

PLOD ESSAY:

Mrs Connelly and Her Cairo Orchestra

Before the “talkies” made their impact on social traditions at the several cinemas in Wonthaggi, young people got together at dances. Peruse the *Powlett Express* or the *Sentinel* – and even the *Criterion* – from 1909 until the mid-1930s and the columns will be littered with advertising for dances at halls scattered round the district. Among the halls, there seemed to be a roster so there was at least one dance being held somewhere every week and, more importantly, so that the different bands – or orchestras, if you were lucky – were available to play.

The most sought after musician in the area from the mid-1920s onward was Mrs Connelly, the leader of the Cairo Orchestra. Ask anyone now who remembers those days, and you’ll be surprised how many people say they do. They won’t be able to tell you that Mrs Connelly’s Christian name was Ruby, but they can tell you the dances they did and exactly what song the orchestra was playing when they met their life-long partners.

It’s not exactly clear when little Ruby was born. In the July 1972 *Sentinel*, a feature article celebrating her 80th birthday at Taberners says she was born in Tasmania in 1883, three years before she came with her large family – she was one of 19 children – to the coal mines in Korumburra. If that were true she would have been more than 80 in 1972. When she was 16 she was the solo artist improvising at the piano for the silent movies in the local cinemas, and they didn’t start until 1910. Back then, she was still Ruby, had waist-length auburn hair in two plaits and was five feet tall.

It was after she married Jack Connelly of Jumbunna in the new St Joseph’s Church, that she became known as Mrs Connelly, the lady who played at the St Joseph’s dances held to raise money to pay the church debt. She was a tiny fine-boned young woman, by then, and still had her thick auburn hair, which, interestingly, never changed colour for years. To help out the church, she had formed a trio by adding cornet

player, Mr Jim Cameron, the leader of the Union Band, to the duo she already had going with Mr George Lees, who played the violin. Soon the band was in demand, travelling by jinker over unmade roads as far as Foster, Woodleigh, Glen Forbes, Glen Alvie, Almurta, even to Cowes, taking the punt over to the island.



Mrs Connelly and The Cairo Orchestra

Sometimes it took them all day to get to the dance where, for a few shillings each, they played all night, from 8:30 to 4:00 am and then drove home. If they got stuck in the mud and it was still dark, they’d just go

to sleep where they were until someone came along to help.

“We used to come through Kilcunda and often got stuck coming through that way. Often the river was flooded. One of the boys would roll up his trousers and wade in to see how deep it was before we tried to go through. I can just picture it now,” said Mrs Connelly, during a long interview with Joe and Lyn Chambers in the mid-1980s.

No one ever said anything about Mrs Connelly staying out all night with a couple of fellows while her husband slept on, oblivious, tucked in his warm bed at home. They knew Mrs Connelly was the boss of the operation and her fellow musicians did what they were told. They’d seen her get them back to their instruments after a break, when they surreptitiously took advantage of the side door that was always at the back of a hall to share around a flask. “You slave driving old devil,” they used to say to her as she pulled them inside to continue playing for the waiting dancers.

Often, the young people making their way home from the dances helped the bogged musicians out of their predicament. It would be the crack of dawn. The dances in the old days purposefully kept going until very late, so the dancers – always getting around on “shanks ponies” – could see their way as the sun came up and get home in time to do the milking. The girls

carried their dainty shoes and tucked their dresses into farm trousers to protect them from the mud and blackberry.

The music in the 1920s was 'jazz', and Mrs Connelly gathered together a group of musicians to play it. "It was a good orchestra. Oh, yes, they were good."

It was a six-piece band she called the Cairo Orchestra because that's where they mostly played after the war until the Union Theatre was built in 1925. Howard Tinkler was on the drums, Reg Baker on the sax and trombone, George Mann on the banjo, Horrie Philpot on the cornet and Snowy Peters on the sax. Although the band members changed over the years, the fellows were all loyal to Mrs Connelly because they knew they couldn't do without her.

"We bought music as a group and I kept it," she said. "If we were going to play for a ball, I would have it all out on the kitchen table sorting out the parts for each man. It was a big job, but once it was sorted, it was right. You see, we bought music from Allen's Music store. We had a subscription with them and they sent us all the latest tunes each month. There were lots of new dances: the Charleston, the Black Bottom, the Royal Alberts, the Maxine, the Joy Stick.

"We'd play thirty dances in a night: sets, waltzes, foxtrots, one-steps, the three-hop polka, the Yale blues, which was a slow one. They liked the slow ones. They also loved the Quadrilles. The girls would form a circle and they'd swing around with such energy that some of the girls ended up under the seats!

"The dancing was almost continuous through the night. They used to do what they called the Johnny Miller Dance. They'd all be on the floor swinging around and then suddenly I'd stop the music. Then they'd march around, the boys one-way, the girls the other and when I began to play again, they'd grab the nearest partner. That mixed them all up. It was fun."

All the musicians carried their own instruments with them; all except for Mrs Connelly, of course. She'd have to rely on whatever she found in the hall. "Oh, I played on some dreadful pianos, some where half the notes wouldn't play. Dreadful! But there were some good ones, too.

"And I remember the halls: the Excelsior, Sheehan's Hall, the Soldiers' Theatre, the Plaza, the Crystal Palace, which became the Cairo. At the Cairo, the silent pictures were on above the dances. When my children were

babies, they always came with me to the dances and I tucked them away in their basket behind the piano, but as they got older, I let them go upstairs to see the films. I remember on a nice night, they could open up the roof and show the stars and moon while people watched the films. I used to let my daughter come down to the Dance Hall after the film and she was allowed to dance the last dance."

In the 30s at the Cairo they had non-stop dances. Another pianist, Bert Nichols, played for those because they went on for more than a day. "They had a piano and an accordion. I saw Johnny Wells, the postman who was a good dancer, collapse after 24 hours, but Bert, he just kept on playing. How they stood it, I don't know."

There were other bands in the area but Mrs Connelly's Cairo Orchestra was the most sought after. "We played at the Union once a month. The Rex Revellers started up when I took a rest from playing for a while. It was Matt Cameron's band. Bob O'Halloran was the pianist. He was a great pianist, but a poor dance player. There is a certain knack, you see. I would sit and play and I would watch the dancers. I couldn't bear to see anyone out of step. I would have to start again with the set dances. There were plenty of people who just didn't have the sense of it, but they always had a good time."

Some weeks, Mrs Connelly didn't get a night off. "One night, we played at Kongwak until 3 and then that evening I had to play on my own at Almurta. Nobody was with me. I was playing away and I fell sound asleep while I was playing. Everybody roared laughing. I usually got 15 shillings a night when I played on my own. If we all played at a large hall, we each got 30 shillings for the night. It was very handy to get the income when the strikes were on."

Mrs Connelly and her orchestra played for the first ball at the Union Theatre. "Annie (Legg) Gilmour was the Queen of the Ball. I remember that," said Mrs Connelly. Her band was also playing when 'A Part of My Heart' was first sung at the Union. In fact it was her husband, Jack, who sang it. "It turned into a duet because Jack forgot the words half way through. Our daughter, Thelma, was standing off-stage and she started to sing the song to get her dad going again. Mr Philpot heard her and brought her out on stage. She held her dad's hand and the two of them finished the song together. It was wonderful."

Mrs Connelly said she lived a good life. "I loved playing. The last dance was always 'No Place Like Home.'"

- c. r. landon