

The Kids Went Wild in Batavia



Terry Collins

"The memory of things gone is important to a jazz musician."

- Louis Armstrong

Joey Alexander's nomination for two Grammy Awards has created a heightened international interest in Indonesia's jazz scene, yet he is not the first child prodigy to emerge here playing jazz piano.

Jazz arrived in what was then the Dutch East Indies nearly a century ago, in 1919, and its entry represented a socio-cultural shift among the Dutch and Indo-European teenagers, much as the advent of rock 'n' roll did in the mid-fifties in the USA. Because nothing happens in isolation, it is important to consider why this was.

According to the second complete census survey of 1930, the population of Batavia population was 435,000, having grown from 306,000 in 1920, while the population of the Dutch East Indies was 60,727,233. Of these millions, just 240,417 were people with European legal status in the colony, and about 75% of those were 'Eurasians', the children of Dutch men who had taken 'native' wives for the duration of their contracts here.

There were also a number of foreign traders, including British, who were 'in need' of entertainment and amusement such as that experienced in Europe and the United States. This was provided by upmarket hotels which had their own house bands, theatres and a network of official Societeit Concordia which offered theatrical and musical performances with dancing at weekends



Societeit Concordia at Weltevreden, Batavia , 1920

Jazz grew out of ragtime music ("ragged" rhythm) which originated in the red-light districts of African-American communities in St. Louis and was popularised by the publication of sheet music for piano performances by Ernest Hogan. Another African-American, Scott Joplin, registered *Maple Leaf Rag* in 1899; the earliest surviving recording of the tune is from 1906 by the United States Military Band. One can only guess at their marching routine when they played it.

Ragtime was popular in Batavia. For example, in May 1913 the Elite Cinema and Deca Park Theatre, which had live vaudeville acts, featured the American ragtime comedian and dancer Tom Richards, "*who sang 'How Do You Do, My Baby?' and other American songs*".

On February 26th 1917 the all-white Original Dixieland 'Jass' Band (ODJB) recorded two sides of a shellac 78rpm disk, *Dixie Jass Band One Step/Livery Stable Blues*, which are considered to be the first jazz recordings. Ragtime went out of style

Just two years later jazz, no longer 'jass', arrived in Batavia with the San Francisco-based Columbia Park Boys Club's act - a group of 42 missionary boys. Their eclectic program included singing, dancing, "tumbling" (gymnastics), with marches and jazz played on cornet, trombone, trumpet, saxophone, with percussion. A reporter from the daily newspaper of the East Indies, *Het Nieuws van den Dag*, dismissed the Boys Club show as a "*sort of cocktail entertainment*". Although he found it amusing, the "*loud and noisy music*" gave him "*stomach cramps*".

THE COLUMBIA PARK BOYS' CLUB OF SAN FRANCISCO.

SOME twelve or fourteen years ago, a few young men in San Francisco conceived the idea of going into one of the poorer, crowded quarters of the city and seeing what they could do for the boys of the neighborhood. There is something original, live, spontaneous, and interesting about a boy that appealed to them, and they liked boys anyway.

They formed a club just for boys. The club became strong, and its fame spread so that it was known in many cities for its remarkable work. Then these young men drifted apart. One went to New York and interested himself in boys' work there. Others traveled and studied, and one began to write about purple cows and chewing-gum men and things, and became famous.

fr. **The Columbia Park Boys' Club of San Francisco by Victor L. O'Brien 1901**

But the new music proved popular, particularly with older teenagers. As phonographs were already part of household furnishings the heavy shellac discs were brought into the country from, it is suggested, Shanghai via Singapore. Live music surfaced too in up-market hotels whose in-house staff bands, known as 'string' bands because banjos and violins predominated, soon began to include jazz in their repertoires for matinee and weekend dances.

