

The Day Duke Ellington Came to Town

Celebrating the Duke Ellington Centennial, 1899-1999



by Jan S. Weaver

Duke Ellington — jazz pianist, composer, bandleader, Pulitzer Prize and Medal of Freedom winner — is said to have played 20,000 performances in the U.S. and around the world in a career that lasted some 50 years.

This year, we celebrate the centennial of Ellington's birth, the beginning of a life filled with talent, achievement, accomplishment and triumph over amazing odds.

On Valentine's Day 1952, Corpus Christi was fortunate enough to be the site of one of Ellington's 20,000 performances.

The Duke Ellington Orchestra was invited to play in Corpus Christi by Ralph Galvan Jr. At the time, Galvan was a professional musician and manager of the popular Galvan Ballroom which his father, Rafael Galvan Sr., opened in 1950.

"Duke Ellington was already a legend at this time," said Galvan Jr. "He was at the level of Tommy Dorsey and had started in the 1920s and 1930s. "He had tremendous compositions such as *Sophisticated Lady*, *Mood Indigo*, *Take the "A" Train* and *Don't Get Around Much Anymore*."

The younger Galvan booked Ellington Orchestra through Music Corporation of America for \$1500. In Corpus Christi, "touring bands were a big deal," according to Galvan Jr.

Television was not widely available and concerts and dances were the only way to hear artists. People buying tickets for the Ellington show "thoroughly appreciated his records and the legend," Galvan Jr. said, and they were eager to see him and his band in person.

Tickets were sold at the ballroom for the Ellington performance for \$3 a person. The per-

formance was sold out in advance, the 650-person Ballroom, billed as the largest in South Texas, was filled to capacity. "We had to turn many people away," said Galvan Jr.

Ellington and his orchestra arrived on a large bus and the band set up. The Galvans provided a baby grand piano for Ellington.

Before the performance that night, the orchestra tuned up in a unique way which set the tone for the whole evening, according to Gallvan Jr.

Other bands usually tuned up at the same time with each musician playing different notes and chords. Ellington's orchestra, however, started with one musician tuning up, a second player would join in on the same chord, then a third. Finally, the bass player would pick up the beat, the drummer would join in followed by the guitarist.

Eddie Galvan, Ralph's brother, also a professional musician, remembered the tuning session as being "choreographed," "very professional," and "perfectly done."

When all the orchestra members had tuned up, Ellington walked on, and the orchestra sequenced right into opening number, *Take the "A" Train*, the group's trademark song.

