

# A conversation with Deirdre O’Connell, author of *Harlem Nights: The Secret History of Australia’s Jazz Age*

Richard Phillips, Frank Gaglioti  
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Earlier this month Deirdre O’Connell spoke with Richard Phillips and Frank Gaglioti about her new book, *Harlem Nights: The Secret History of Australia’s Jazz Age*.

Published last year by Melbourne University Press, O’Connell’s detailed and richly referenced work examines the deportation from Australia of Colored Idea, a popular African-American jazz troupe, in 1928 (see WSWs review).

The band’s expulsion followed a carefully engineered sex scandal activated against Colored Idea by a cast of shadowy figures horrified at the popular acclaim for the jazz troupe’s successful theatrical appearances in Sydney and Melbourne.

Those involved in the racially driven campaign included senior intelligence officers and the Victorian state police, as well as politicians, the Musicians Union, and the tabloid media. The operation was used to bolster the country’s repressive “White Australia” immigration policy and block all African American jazz musicians from performing in Australia for the next quarter century.

We began our discussion with O’Connell, which has been edited for clarity and length, by asking why she began investigating this infamous but little-known incident. The full video of our conversation can be viewed above.

**Richard Phillips:** Deirdre could you explain something about Sonny Clay and the Colored Idea show and what popular cultural life was like in Australia in 1928?

**Deirdre O’Connell:** Sonny Clay was 28 years old when he came to Australia, although as many observers noted, he seemed a lot younger, a bit like a 15-year-old. He looked like a man who was not equipped for the burdens he was about to receive. Clay was born in Texas and, like most of his band, part of the northern and western migrations of African Americans out of the south, a lot of times to flee the Ku Klux Klan. He lands first in Phoenix but then moves on to Los Angeles via Tijuana where he quickly establishes himself as one of the most popular African American bands in that town.

Clay arrives in Los Angeles at a historical moment known as the “Negro Vogue,” which was a kind of white vogue for what people imagined was African American. It was in many instances a way of resisting things like prohibition and the criminalisation of people for having a drink. A white embrace of African American culture became a kind of proxy way of expressing your resistance.

Clay is in much demand with the Hollywood crowd and among other young sections of the city. Radio is just becoming a medium so the Radio Ball—transmissions from ballrooms—crosses the colour line and is transmitted into bedrooms and living rooms across the state. He’s riding the crest of a wave and meets a Sydney theatrical promoter in Los Angeles

called Harry Mueller, who is part of Australia’s Tivoli theatre circuit.

Mueller’s job is to bring out the latest thing, the latest novelty, from the United States to Australia, but he’s up against the huge cost of bringing out white acts which are prohibitively expensive. He can’t afford to meet their demands but African American acts, which don’t have the opportunities of the white acts, and often work longer hours for less money, are much more open to the idea.

In late 1927, Sonny Clay signs a contract to appear at the Tivoli theatres and puts together a cabaret show with singers like Ivy Anderson and a remarkable quartet of dancers—The Four Covans—and they set off, landing at Sydney’s Circular Quay in early January 1928, landing on the 21st, after a three-week voyage. They’re the first African American band to arrive in Australia.

It’s not the first attempt to bring an African American band into Australia but it’s the first successful one. Many years earlier, in 1923, two local dance promoters went to the US and put together an African American music and dance team and were ready to bring them to Australia to play at the dance palladium. But they were blocked by the minister for home and territories who point blank refuses to grant a visa. He’s concerned about white people dancing to African rhythms, as if it will kind of undermine their racial identity and subvert the national culture. Then quite quickly the Musicians Union in 1923 passes an ordinance saying “no coloured musicians.”

So black musicians are kept out, but Harry Mueller figures out a workaround by bringing them in as theatrical artists on the theatre stage, rather than in the dance hall.

Finally, Australian audiences, after seeing African American acts in cinemas, such as glamorous sophisticated films like *So This is Paris* [Ernst Lubitsch, 1926], which are silent and so they can’t hear them.

Finally, they get the chance to experience what Hollywood films often depict as the ultimate moment in modern sophistication. But they can only see them in a theatre, they cannot dance to them in a dance hall.