It wasn't long before high school and vocational college students decided to form their own dance bands playing the new music. However, it wasn't in Batavia but in Makassar, Celebes, now Sulawesi, that the first band was started. In 1920,

W.M. van Eldik formed the Black & White Band with his 17 year old violin playing brother-in-law Wage Rudolf Supratman, now better known as the composer of the country's national anthem *Indonesia Raya*. They played at weddings and birthday parties. (There's a photo of the band in the Youth Pledge Museum on Jl. Kramat Raya, Central Jakarta,)

The Batavia Jazz Band formed in 1922 with a line up of six(!) banjoists, two C-melody saxophonists, a pianist, an acoustic bassist and drummer, all of whom had Dutch names. However, Pater who played the trombone and Geduld the cornet were possibly from Suriname, the Dutch colony in the Caribbean. All were amateur, but their influences stretched to Ted Lewis and Paul Whiteman as interpreted from sheet music.

The following year the band folded and two of the banjo players, brothers Wim and Piet Bruyn van Rozenburg joined with four other students at King Willem III School to form The Royal Jazz Band, but on violin and alto sax respectively. They took their name from Koningsplein (King's Square, now Monas) because they had a regular booking at the Railway Hotel on the east side, where Gambir Station is now.



King Willem III School

The land in Jl. Salemba is now occupied by the National Library.

Another band on the scene at the time was prosaically called The Original Jazz Band. It is now notable for its drummer: Moh. Aroef was the first recorded Indonesian jazz musician.

In 1926, a number of Filipino jazz musicians enlivened the scene, and 1928 saw the visit of a real American jazz band, that of drummer Jack Carter touring south-east Asia after finishing a contract at the Plaza Hotel in Shanghai. Their live sound being so much better than recorded 'platten', they inspired the young local musicians.

A new band was formed at the end of that year with saxes, trumpet and trombone, with Moh. Aroef on drums. They secured regular gigs in the restaurant of the Deca Park Theatre (north side of Koningsplein) on Saturday evenings after the film show, and at the Railway Hotel whose manager was Paatje Vos. At the end of 1926 he became manager of the newly opened Tjikini Swimming Pool at the Zoo (now Taman Ismail Mazurki), and the band, now called the Swimming Bath Orchestra, played the Sunday matinees, which started at 11am.

"The visitors first had a swim for half an hour and spent the rest of the matinee dancing to the lively music. At two o'clock they went home for their afternoon nap."

Yes, it was a time of leisure for the very few.



Bands came and went as the personnel left school, were posted outside Batavia or returned to the Netherlands, so we jump to 1930 and the entry of Charlie Overbeek Bloem to the scene. Born in 1912, he was just six years old when he took his first step to fame by playing Paderewski's *Minuet in G* at Schouburg Weltevreden, now Gedung Kesenian.



Photo © Tropenmuseum, part of the National Museum of World Cultures

Bloem was to prove a musical driving force not only in Batavia but also nationwide. At 18 he was leading a trio, the Jazz-O-Maniacs, which played in the King Willem III School hall. He was also a key player in The Silver Kings, named after a cigarette brand. They had gigs at élite hotels such as the Hotel des Indes, the Batavian Yacht Club and other society venues such as Societeit Concordia in Bandung., regularly broadcast live and radio broadcasts.

In 1936 the semi-professional band recorded two sides of a 78rpm disc for HMV, *Dinah* and *Ma, He's Making Eyes At Me*, which, sadly, doesn't seem to have survived.

In early 1938, Bloem resigned from the band and focussed as a solo pianist broadcasting live on Saturday nights on the government approved radio network heard throughout the archipelago. On December 7th 1941, when Pearl Harbour was attacked, jazz in the Dutch East Indies came to an abrupt end as all able-bodied men were mobilised and despatched to their defensive positions to prepare for the Japanese invasion.

The next chapter in *A History of Jazz in Indonesia* began in late August 1945 when Charlie Overbeek Bloem was released from the Japanese internment camp in Bandung.



Drugs and Jazz in Batavia

The first time that the music genre was heard in the Dutch East Indies was in 1919. This was a couple of years after February 26th 1917 when the first jazz sides were recorded.



(Listen [here](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WojNaU4-kl) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5WojNaU4-kl>)

Whether this 'platen' arrived in Batavia is not known. Most of the bands used sheet music as well as recordings when they set their repertoires. Naturally, this led me to investigate both the sound of the music and the nature of 'society' at the time.

The Silver Kings recorded the only two known jazz sides in 1936: *Ma, He's Making Eyes At Me*, written in 1921, and *Dinah*, written in 1925.

