Why "The Tango-Rag"? An Interrupted Revolution in Early Australian Popular Music and Dance

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This paper offers a brief social, cultural and music and dance studies reading of "The Tango Rag", a 1914 Australian composition by Reg Stoneham, interpreted through my notion of 'Australian decontextualisation'. By this I mean cultural decontextualisation that is very specific to Australian contexts, conditions and contingencies (Whiteoak, *Playing Ad Lib* xiii–xiv). This simple concept provides a useful entry point to understanding the complex confluence of imported cultural and commercial influences and factors that triggered the first substantial youth culture-oriented revolution in Australian popular music, social dancing and theatrical entertainment history between 1912 and late 1914. I want to suggest that this 'revolution' probably would have brought forward the social, moral and cultural turmoil of Australia's 1920s Jazz-Age had Australia's shock entry into World War One not killed its momentum almost overnight.

I have already researched ragtime and tango music and dance of this period in Australia and my many ragtime and Hispanic music and dance-related publications listed on my website (Whiteoak, "Publications") illustrate how I have maintained a dual research interest in these fields. But I have also recently become interested in a body of primary and secondary sources on these topics that include early Australian-authored novels like *Jonah* about a hunchbacked Jewish-Australian street gang thug or so-called 'larrikin' with a musical bent (Stone) and recent academic studies of Larrikin culture such as Melissa Belanta's *Larrikins: a History* (Belanta). Such sources sometimes refer anecdotally and otherwise to music and dance but they have not been examined specifically from a popular music and dance studies perspective. In today's paper, however, I just want to briefly outline the circumstances behind what I have been bold enough to claim as being "An Interrupted Revolution in Early Australian Popular Music and Dance" and its association with ragtime and tango music and dancing and oppositional youth culture..

Between the late 1890s and the 1920s Jazz-Age, the terms rag-time or ragtime became globally synonymous with modern popular music and dance, and 'ragging' became the descriptor for ragtime playing, ragtime singing, ragtime improvising and ragtime dancing (Berlin 146–169). The classic style of piano ragtime commonly associated with Scott Joplin was not greatly significant to what I am about to discuss. The revolutionary new Irving Berlin-style of ragtime song and dance music became popularised in Australia during 1912–14 at the same time as the popularisation and sudden expansion of public, dance-for-a-fee dancing; the successive arrival of international ragtime artists on Australian vaudeville circuits ; intense marketing of ragtime on record and sheet music; new rhythmic ragtime social dances; and a directly associated craze for tango dancing – along with Australian moral panic about these developments (Whiteoak, *Playing Ad Lib* 111–167; Whiteoak, "The Tango" 43–46).

My first understanding of the notion of both ragtime and tango music and dancing as being associated with a pre-World War One cultural revolution in Australian popular entertainment came around 30 years ago through my friendship with the left-wing political and dance historian, Les Barnes. Barnes was an authority on the partly mythologised pre-War violent, racist and criminal street-youth gang subculture of the so-called larrikins (Belanta). Les was born around the turn of the century and his legendary memory had inspired an academic study of the larrikin culture of his youth in the working-class Melbourne suburb of Brunswick (Freestone). In his public lectures on Australian social dance history, he was adamant that the initial impulse for what later became Jazz-Age dancing and dance music culture came before World War One – and not after it – with the remarkable global success of Irving Berlin's innovative 1911 ragtime song and dance music hit, "Alexander's Rag-Time Band". In fact, the Australian press noted in early 1912 that a million copies had sold within months of publication in the USA and that it was already being performed in Australia ("From a Tune" 5).

In *Irving Berlin and Ragtime America*, Ian Whitcomb explains that:

> The words bore traces of minstrelsy. … Yet the cover art-work and most performances depicted Alexander's band in white-face. The song therefore wasn't shackled [to the old blackface and African-American minstrel show stereotypes] but could race free through the new electric world. It was, in fact, a clarion call summons to everybody to

take part in some twentieth-century fun. A similar summons became the anthem of 1950s youth when rock & roll arrived:[namely] Bill Haley the square-dance caller instructing his hon' to get her glad rags on and "Rock Around the Clock" (75–6).

