

Harlem Nights: The shadowy state operation to ban black jazz musicians performing in Australia

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Harlem Nights: The Secret History of Australia's Jazz Age by Deirdre O'Connell is a fascinating examination of the deportation in 1928 of Colored Idea, a popular African American jazz troupe, following a frenzied and racially driven frame-up campaign by Australian state authorities.

O'Connell's book, her second, lifts the lid on this infamy. Her first book, *The Ballad of Blind Tom*, is about Tom Wiggins (1849–1908), a child musical prodigy and blind US slave who became an internationally acclaimed piano player.

Much has been written about “White Australia,” the country's racially discriminatory immigration laws that barred non-British subjects from immigrating, or in many cases, even being allowed to enter the country. Little is known, however, about how Colored Idea was demonised and expelled, with the incident used to further bolster Australia's reactionary immigration laws.

Those involved in the operation included senior members of Australia's secret police, the media, the Musicians Union and various establishment politicians, including former Prime Minister Billy Hughes, and white racist militia groups.

Colored Idea, led by Sonny Clay, a talented 28-year-old jazz pianist and drummer, was hired by an Australian talent scout to perform at Tivoli vaudeville theatres in Sydney and Melbourne in early 1928. Clay (1899–1973) previously played with Jelly Roll Morton's band and in Kid Ory's Original Creole Jazz Band. Prior to the Australian tour he led a number of West Coast bands, including the Eccentric Harmony Six, and made several recordings (see: “Jambled Blues” [1925]) and “Devil's Serenade” [1928]).

Colored Idea, the first African American jazz troupe to perform in Australia, was a remarkable collection of musicians, comedians, dancers—25 all told—and included acclaimed jazz vocalist Ivy Anderson (1905–1949). Anderson later became a full-time lead singer for Duke Ellington's orchestra in 1931, touring with him over the next decade and performing in *The Hit Parade* (1937) movie. She also appeared independently with the Crinoline Choir and Whitey's Lindy Hoppers in *A Day at the Races*, the Marx Brothers 1937 classic.

Clay's music, which expressed the unfettered confidence and exuberance of “Roaring Twenties” jazz, had an electrifying impact on Australian audiences eager to listen to the new syncopated sounds and try out the latest dance steps.

The Sonny Clay Orchestra had recorded “Australian Stomp” just before the group set sail for Australia, and it was played to an eager crowd of onlookers during a live radio broadcast when the band arrived on the SS Sierra at Circular Quay in early January. An enthusiastic column by Gayne Dexter, editor of *Everyones*, a local film magazine, visualised the SS Sierra “as a ‘Jazz Ship,’ electrified with rhythm, bearing the mysteries

and exorcism of a new brand of jazz and blues. Hot beats, not cold formats, propelled modern culture.”

Colored Idea's high-powered performances were an instant hit. The troupe played twice daily, six days a week for four weeks at Sydney's inner-city Tivoli theatre to sell-out, mainly working-class, audiences. Clay and his group had no idea, however, that national authorities regarded their tour as a threat to the country's “White Australia” immigration laws and were plotting against the jazz troupe.

Written into Australia's founding constitution in 1901, “White Australia” was long championed by Labor and the unions, who declared that the entry of “cheap coloured labour” would undermine Australian workers' wages.

Labor and the political establishment argued, moreover, that unrestricted immigration of Asian and non-British workers would create a “dangerous class,” a proletariat with ties to the region's oppressed masses and a sense of international class solidarity. Anything that challenged the official shibboleths was a threat to national unity and to be resisted.

Harlem Nights cites historian David Dutton, who said Australia emerged from the World War I “obsessed with the dangers of subversion and was determined to employ the full extent of its powers to observe, quantify, marginalise and deport those deemed disloyal.” The result, O'Connell explains, was a “less cosmopolitan, more British White Australia.”