Ted Lewis (1890-1971) was cited by Batavian jazz musicians as an influence, and he had a hit in 1921 with *Ma, He's Making Eyes At Me*. This is the version by Isham Jones: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gILpg5YWBS8>.

In 1930, Ted Lewis' version of *Dinah* was a top ten hit in the USA. Was this the version which reached Batavia? <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rh4ekgwKl8>

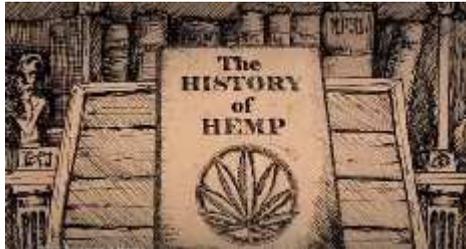
Many early jazz songs have references to recreational narcotics, particularly marijuana / cannabis because it got them the musicians 'high' and 'mellow'.



Fats Waller sang *The Reefer Song* and *Vipers Drag*

The following words: **reefer** (= marijuana cigarette) / **weed** (marijuana leaves) / **roach** (the last bit of the reefer) crop up in a surprising number of jazz lyrics. You'll discover that many well-known jazz musicians such as Cab Calloway, Fats Waller, and Ella Fitzgerald got 'high', in Ella's case, when she was 'feeling low'.

Did the jazz pioneers in Batavia also indulge?



Indian hemp, as cannabis / marijuana was generally referred to until the twentieth century, is one of the most versatile plants known to mankind. Its industrial uses made it a major cash export from the Dutch East Indies¹, and it was recorded as hemp fibres were used for the sails and ropes of the fleets of ships engaged in the Spice Trade. Although used rags (linen) were the most likely source of their maps, they were possibly printed on hemp paper. In the mid-nineteenth century as wood pulp became the major source, both industries faded away.

In his book *Herbarium Amboinense*, published in 1741, the German-Dutch botanist G. E. Rumphius wrote about the recreational and medicinal applications of the cannabis cultivated in Ambon with seeds from Java.

In the Molluccas, cannabis roots were consumed to treat gonorrhoea, while its leaves were sometimes combined with nutmeg and brewed as a tea for the purpose of alleviating asthma, pleuritic chest pain and bile secretion.

Furthermore, cannabis tea, prepared with dried *cannabis sativa* leaves, was consumed recreationally to enhance the sense of well-being. Local populations referred to this as *hayal*, similar to the modern Indonesian word *khayal*, a state of fantasy and imagination.

Rumphius also observed that among Muslims, *cannabis indica* leaves, which were smoked with tobacco, produced effects varying from aggression to sadness and melancholy.¹

[*Recommendation: Muslims should try cannabis sativa and learn to chill. Ganja is not mentioned in the Holy Koran, so although it may not strictly be halal – meaning 'good', it could be categorised as makrooh, or "doubtful". Several holy books such as Mujarabat and Tajul Muluk provide religious grounds for medicinal use of cannabis. These holy books, translated from ancient Malay in the 16th century, suggest that the cannabis plant is a crucial herbal remedy for various sicknesses such as diabetes.]*

None of this answers the question of whether the jazz lovers enhanced their listening pleasure with 'recreational' drugs. That they could is 'proven' by this

advertisement in *Bataviaasch Nieuwsblad*, the colony's leading daily newspaper.



Following international agreements at the 1925 International Opium Convention, the Dutch colonial government issued the *Verdoovende Middelen Ordonnantie* (narcotics decree) in 1927 which imposed restrictions on access to cannabis.

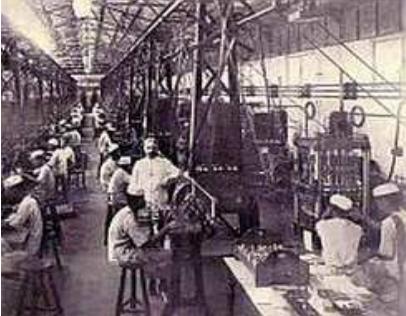
The early Batavian jazz bands played at parties and school dances, but as jazz became more accepted, and the teenagers matured into 'responsible adulthood', venues also went upmarket. So, if cannabis was now illicit, what was the libation of choice of the high society folk who had enough wealth and time to dance to jazz music at the prestigious Hotel des Indes?



