other group of musicians with a sense of professional gravitas. This is a very modern version of the bush-life: sophisticated recreation and cuisine, as waiters serve hors d’oeuvres, stylish costuming, and an up-to-the-minute jazz-based dance band, with an independent minded young woman announcing that she is about to take charge of her own fortunes in a masculinist environment. While the fashionably modern dance band continues to be heard playing a waltz in the background, the dialogue is about new liberating gender roles, but unlike Margery in Greenhide, this is harnessed to, rather than threatening, the national interest: young Joan Enderby’s sheep drive will contribute to the national economy. Her announcement is followed by a patriotic speech from the station owner Sherrington Senior 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... [What makes this country] 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 what was at that time referred to in the east of Australia as a ‘jazz waltz’. 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 modernising itself and taking on the trappings of contemporary sophistication, ‘bridging’ rural and urban, exalting rather than excoriating the New Woman.
Conclusion

Sound enabled the sound of jazz to be projected directly. It turned cinema jazz from visual display to sonority. This allowed its semi-comic, undignified clowning to be dispensed with, and the cinematic depiction of the music brought it closer to respectable popular music performance. In musical terms, jazz is gradually being assimilated into the approved mainstream of advancing modernity. In moral and cultural terms it is beginning to come to an accommodation with an Australian identity which itself is increasingly reconciling a bush tradition and the imperatives of modernity. 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 (see further Johnson, 2000:81–105). This seems to be one of the factors that nudged jazz into a more favourable alignment with national identity. Apart from the fact that vernacular dance does not carry the same cultural capital as instrumental skill (dancing appears to be abandoned corporeality, instrumental performance 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 mythology, jazz becomes one end of a ‘bridge’ between the city and the country that holds the promise of self-generated national economic renewal.

In time this process was accelerated of course by other factors. These appear to include disillusionment with the Anglo-American axis of economic and political influence during the 1930s. The arrival of US service personnel from 1941 was ambiguous in its impact, 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 the Second World War, becoming more aware of its own robustness, as evidenced particularly in the emerging revivalist or traditional jazz movement. Somewhere between the early 1930s and the end of the war there is a transition from opposition to collaboration in the relationship between jazz and established models of Australian identity. The jazz enthusiast crossed a line from being at best an effeminate champagne debauchee, to at worst a masculine beer drinker, and with a greater affinity for the bush mythology. By the late twentieth century, jazz had become so assimilated 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 twentieth century.

References


**Filmography**

William Anderson (1910) *The Squatter’s Daughter* or *The Land of the Wattle*
Charles Chauvel (1926) *Moth of Moombi*
----- (1926) *Greenhide*
Norman Dawn (1931) *Showgirl’s Luck*
Ken Hall (1933) *The Squatter’s Daughter*
Rolf de Heer (1991) *Dingo*
Baz Luhrmann (2008) *Australia*
Raymond Longford (1919) *The Sentimental Bloke*