These concerns were bound up with the 1917 Russian Revolution that heralded an explosive period of revolutionary struggles internationally, including in Australia where the largest ever strike movement erupted that year, and again two years later in 1919. The Australian ruling elite lived in mortal fear that the Bolshevik revolution would be replicated in Australia.

In response, the White Australia act was modified in 1920, enabling the deportation of socialists, communists and radical syndicalists, such as the Industrial Workers of the World. Five years later, the act was made even more pernicious, allowing the federal minister to declare anyone a “prohibited immigrant” and have them deported.

Colored Idea's arrival in Sydney in 1928, and the popular response to its performances, rang alarm bells in various quarters.

Melbourne Conservatory of Music director Bernard Heinze decried the “fiendish” and “negroid spirit” of jazz. Its “seductive yet diabolical force,” he declared, violated the balance and harmony of European music. The *Sun* denounced Colored Idea's performances in lurid articles—“Young Folk Raise Hell in Modern Sodom.” The newspaper issued stern warnings about the impact of jazz on the morals of white women.

Eric Longfield Lloyd, Sydney director of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch (CIB), precursor of the Australian Federal Police and the ASIO spy agency, decided to launch a campaign against the jazz troupe, mobilising plainclothes police and others to conduct surveillance.

Lloyd, a WWI Anzac war hero and close confidant of former Labor Prime Minister Billy Hughes had been centrally involved in the surveillance of German and Irish residents in the latter years of WWI.

Under his watch, 700 Germans were defined as “enemy aliens” because of their religion and activity in the labour movement and deported. In 1925, Lloyd arrested and attempted to deport Seaman’s Union officials Jacob Johnson and Tom Walsh, both Communist Party members, following a wave of militant strikes that year on the Sydney waterfront.

In February 1928, Lloyd drafted a confidential report outlining an investigation into a “Negro Orchestra.” Bemoaning the fact that the musicians had been able to enter the country, he initiated surveillance to obtain incriminating evidence against the troupe.

While African American sportsmen and performers were allowed to temporarily enter Australia—the most famous of these being world heavyweight champion boxer Jack Johnson in 1908—such visits were rare.

Black American jazz bands, in line with Musicians Union demands, were totally banned from performing in Australian dance clubs. Colored Idea, however, was allowed into the country because its promoters described the troupe as a theatrical act, their performances restricted to the vaudeville stage.

When Colored Idea travelled to Melbourne to begin their Tivoli performances in that city, Lloyd contacted the Victorian Commissioner of Police Thomas Blamey, another right-wing World War I veteran and later head of the Australian military in World War II, to step up the surveillance.

Blamey was aided and abetted by Ezra Norton, editor of the *Truth*, a national weekly tabloid and vicious proponent of the White Australia policy. Norton fulminated against the fact there were no laws banning “consorting” or “anti-miscegenation” laws and lamented the lack of legal measures to keep “the negro” in his place.

In 1926, Norton launched a vicious campaign for the deportation of four black American boxers. “We have built up as a young, healthy, isolated race,” any “intermingling of races” will “curse” this country” the *Truth* declared. The newspaper was particularly enraged that one of the boxers, Joe Hall, was married to an Australian woman. Imports like Hall, it declared, “like Australia, Australian money, and Australian women.”

This lynch-mob rhetoric was unleashed against members of the Colored Idea, with the *Truth*, working hand in hand with the police and the CIB, churning out slanders against their prospective victims.

Colored Idea’s Tivoli shows in Melbourne, however, were so successful that it was invited to play at the popular Green Mill Dance Hall. The Musician’s Union, led by its federal secretary Cecil Trevelyan, immediately demanded the troupe be stopped from appearing at Green Mill and any other dance hall. In 1923, the union modified its rules to “uphold and maintain White Australia and prohibit the admission of colored races as members.” The following year it vowed to “keep orchestras British.”