**Frank Gaglioti:** You say at the end of your book, “I never expected to stumble into political territory.” Could you elaborate on this and who were some of the political characters involved?

**DO:** My investigation into this story began with a photograph—the photograph of Sonny Clay arriving at Circular Quay and two of the dancers, doing the “Black Bottom,” the latest dance to follow the “Charleston” to Australian shores.

For me it was a story of popular culture, of music culture, and then I began to investigate everyone involved, and every name that surfaced I started to explore. And it just got deeper and deeper.

I knew initially that the band had been deported after nine weeks but then I discovered a report in the national archives by Major Longfield

Lloyd. He is part of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch and had, within days of the band arriving, initiated a surveillance operation.

Okay, here's the name of a bureaucrat that I can chase, a bureaucrat who's feeling anxious about the threat to White Australia. I look him up and find out about his history and role in deporting people, in constructing notions of undesirability, that stretched right back to the Great War.

Lloyd was part of military intelligence and with the department of defence and involved in enforcing the War Precautions Act where vast numbers of Germans, not only German-born migrants but also the children of German-born migrants, and in some cases grandchildren, were interned without often cause or charge and held for a number of years.

After the war he was instrumental in a wave of deportations. This included union leaders and others he pinpointed as Communists or Bolsheviks. There was even a Catholic priest, a German priest, whom he fingered as disloyal. There was a huge protest to keep the German priest in the country.

And it just kind of rolled on from there. I looked up the names of the Victoria police detectives who were instrumental to the frame-up in Melbourne. These plainclothes police were part of a special unit very close to General Blamey, the police commissioner. Blamey was head of a secret army known as the White Army and oversaw a really brutal force that cracked a lot of heads and were very violent.

I used the Trove newspaper site to discover that the policemen responsible for structuring the trumped-up scandal against the band had also been involved in invading the homes of Chinese laundry workers and sticking them with opium charges. They had a long, long record of garden variety, good old Aussie police corruption.

But in this instance what went through the magistrates' court on the so-called sex scandal had a much wider significance for the deportation of the Sonny Clay Orchestra and then used by the government to initiate a ban on the entry of African American musicians that would last until 1953.

That had a terrible impact on the quality of Australian culture. It created a cultural quarantine where people were denied the kind of opportunity to engage with cosmopolitan forms of modernity.

**RP:** You speak about the authorities feeling anxious. There was much for them to be anxious about. They were enforcing the White Australia policy under conditions of tremendous class struggles and social upheaval in that period. When Clay's band arrived in Australia it was only 11 years after the Russian Revolution, there had been mass strikes of the railway in Sydney in 1917, a wave of industrial action in 1919, a Victorian police strike in 1923, and national waterfront strikes in 1928. They had quite a bit to be nervous about.

**DO:** Yes, they were quite fragile in a way. It was easy for them to feel threatened. You see this in the way they cobbled things together—the Fenians were seen to be in cahoots with the Bolsheviks, who were in cahoots with the people who loved the black race, and things like that. They had a very conspiratorial mindset and were at odds with the arc of the 20th century.

Australia had committed squarely to what they called racial unity at the time—which is racial homogeneity, racial purity—but the arc of the 20th century is about the rise of women and the rise of non-white nationalism. America rose as a global superpower at that time with African American culture a defining force within it.

When America exports its culture to the world, it's exporting, according to White Australia's mindset, a racially contaminated form of culture. All this created huge problems for them [the Australian authorities].

Then you get feminism. The 20s saw enormous numbers of women coming into the workforce. There's a rise of a kind of business class, a managerial class, which needs secretaries and clerks to operate in these

offices and businesses. This creates huge kinds of work opportunities for women.

At that time in Sydney and Melbourne you get large numbers of single women coming in from the countryside to take up these jobs. They're living alone, or with their friends. They're earning decent money, have a disposable income and can engage in the leisure time industries, like the cinema and music, which, of course, are strongly American and by default have a strong African American flavour. So pursuit of the White Australia policy is at odds with the bigger trends.

**RP:** What was the popular response to the Colored Idea?

**DO:** The tour was a huge success.

There's often this position that everyone agreed with the White Australia policy, that there was no opposition, that Labor and the conservatives all agreed, and that it was the right way to go. But if you look at consumer demand and popular demand, the promoters knew they could fill theatre after theatre, and dance hall after dance hall with punters wanting to engage with African American culture.