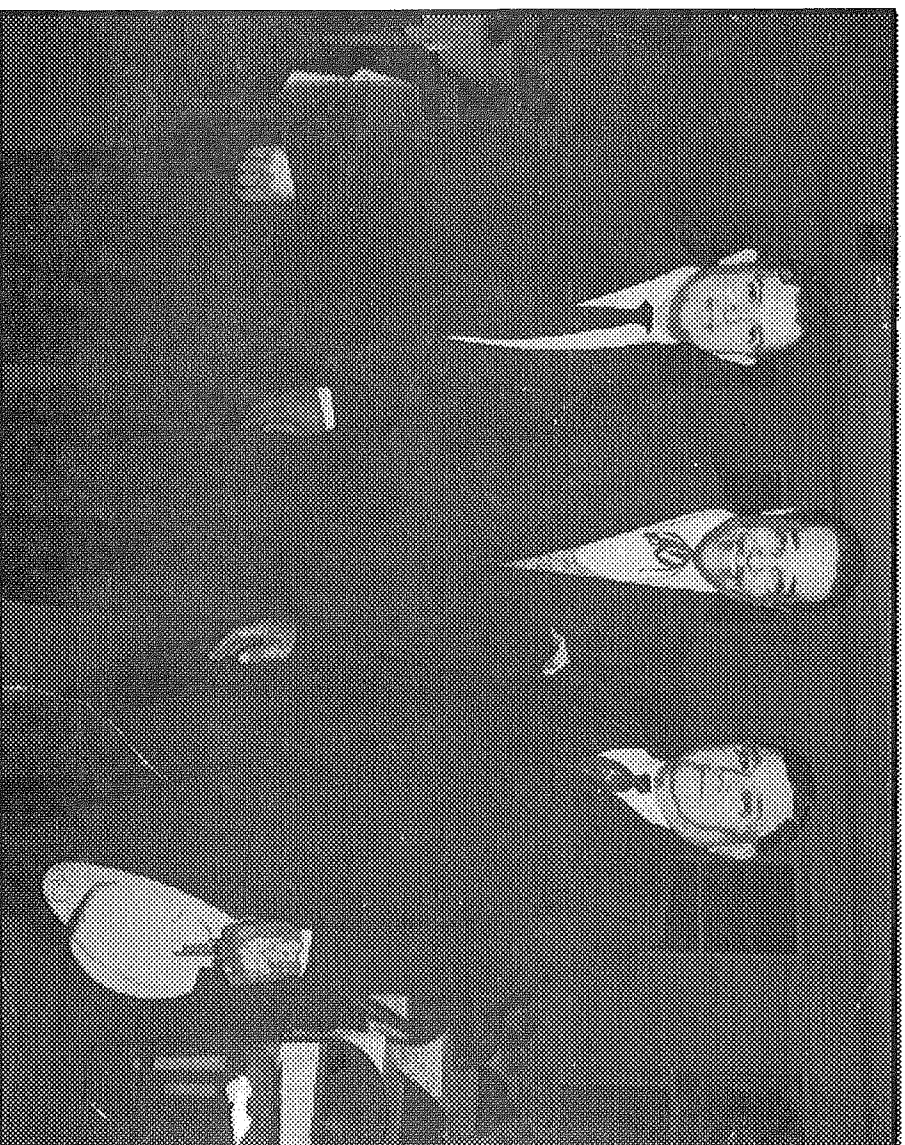
Galvan Jr. said There was great excitement in the audience. "The people there were big band

sound fans and Duke Ellington fans," he said. When Ellington appeared, the audience gave the orchestra a standing ovation and began yelling and screaming.

The Ellington orchestra played dance music, and people danced all evening. Reserved ta-

he graciously signed autographs and posed for pictures with the audience. A professional photographer from the Galvan Building took photographs.

Galvan Jr. and his father Rafael Galvan Sr. visited with Ellington during intermissions and



Duke Ellington, center, with Ralph Galvan Jr., Ballroom manager, left, and his father, owner Rafael Galvan Sr., right, at the Galvan Ballroom February 14, 1952. Ellington played to a sold-out crowd in Corpus Christi.

— Photo courtesy of Galvan Family Photo Collection, Special Collection & Archives, Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

bles were set up, but none were placed on the dance floor.

Many fans just "stood and watched the band. It was a show within a dance band," according to Galvan Jr. The crowd "was mesmerized by him. It was a two-way appreciation evening. The band appreciated the fan's response."

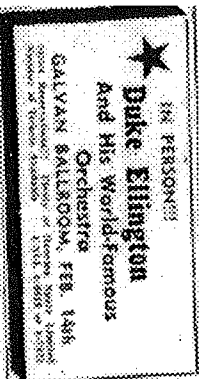
The orchestra played the many of their most popular songs that night, including *Tenderly*, featuring Willie Smith on sax. The orchestra's rendition of *In a Sentimental Mood* was "truly gorgeous," Eddie Galvan said. Ellington was all smiles, and

found him "professional and friendly."

Ellington was "warm, classy, polite," said Galvan Jr. "I felt I'd known him all my life" despite the fact that the two had just met that night. He was "a gentleman from the word go. Very courteous," said Eddie Galvan.

Ellington and the orchestra were true professionals and knew their material so well they did not need their sheet music.

Unlike many other bands, the Ellington Orchestra did not drink alcohol while performing and took precise 15 minute breaks, Eddie



Advertisement for February 1952 performance which appeared in the Corpus Christi Caller and Times.

Galvan recalled.