On March 16, Trevelyan met with Australian Prime Minister Stanley Bruce, Minister for Home and Territories Neville Howse, Australian Labor Party opposition leader Matthew Charlton and other senior MPs. There would be consequences, Trevelyan warned, in they allowed the “public to dance to blacks.” A total ban on African American orchestras was needed, he said, to “end this national humiliation.”

Six days later on March 22, Victorian police, accompanied by a *Truth* reporter, who had already been spying on Clay’s bandmen, raided an apartment where some of the troupe was staying.

The *Truth* hysterically reported a cocaine-crazed and drunken orgy with participants having “partly discarded their clothes” and where “glistening black arms wound round white shoulders.” Three Australian women were arrested for vagrancy, a euphemism for prostitution, with newspapers across the country echoing the *Truth*’s salacious coverage.

The judge, however, dismissed all charges against the women due to

lack of evidence and no charges were laid against any members of the Sonny Clay Orchestra.

As Clay declared in an interview following his return to the US, the police raid on the flat was “a frame-up from the start to finish.” But the damage had been done.

The women and the Sonny Clay Orchestra bandmen were subjected to more scandal-mongering media coverage and the entire Colored Idea tour shut down. Promoters were ordered to cancel the rest of its Melbourne shows and threatened that if they did not do so the performers could meet “trouble.” Uniformed police were dispatched to the theatre.

Home and Territories Minister Howse used his discretionary powers to cancel Colored Idea’s performing exemption certificates and ordered the troupe to leave Australia on the next available boat.

Several protests were organised to try to menace the bandmen at Melbourne’s Tivoli Theatre and nearby Spencer Street Railway station. When Clay and his troupe arrived at Sydney’s Central Station they were also confronted by several hundred men in an attempt to intimidate them with the possibility of “vigilante justice.”

O’Connell makes clear that these demonstrations were not spontaneous but “organised” and “consistent with the conduct of a clandestine militia” in Australia at that time. She points to the possible involvement of extreme-right formations that modelled themselves on the Italian fascists, including the Citizens’ Defence League, which railed against “colored immigration” including southern Europeans, active around the time of the Colored Ideas tour.

Australia’s federal cabinet met following the jazz troupe’s return to Sydney and the following week announced new procedures for “coloured theatrical performers or vaudeville artists.” Thenceforth artists were required to furnish credentials demonstrating their “general good character” and how they could “raise the local standard.” In effect, it became impossible for non-white artists to enter the country.

On March 28, three days before ten members of the Sonny Clay Orchestra and singer Ivy Anderson boarded a ship back to the US, former Prime Minister Hughes delivered a chilling lynch-mob-style speech to the Nationalist Party’s annual conference in Sydney. Hughes maintained behind-the-scenes collaboration with the CIB chief Lloyd and others involved in the racist provocations against Colored Idea.

“[T]here was some talk of them [Colored Idea] going away on Saturday,” Hughes told party delegates. “If that had happened in some American States, they would not have gone away on Saturday. They would not have lived the night! Are we going to tolerate such things? Are we going to take all these things lying down?”

Australia’s ban on African American musicians remained in place for the next quarter century, until 1954 when the great jazz trumpeter Louis Armstrong and brilliant vocalist Ella Fitzgerald were allowed to perform in Australia.

Although the White Australia policy was abolished in 1973, due to the growing trade with Asia, Australian governments—Liberal-National and Labor alike—compete to maintain some of the world’s most vicious anti-refugee immigration laws, including offshore incarceration and mandatory detention.

As in the past, racism and anti-immigrant denunciations are used to try and divide workers and divert attention from government attacks on the democratic and social rights of everyone. Frenzied and thoroughly bogus allegations in 2018 by the Australian federal government and the media claiming African youth gangs were unleashing violent attacks on Melbourne residents, being a more recent example of this racist hysteria (see: “Australian PM promotes racist campaign over ‘African gangs’”).

Harlem Nights: The Secret History of Australia’s Jazz Age is another timely reminder of the state-sponsored character and historical roots of this anti-working-class poison in Australia. O’Connell’s book deserves a

wide audience.



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