

The Casino, Bondi Beach and the Palais de Danse: Sydney's first nightclub



*A rare photo of the Casino on Campbell Parade showing its proximity to the Hotel Bondi, c. mid-1920s
Photographer: Samuel Wood*

The Casino at Bondi Beach (aka the Bondi Casino) has been described as Sydney's first nightclub, and while this is unconfirmed, it certainly it was one of the earliest. It opened in 1923 with Will James' Band in residence. It was not a 'casino' in the contemporary sense of a gambling venue, but was a 'casino' in the now superseded use of the word meaning a building or large room used for entertainment and dancing.

The Casino is also referred to as the Palais de Danse or the Bondi Palais de Danse. It appears that the company owning the site was Palais de Danse Limited, as blueprints submitted to Waverley Council in 1923 are for a 'Proposed Casino' for the Palais de Danse Limited. The external awning had 'CASINO' in large lettering, but a proposed sign at the top of the building read 'Bondi Palais de Danse.' Despite this confusion over its name, the venue refers to itself in its advertisements as The Casino, Bondi Beach.

In the 1920s Bondi Beach had been newly discovered by artist and writers and was rapidly developing a slightly bohemian and certainly very hedonistic atmosphere. Bondi had usurped Manly as Sydney's premier surfing beach, with Sydneysiders in their thousands flocking to the surf and to promenade along the beachfront. Campbell Parade was being transformed to reflect Bondi's new status, the Hotel Astra and Hotel Bondi had been built and it was in this environment that the Casino opened.

A 'colourful racing identity' opens a nightclub

The owner of the Casino was David McFarlane McLachlan Kerr, nicknamed 'Andy', who was one of Sydney's early 'colourful racing identities'. In the 1910s and 1920s he was a high profile bookie at Sydney racecourses, known as the 'Coogee Bunyip' because of his love of that beach. Andy Kerr was very wealthy, very flashy and owned a number of businesses, including theatres and a city jewellery shop, as well as the Casino.

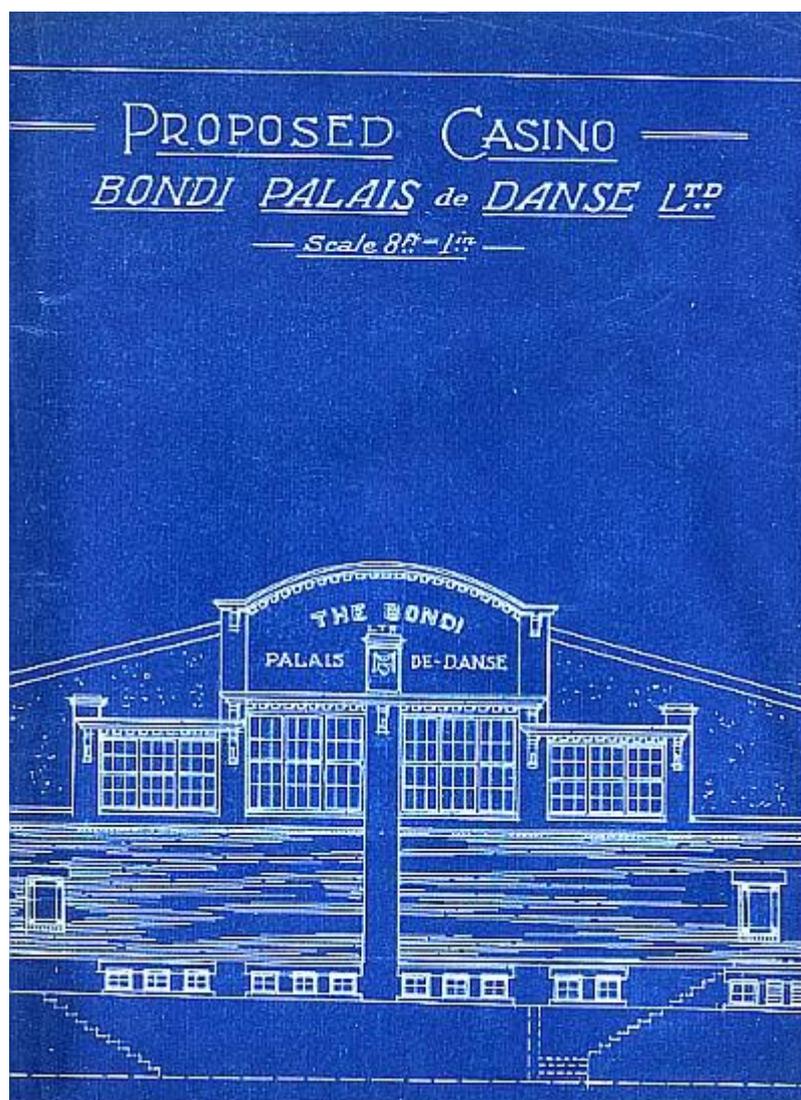
The Casino itself was on an enormous site. Located on the corner of Roscoe Street and