Irving Berlin himself states "that the lyric was fundamentally right. It's opening words, emphasised by immediate repetition: 'Come on and hear! Come on and hear!' –were an invitation to 'come', to join in …[this]idea pounded in again and again throughout the song in various ways-was the secret of the song's success" (quoted in Whitcomb 76). Berlin composed other immensely popular ragtime dance songs, such as the ambiguously titled "Everybody's Doin' It Now". This carried a similar message of joining in and becoming part of this pan-American, pan-global and largely Jewish-American Tin Pan Alley-contrived popular modernity fun.

Les Barnes vividly recalled the cylinder recording version of "Alexander's Rag-Time Band" being purchased for the family gramophone in 1913 and played over and over until it was totally worn out. He also recalled how ragtime dancing and music were considered to be anti-social and, then, anti-patriotic and pacifist from when the 1914-18 war was declared until 1917, when America finally began to contribute to the war effort and therefore regain the respect of the war and war casualty-traumatised Australian population. But one thing that I did not understand when talking to Les Barnes was his recollection of his older brother attending ragtime dances with others dressed in Spanish costumes. I now know it was because the newly-arrived <u>tango</u> was perceived to be one of the most popular of the new ragtime dances (see Fig. 1). But let's go back to earlier developments.

Fig. 1 Advertisement for "The Tango and Other Ragtime Dances", *Australian Musical News*, November 1913, 140.

Hispanic dances such as the tango and ragtime were in fact burdened with counter-respectable historical associations in Australia. Spanish dances such as the bolero and cachucha were perceived to be associated with seduction, indecency and immorality from the beginning of colonial theatrical entertainment and especially through the Australian 1850s Gold Rush-era tours of the infamous Spanish dancer, Lola Montez. The character of Carmen in the many colonial Australian stagings of Bizet's opera, *Carmen*, from 1879, further attenuated these perceptions (Whiteoak, *Take Me To Spain* 36–44, 94–99). This opera widely popularised the early form of tango rhythm, the habanera, which became confused in Australia with early ragtime or 'cakewalk' rhythm (Whiteoak, "The Tango" 43-46). Furthermore, the tango retained strong conceptual associations with prostitution, the dance hall and the 'Tango Tea gigolo', the early profession of the famous 'Latin lover' of the silent screen, Rudolf Valentino. Just before the War, Reverend James White in Melbourne declared that the tango "is a spider's web, put by the devil to entrap weak women. ... The negroes danced it, but not as an innocent pleasure dance. It does not reflect much credit on our civilisation that any should be found emulating these ignorant savages" ("Immoral Dance" 1).

Pre-1910s ragtime music and dance as mainstream popular entertainment developed largely out of early white American and post-Civil War black American minstrel show entertainment which – in Australia – always retained associations with lowlife urban Australian culture and, from the 1870s, the colourful thuggish street and dance-hall youth subculture of the so-called Larrikin Push, mythologised by the Melbourne journalist and poet C. J. Denis and others.

No wonder these dusky folks like Sydney. They hear everywhere the music of the cake-walks; they see the young girls of a certain type going through the senseless 'steps' on the pavement, and being brought before the magistrates for making themselves an abominable nuisance. The young men and boys whistle the dreadful 'tunes' in the streets until sensitive musical people are driven nearly mad ("Our Sydney Letter" 8).

Fig 2. Tom Durkin, At The Larrikin's Ball, *Bulletin*, 13 July 1895, 15.

Here, it should be recalled that colonial Australia commenced as a penal colony. Convict transportation to Australia did not cease until 1868 and a huge proportion of colonial Australians – especially in Sydney and New South Wales – were of direct convict heritage. The term, 'larrikin' began to enter Australian vernacular only a few years after 1868. Both Bruce Johnson and I have written about the arguable significance of this convict heritage to later Australian jazz–related culture (Whiteoak, "Demons of Discord" 23–51).