One may assume that their alcohol of choice was *jenever* (or gin). However, although the Dutch and Indo-Europeans may have continued to enjoy cannabis in Aceh and pockets of west and south Sumatra where it was, and still is, a 'condiment', there were other legal recreational drugs available: opium and cocaine, both of which featured in jazz recordings.

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From its founding in 1602, and for most of the 17th century, the Dutch East India Company (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*; VOC) enjoyed huge profits from its spice monopoly. However, being beholden to their shareholders back in

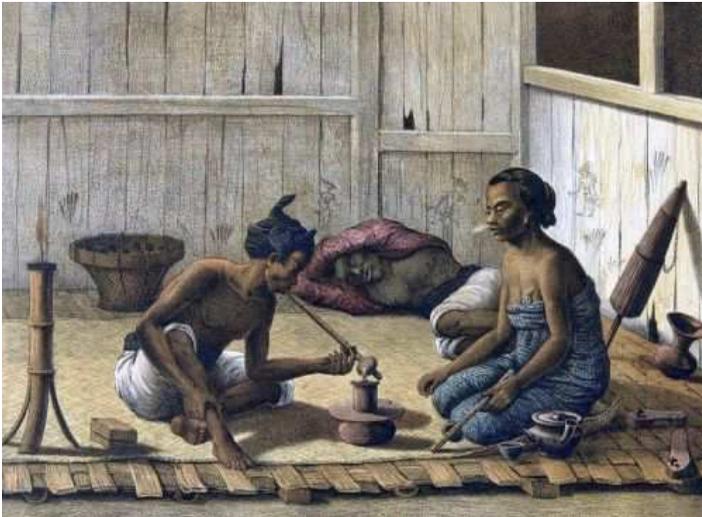
Holland, they were not good employers. So in order to supplement their incomes, senior officers engaged in "*private-account trading*", including opium smuggling.



Opium processing factory in Jember, Java

This was chiefly sourced from Bengal, then in India, now Bangladesh. When the VOC collapsed, bankrupt, on December 31st 1799, the Dutch government took over its assets (and debts), and the Dutch East Indies became a colony. From then on until 1942, the Dutch government controlled the opium industry, called the *Opium Regie*. Its revenues became one of the principal sources financing the Dutch colonial administration.

We can assume that the smoking of opium was not prevalent among jazz lovers because of the effects. Initially, it leads to a state of euphoria; however, that then quickly turns to a sleepy, sedated state for the user. An evening of jitterbugging was, therefore, out of the question. Besides, it was intended for the 'natives'.



But what about other recreational narcotics, such as cocaine? As Ella Fitzgerald sang: *They call it wacky dust; It brings a dancing jag.* It was most suitable then.

What is more, it was readily available. Joseph Spillane suggested that "*the most successful alternative coca growing venture outside Latin America before 1945 was in the Dutch East Indies on the island of Java. ... Dutch colonial coca production began to dominate the global markets in the 1910s and crowded South American producers from these markets. It is not far fetched to argue that the Dutch were the drug lords of the interbellum.*" ⁵



Luke Jordan - Cocaine (1927)

I called my Cora, hey hey

She come on sniffin' with her nose all sore,

The doctor swore she's gonna smell no more

Sayin', run doctor, ring the bell - the women in the alley

I'm simply wild about my good cocaine

Cab Calloway first recorded **Minnie The Moocher** in 1931.

[She] messed around with a bloke named Smokie.

She loved him though he was cokey

He took her down to Chinatown

and showed her how to kick the gong [opium] around.

There can be few, if any, Batavian jazzers still alive to confirm that narcotics fuelled the pre-war fervour for a music genre which has continued to this day, nigh on 100 years since it first surfaced. That the likes of such jazz giants as Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Chet Baker, Joe Pass and, to the surprise of this writer, Ella Fitzgerald were fuelled by so-called 'recreational drugs', and that some succumbed, is historical fact.

Any suggestion that the early jazz scene in Batavia was rife with drug taking is pure conjecture. But it is also historical fact that only a privileged few could enjoy the scene, and they were from the same class which monopolised the narcotics trade.

Sources

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