That might not have been a conscious political choice or grounded in ideological depth but it's a consumer decision, a type of pull towards something that's cosmopolitan and vibrant and mixed race. It's not about racial purity but something else.

If you measure support for White Australia in terms of popular demand then it calls into question the extent to which people wanted this very narrow, rigid and racially pure country and culture.

**RP:** The legislation was used to effect political persecutions as you previously mentioned, the deportation of anyone deemed to be dangerous. It became a political vehicle that could be used against anyone really.

**DO:** Yes, it was. Longfield Lloyd is constructing these categories of undesirability, and the Immigration Act, which lies at the foundation of the White Australia policy, undergoes a series of amendments to keep out various waterside workers who are seen to be Bolsheviks. They introduce the category of occupation to one of the amendments and so Longfield Lloyd takes that category of occupation and starts to apply it to jazz musicians.

**FG:** I was very interested in the role of the Musicians Union. Can you explain what it actually did?

**DO:** I'll backtrack a bit. The Musicians Union came into being with the passing of the Arbitration Act of 1909 and the government decided that all workers had to deal with the arbitration court through a union.

There were already these grassroots union, like the shearers union and the waterside workers union, but there were some sectors that weren't unionised like musicians. It was a matter of who got in first and formed this organisation and then kind of controlled the labour supply. And in the case of the Musicians Union, it was often a bunch of strongly nationalist figures with strong military connections. They came out of the brass bands, a lot of the time military bands, and they were very loyal to Billy Hughes [the former Australian Labor prime minister].

The Labor government split during World War I. While most of the union movement opposed Billy Hughes—and he is booted out of the Labor Party [over his attempt to impose military conscription]—the Musicians Union pledged their loyalty to him and for a time it is excluded from Trades Hall.

The Musicians Union initiates a whole lot of measures where they kick out so-called enemy aliens [from membership], particularly in Adelaide where there were lots of German musicians. They kind of stand apart from the bulk of the union movement and start to introduce into their book of rules during the twenties many forms of racial exclusion, or different categories of exclusion. Anyone who was not a British-born subject found it very hard to become a member.

Naturalised Italians, Greeks, Russians and others, even though they had

high levels of musical skill, were excluded from the union and were unable to work. Of course, it's just another logical step to start to exclude African American musicians. The logic was to keep the national imagination pure, and through this a true Australian culture would emerge. Other sources will contaminate and weaken people's racial identity.

**FG:** Your book refers to an extraordinary event in which Musicians Union head Cecil Trevelyan meets with the Australian prime minister, the minister for home and territories, the Labor Party opposition leader Matthew Charlton, and other senior members of parliament. "There would be consequences," Trevelyan says, "if the public was allowed to dance to music played by blacks," and he called for a total ban on African American orchestras in Australia. Could you explain what ensued after this meeting?

**DO:** By 1928 Australia is in recession and unemployment is running at 10 percent. This would explode in the following years, after the Wall Street crash and into the early 30s, and there's the introduction of talkies. Lots of musicians had jobs in cinemas playing to silent films, so there's a huge unemployment among white Australian musicians. The Musicians Union's argument, which had some sympathy from the Labor Party and the Nationals, was that these jobs had to be protected, and as a consequence, Australian music during the 1930s was in the doldrums.

These policies are directly related to the kind crushing sense of Australia as a cultural backwater, a sense of a cultural cringe and the closing of Australia off to the world. During World War II a million US soldiers come through Australia, including some African Americans, and a number of them were musicians.

When they open a black serviceman's club, the Booker T. Washington Club, in Sydney it's the first time in decades that Australian bands had a chance to sit in with African American bands, learn techniques of drumming and different trumpet licks and so on. That's the type of interpersonal exchange that happens when people are on the ground. Culture transfers from one person to the next through these individual personal connections.

That type meeting that you're referring to was an effort to block those type of connections from taking place and was to Australia's great disadvantage.

**FG:** Could you describe the police raids and frame-up scandal in Melbourne involving some members of the Sonny Clay band and some women, and the role of Thomas Blamey and Victoria Police?