Campbell Parade, directly opposite Bondi Beach, it took up half the Campbell Parade block between Roscoe Street and Curlewis Street and stretched back up Roscoe Street as far as the laneway which ran behind the Hotel Bondi.

Inside the Casino a huge lavishly furnished central dance area was complemented by semi-private sitting compartments, called 'logues', to either side of the public entertainment area. A very high ceiling added to the sense of the large scale and size of the building.

The Casino, Bondi Beach advertised itself as:

'Sydney's most popular dancing rendezvous. Specially designed for dancing this palatial building quickly established itself in public favour. Its situation overlooking the Ocean is, of course, unique. Its luxurious furnishings, elegant appointments and exquisite Palm Court are all in keeping with the refined atmosphere that is the keynote to the Casino's success. The floor of Tasmanian blackwood is perfect; the full strength All-Australian band a revelation in the possibilities of syncopated melody. Nowhere would you find a pleasanter place in which to enjoy the modern dance or listen to good music played amid congenial surroundings. A visit to The Casino should form part of every Sydney visitor's program.'



The Casino's weekly program

An advertisement for the Casino in the 1920s lists the weekly program as follows:

Monday-Wednesday: Popular nights. Admission 2/2 (including tax). Dances, 3d. per couple. Private Loges 2/2 each person (plus admission fee). No charge for Dancing.

Thursday: Popular Supper Nights. Prices as above. Dress optional. Supper is served as required.

Friday: Supper Night. Admission 4/4 (including tax). No charge for Dancing.

Saturday: Matinee: 3.pm to 5pm. Admission 2/2 to all parts. No charge for Dancing. Evening: 8pm to 11.15pm. Prices same as Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

Programs for the Casino, printed in newspapers and magazines, also list which band would be playing and even a list of the specific piece of music which would be played, and in what order. In 1928, taking advantage of Leap Year where traditionally women can ask men to marry them, a Leap Year Bride's Ball was held at the Casino.

In 1923 there was also another dance venue called the Palaise de Danse operating at Bondi Junction, it is unknown if this venue was connected to the one at Bondi Beach.

The end of the Casino

Andy Kerr lost all his money during the Great Depression and the Casino felt the brunt of this, closing in 1931. For the next six years the cavernous dance venue became the Rialto Skating Rink. In 1937 it briefly became a dance venue again, the Rex Palais, which opened and closed the same year.

The site was redeveloped as the Kings Theatre/Cinema, on two levels, opening in 1937. On the street frontage facing Campbell Parade a milkbar, Vallis's Milkbar, became a local landmark, as popular with the late night cinema crowd as those leaving the beach after a long day in the sun. The cinema closed in 1969 and in later years the Hakoah Club occupied the site. In the 1980s the building was demolished and today the Breakers building occupies the site.

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