From a musical perspective, the roots of jazz improvisation themselves trace back very distinctly to early and later ragtime through the practice of so-called 'ragging'. The essence of ragging was the spontaneous (or seemingly spontaneous) transformation of popular or classical music, or even hymns into ragtime through idiomatic musical elaboration. The lyrics of "Alexander's Rag-Time Band" confirmed this fact for all time where they proclaim that "And if you care to hear the Swa-nee Riv-er played in [transformed/embellished/improvised into] rag-time, Come on and hear, come on and hear, Al-ex-an-der's Rag-Time Band".

Ragging was already codified in the first of many ragtime instructors by 1897 and its white author, Ben Harney, also featured a famous 1890s vaudeville act where he would play a classical piano work and then rag it into piano ragtime in what became widely known as 'ragging the classics' and, later, as 'jazzing the classics'. Harney, who toured Australia in 1911, also ragged popular tunes, like his "Cake Walk in the Sky" (1899), with weird bluesy vocal embellishments – early scat singing. A very common feature of vocal ragging was idiomatic rhythmic paraphrasing by breaking up the syllables of the lyrics with a jerky or choppy 'banjo imitation' effect plus the interpolation of extra syllables. Its revolutionary aspect was the ability of gifted overseas and Australian ragtime vocal and instrumental artists to begin to widely popularise this new level of improvisatory creative freedom (Whiteoak, *Playing Ad Lib* 139–167).

Early ragtime (in the form of syncopated cakewalk music and dance and so-called coon-song) was popularized in Australia from 1899 following tours of several Black American ragtime theatre companies with cakewalk dancers, ragtime wind bands and leading black American ragtime singers who, ironically, strongly reinforced popular racist and lowlife stereotypes of African-Americans in ragtime song lyrics and comedy (Whiteoak "A Good Black Music Story"). The cakewalk dancing brought to Australia by these companies in 1899 soon became a social dance fad and this was also revolutionary in the sense that it introduced public dancing based on rhythmic body movement to strongly syncopated African-American inflected music, as opposed to concentration on the steps. Moreover – being a dance based on showing off individual inventiveness – it inherently invited social dancers to spontaneously invent unorthodox performance behaviour to rhythm. In other words, it was an improvisatory dance in an era in which the decorous reproduction of highly codified dance steps and movements was the expected social norm. It was dancing as ragging – before jazz dancing became known as 'jazzing'. *The Truth* (Melbourne) complained in 1904 that:

> Bestiality manifests itself in the cakewalk which respectable Australian mothers allow their daughters to learn and perform. Every movement in the Cake Walk has an indecent meaning and is a representation, from beginning to end, of a couple who are working out with frenzy around licentious sexual scheme ("Half-Naked Women" 5).

The same year, it was suggested that "Our larrikins are produced, because there is nothing wholesome for them to do at night. They are to be gathered in by… ragtime and coon melodies…and gradually Mendelssohn, Mozart

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and Beethoven are to be administered in small doses, and so the criminal instinct will he checked" ("Taming Toughs").

The much more influential 1912–14 revolution led by Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Rag-Time Band" was a counter-revolution in that this style of 'ragtime' rapidly de-emphasised African-American inflections in ragtime. It no longer typically featured lyrics in black vernacular or used African-American-related themes. This new swinging and improvisatory style of ragtime was not even overly syncopated and was not performed in the burnt cork make-up of earlier blackface minstrel show performers. It was instead perceived to be the ultra-modern, white American musical metaphor for American modernity – modern American 'hustle' music ("Rag-Time" 11). The blackface and black minstrelsy that preceded had become 'old-time' entertainment – but this was brand new.

