

## **When Bebop came to Durham Hall – 1943-1945**

### **Durham Hall prior to World War II**

George Hill (1802-1883), the son of convict parents, became a wealthy butcher and innkeeper in Sydney, and in 1850 was elected Lord Mayor. In 1835 he built a grand Georgian villa in Surry Hills and named it Durham Hall. He lived there until his death, after which it became a boarding house for a time, and was eventually purchased by the German Concordia Club in 1925. However, the Club was forced to close on the outbreak of World War II when many of its members were interned as enemy aliens.



**Figure 1 Durham Hall**

### **Overpaid, oversexed and over here**

The attack on Pearl Harbour by the Imperial Japanese Navy in December 1941 abruptly brought the United States into the war, and by early 1942 there were 250,000 American servicemen (GIs) stationed in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane. At this time, very few Australians travelled overseas, and their knowledge of Americans was largely gained from Hollywood movies. For young Australians, these Americans represented wealth, glamour and modernity. They were paid twice as much as the Australians, and were ready to spend their money on a good time<sup>1</sup>.

A major area of the impact of GIs in Australia was the presence of African Americans. American troops were segregated by colour, and Australia was predominantly Anglo-Saxon. Many were sent to outback areas, but when they were stationed in large cities, separate facilities were usually provided for them, including recreation centres.

## **The Booker T. Washington Club at Durham Hall**

The US Military authorities began to operate a recreation club for their African American servicemen at Durham Hall at the beginning of 1943<sup>2</sup>, calling it the Booker T. Washington Club, after the African American educator, author, and adviser to American Presidents. However, the Booker T. must have been a wild place in the early months, because the Vice Squad asked the US Military to close it down in October 1943, mainly due to white girls consorting with the servicemen in and around the premises<sup>3</sup>.

## **American Red Cross takes over the Booker T.**

Then in December 1943, the Club reopened as an activity of the American Red Cross. This transformed the place, both in appearance and in the style of recreation offered. Joan Clarke (1920-2004) was a Sydney woman who worked as a voluntary typist and secretary at the Booker T. in 1944 and 1945. In her autobiography she describes from first-hand experience the life of the Club during this time. In the large reception room were lounge chairs and tables where GIs sat around reading, talking or playing cards. Now and then one would come to reception to ask the way to Luna Park or Bondi.

Dances were held Wednesday and Saturday nights, and the big hall was packed with GIs and their dance partners, jitterbugging to the music of an Australian band. The girls invited to the Club were mostly Aboriginal or Pacific Islanders, because of the colour bar in operation. The men were on R&R leave for a week or two, and Joan found that most were friendly and courteous with a wonderful sense of humour.

## **Bebop jazz livens up Durham Hall**

On dance nights at the Booker T., the grand old building would shake to the rhythms of jazz and swing music. Good dance bands, singers and musicians had become harder for the Club's director to find, partly because so many had been enlisted into the army's Entertainment Unit. Despite this, many of Sydney's top jazz musicians played in the Club Band, such as saxophone players Merv Acheson (1922-1987) and Rolph Pommer (1914-1980), guitarist Ray Price (1921-1990) and pianist Jim Somerville (1922- )<sup>4</sup>. A very young Don Burrows (1928- ) played one of his first gigs there.



Figure 2 Don Burrows (State Library of NSW)

Jim Somerville liked the freedom to play faster than fast or slower than slow at the Booker T. Play lists were often thrown out the window, and Somerville recalled that “we played what we could get away with. Songs weren’t important - it was how you played them”. He recalls playing fast blues improvisations for 45 minutes while the servicemen jitterbugged with their partners<sup>5</sup>.

In the early 1940s, a new style of jazz called bebop came out of America as a counter to the popularity of swing – jazz musicians wanted a style of fast and exciting non-dancing music that demanded attention. Famous exponents of bebop were the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie (1917-1993), the saxophonist Charlie “Bird” Parker (1920-1955) and the pianist Thelonius Monk (1917-1982). Many of the Australian jazz musicians at the Booker T. gave their services for free, just to play for the Club’s appreciative audiences, or for the chance to play with GIs who were jazz musicians before the war.

The writer Clem Gorman interviewed musicians who played in the Booker T., and they said there was extensive learning by the Australian players during the nightly dance sessions. Influential musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie, saxophonist Coleman Hawkins and pianist Teddy Wilson were involved in skill-sharing jam sessions with locals during the 1940s and 1950s in various Sydney nightclubs and jazz clubs<sup>6</sup>.

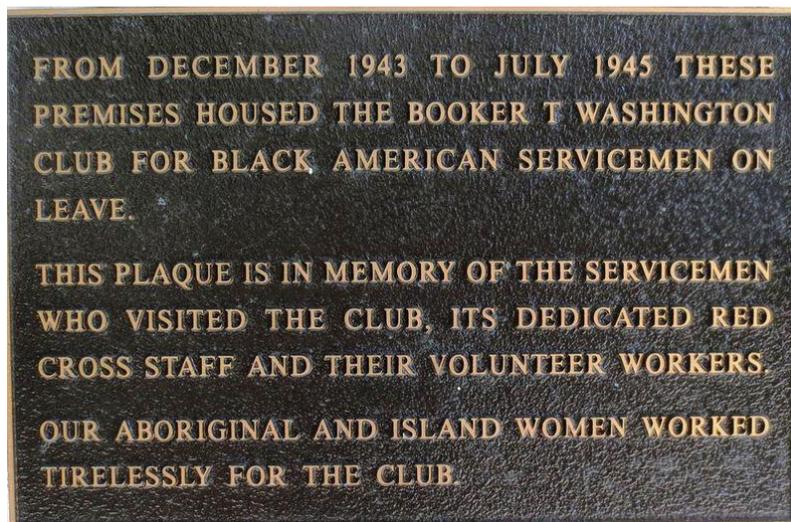


Figure 3 Plaque outside Durham Hall

### **The British Navy takes over the Club**

By 1944, there were complaints from some church leaders<sup>7</sup> and politicians<sup>7</sup> about the Booker T., and requests to move it elsewhere. This issue generated debate among the city’s worthies, and the Reverend Alan Walker, speaking from the pulpit of the Waverley Methodist Church, attacked the prejudice shown by Australians to African American servicemen. He said that Australia should not become another Georgia, and urged his flock to talk to African Americans in the street and to ignore any insults or intimidation from locals<sup>9</sup>.

Early in 1945 it was announced that American Red Cross activities were gradually being curtailed in Australia<sup>10</sup>. This was in line with the American forces pushing further north towards Japan and moving their administration to the Philippines. From April 1945, the clubs were converted to Navy Branches of the British Centre<sup>11</sup>, and in July 1945 the American Red Cross handed Durham Hall over

to the British Navy. This ended the liveliest and most colourful period in Durham Hall's history. It was sure to be a much quieter place after this.

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