**DO:** I mentioned earlier that Blamey was the police chief. He was also a WWI hero, a great advocate of the White Australia policy and a real law-and-order man. He was also very corrupt and had interests in the sex industry, gambling and things like that. He kept up this appearance of creating stability through imposing strong-man politics. That's the way he presented himself to the world.

There's also the rise of tabloid newspapers, with new photographic technology and the big bold headlines. Tabloid newspapers are driven by crime stories, so the media relied very heavily on the police to fill the newspapers every day. There were at least seven or so journalists based at Russell Street [police] headquarters in Melbourne. There's this kind of symbiotic relationship between the police and journalists. The police would give them little scoops and things like that in exchange for very, very positive coverage.

The plainclothes police constructed this frame-up and enlisted a stool pigeon to be in the [band's] room so when they raided it looked like there was something sexual happening and things like that. The girls are arrested on a very, very minor charge—vagrancy—which is a euphemism

for prostitution, but they are found not guilty by the court.

The police provide evidence in the court and try to make the incident as salacious as possible, basically providing copy for the journalists who are transcribing it. This has all the making of a tabloid front page scandal—it's perfect tabloid fodder. They're able to amp up something that was a very small charge in the magistrates' court.

Even though the court verdict was not guilty, the media managed to frame it into guilty: "Why were these five women found not guilty? What is it about Australia that there are no laws stopping white Australian women mixing with black men whereas in the United States that's a lynchable offense?" That's the type of, ugly line they went down, so there's a kind of loose alliance, a shared system of interest, between the police, the magistrates, the judiciary and the press.

**RP:** One of the remarkable things about your book is how it reveals the two levels of rule. There's parliament and the official framework, and a virtual secret state operating underneath it all. And its agenda wins out. In line with the demands being raised in the *Truth* newspaper, the laws are changed, and the band are kicked out.

**DO:** Yes, there's nothing like a moral scandal. They promote the idea that the band is corrupting the minds of the youth to enact as some type of political change. I might point out that the ban didn't require any changes to law, all they did was introduce this thing called a "character test."

You often hear the Australian government today talking about introducing a character test, A bit like the dictation test they had with the White Australia policy—a literacy test designed so that a non-white person could never pass. They still let in minstrels or performers, who represented African American culture in a way that upheld the racial, the white supremacist, order. There would be the occasional black quartet coming through, but not a jazz band.

**RP:** What happened to Sonny Clay?

**DO:** His career never really recovered. When he left for Australia there was a lot of talk in the black press about this new market which had opened up with new opportunities for African American bands who could cross the Pacific and come to Australia.

When he came back—in defeat and shame—there's lots of accusations that he didn't have his bandmen under control. They should have known not to mix with white women. This was how things operated in California, so why didn't he have the matter in hand. His career never really recovered, and then you get the Depression and then the mass unemployment of musicians.

Clay kind of ticks along for a few years, but his dependency on alcoholism grows and he is hospitalised for alcoholism for a time. He remarries and, I think through the support of his wife, gets his act together. He works for a while as a postman and while working in clubs at night playing solo piano. Other members of his band, however, went on to greater things.

Ivy Anderson ends up working for many, many years with Duke Ellington. She became his favourite singer. Ellington writes in his biography about her performance of "Stormy Weather" in London where she had the whole audience, the crew, and the band in tears and what an extraordinary musician and vocalist she was. She's also in a Marx Brothers film [*A Day at the Races*].

There was a trombone player who kind of really becomes a major player in the swing era. He records with Louis Armstrong and a whole bunch of others.

**RP:** At the end of the book, you speak about the debilitating cultural impact of these bans on the music scene in Australia until 1954, a quarter of a century, until Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald toured.

**DO:** Yes, and then Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Harry Belafonte.

**RP:** Thanks very much for your time. How's the response to the book

been?

**DO:** It's been very good, with consistently strong reviews. I bump into people all the time who have said that they've read it, or got a copy, or that their dad's reading it, so I'm delighted with that. Yeah, it's been a real pleasure. I love researching and that whole process, so that to be able to actually do something with all that research is a great privilege.



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