"Alexander's Rag-Time Band" arrived along with a confusing array of new so-called 'freak' or 'animal' ragtime dances such as the Grizzly Bear, Bunny Hug, Crab Crawl, Kangaroo Hop, Turkey Trot, or Jelly Wobble. To the consternation of Australian dance teachers, all these tango and ragtime dances invited more improvisatory invention of unorthodox or 'ragged' body movements or gestures (Salinger 3, 31). However, there were even louder bellows of consternation from Australia's moral guardians about the potential indecency of these new 'freak' ragtime dances, which included the tango. Firstly, was their undesirable latitude for the invention of unorthodox and indecent movements and gestures. But worse still, the new ragtime dances like the Bunny Hug – as that name suggests – brought dancing couples into overly intimate physical contact. Double-entendre titles or lyrics in ragtime songs like "Everybody's Doing It" or The Grizzly Bear Rag" with the lyrics "You and me is two, I'll make it one when we get through" (Whitcomb 72) were further evidence that the new ragtime was a corrupting American influence on Australian youth. The early 1910s arrival of the new style of ragtime dance songs corresponded with the popularisation of public dancing where complete strangers could hook up at dance venues constructed or especially converted for this highly controversial form of entertainment. It was also integrated with a craze for modern American culture: American bars, American hairdressers, American tailors, American movies and so forth.

These controversial influences also corresponded with the introduction of compulsory school boy and youth military conscription. This generated strong left-wing pacifist and anti-conscription youth opposition that included the low-life and ragtime and tango-loving bodgie and widgie forerunners, the larrikins and female larrikins, or so-called 'donahs'. A correspondent to the *Sun* (Sydney) claimed that "the later-day cakewalks now called tango and ragtime are the inventions of the hottest hells in [South America]… The tango is there danced in the saloons by … women who are almost in the nude. In Sydney the 'lairy Lairs' [larrikins] were the first to tango and rag in public, and…it will not advance from 'Lairy' circles" ("Tango and Rag" 4) and larrikins and donahs were also observed as having developed their own uncouth style of tango dancing. Opposition to boy conscription or the compulsory drilling resulted in around 34,000 prosecutions and 7,000 detentions by mid-1915. The anti-authoritarian larrikins were well represented in these prosecutions and compliance was viewed very darkly by fellow street Push or gang members and those being prosecuted. In one trial at the Water Police Court in Sydney "Above the hum of court a bar or two of ragtime was softly whistled. 'Who's whistling?' from the Bench – 'Get hold of him'…" (Barrett 194).

One white American cult figure widely emulated by Australian youth was the 'Emperor of Ragtime', Gene Greene, who toured Australasia for six months as the international pop star of the new ragtime in dress and demeanour. He taught young Australians how to dress, walk and talk ragtime and how to spontaneously rag any song named by the audience into ragtime. He also ran stage contests throughout Australasia for the best young Australasian raggers. As if reviewing a 1950s rock & roll artist, Australian critics noted his "infinite capacity for making weird noises" ("Music and Drama" 13) and the "convulsive movements which accompany his singing of ragtime" ("Opera House" 11). The Melbourne *Argus* complained that "whether Mr Greene is doing a kind thing to Australia in encouraging its youth to develop the ragtime habit must be left to his conscience" ("Many New Artists" 11). Also, because the new ragtime song came out of American speech patterns, it sounded unnatural when not sung with an American accent. The association of a ragtime and tango dancing and music-led cultural revolution with a particular class is however complicated by the fact these entertainments were also adopted by a youthful middle to upper-class society 'smart set' as modern, sophisticated and fashionable. For example, the social pages of newspapers reported on the popular 'Tango Teas', where leading ragtime and tango dancers and ragtime singers appeared, the latest in apparel fashions were exhibited and well-heeled young patrons danced to ragtime and tango music.

Fig 3. "The Tango Rag" (Whiteoak Research Collection).

The image and printed explanation on the cover of Reg Stoneham's "Tango Rag" (Fig. 3) indicate that he composed it especially for this sector of society. It is also more or less de-ethnicised Hispanically and even lacks the habanera rhythm that would have identified it as a tango in 1914 Australia. It is offered instead as a reflection of ragtime-age popular modernity and is probably directly related to the niche 'Tango Rag' genre of America's own ragtime era. But, as a curious conflation of ragtime and tango, it was also an Australian response to the unfathomable hybridity associated with the labyrinth of 'freak' styles of music and dance being swept into Australian entertainment as part of the huge tsunami of modern American entertainment culture that was swamping British-Australian society and tearing youth taste away from that of their elders and other guardians of decorum and morality. Australian youth had listened and danced to the pied-piper call of "Alexander's Rag-Time Band" and was well into the process of 'breaking out' when the bugle call of War heralded a grim new paradigm that largely reversed this process. Enlistment, itself, greatly disrupted youth subcultures, and the influential Australian poet, C. J. Dennis, along with others, reconfigured the larrikin part-myth to present larrikinism as a uniquely Austral-
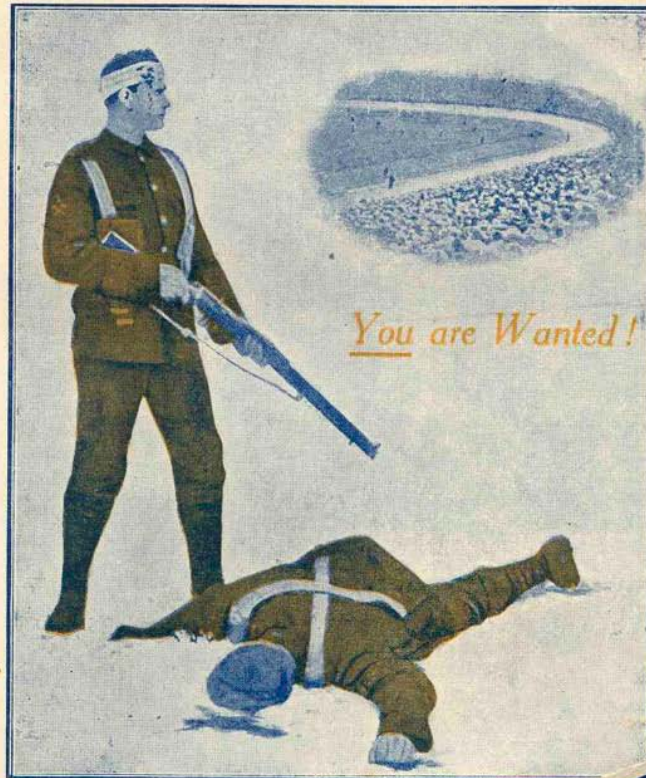
Fig 4. "Wake Up! Australia" c. 1915 by Alfred Mansfield (Whiteoak Research Collection).

ian virtue that featured mateship, fighting spirit, independence and irreverence – a virtue supposedly brought out in larrikins through the trials of character-building enlistment and the horrors of the battlefront (Dennis).

The tango was still danced socially, on stage or at occasional Tango Teas after 1914, but 'tangomania' had more or less evaporated. Opposition to the tango did however continue in press reports, which blamed it for a whole range of ills, including sex orgies and drug addiction, divorce and as being contrary to the war effort and unpatriotic (Whiteoak, "The Tango in Australia" 45–46). Irving Berlin-style ragtime song and dance music had become partly accepted within mainstream popular culture, especially on the popular stage, and most of the fifty or so rags composed in Australia during the 1910s were published after 1914. However, ragtime music as entertainment had to compete with much more pervasive and acceptable patriotic musical entertainment. It was also, until 1917, increasingly frowned on by many as emblematic of America's refusal to support the Allies. Like the much later jitterbug and 'rock and roll' dancing – 'ragging' was still perceived to be a magnet for disruptive , low-life youth and therefore banned from those dance venues that had not been forced to close because of the War.

"Ragtime is to music what the larrikin is to society". ("On and Off")

By the end of the War, ragtime dancing became fashionable again, but now as the refined, codified and "much more classy" One Step ("Dancing and Dancers" 16). The high-profile Australian dance teacher, Jennie Brennan, who taught ragtime dancing before the War noted that "but gone are the wild Ragtimes … elegance is the key to the 1919 dancing philosophy ("American Dancing"). However, Australia's Jazz Age had already been heralded in May 1918 by the sequel to "Alexander's Rag-Time Band" called "Alexander's Got a Jazz Band Now" (by Chris Schonberg and Buddy De Sylva). And two months later, the vaudeville act called *Australia's First Jazz Band* began its now legendary tour of the Australian Eastern states that ragged and jazzed Australia into a new but much more profound and sustained music and dance-led cultural and social revolution (Whiteoak "Jazzing").

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