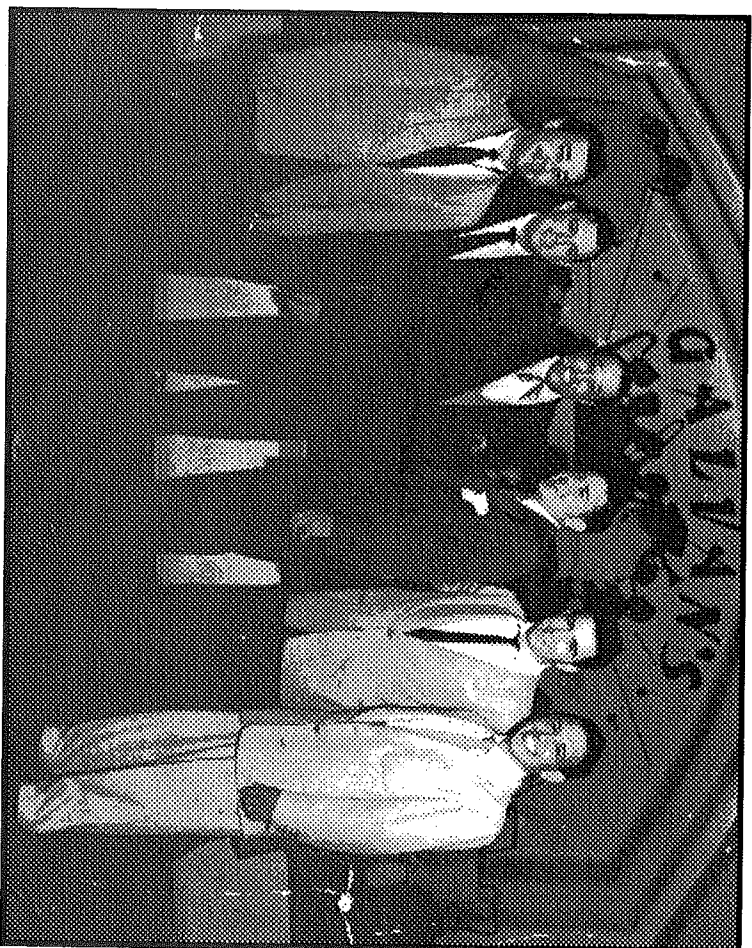
Unlike many other bands that hired local musicians to back up big-name stars, Ellington toured with the same people with whom he made recordings, Galvan Jr. said.

That Valentine's night in Corpus Christi, each of Ellington's band members was a highly-respected musician: lead alto saxophonist Willie Smith, drummer Louis Bellson and principal soloist Paul Gonsalves on tenor sax.

bass, and Britt Woodman, trombone.

During the Galvan Ballroom concert, a local musician who had been drinking told Ellington loudly between dances, "I can play better than you." Ellington simply replied, "That's great," and played it down. When the heckling continued, Frank Dolan, head of security for the ballroom, escorted the heckler out, Eddie Galvan said.

Ellington and his Orchestra



Duke Ellington and band members with Galvan family members at Galvan Ballroom after 1952 concert. Left to right: Willie Smith, lead alto saxophonist, Ralph Galvan Jr., Duke Ellington, Eddie Galvan, Louis Bellson, drummer and Sammie Galvan.

— *Photo courtesy of Galvan Family Photo Collection, Special Collections & Archives, Bell Library, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi*

Gonsalves had played in the Dizzy Gillespie and Count Basie orchestras. The majority of the musicians with Ellington's orchestra that evening were present for a performance and recording at the famous Newport Jazz Festival in July 1956.

Additional band members believed to have played in Corpus Christi that night were Russell Procope, alto sax/clarinet, Harry Carney, saxophone, Jimmy Hamilton, clarinet and Ray Nance, cornet/violin/vocalist/trumpet.

Others included: Juan Tizol, trombone, Quentin Jackson, trombone, "Cat" Anderson, trumpet, Clark Terry, trumpet, Willie Cook, trumpet, Wendell Marshall,

played from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. at the ballroom, and the time went fast. "It was four hours of nothing but an exciting evening," Galvan Jr. said.

Ellington was a "genius" who "wrote the originals he played," said Eddie Galvan. "He was a very versatile musician who performed in Carnegie Hall and in major arenas in California. His trademark was his piano playing and fabulous orchestra amplified by his composing and performing his own music."

Another fan who was there that night was Dr. C.L. Concklin who said, "The things that Ellington wrote, such as *Take the 'A' Train*, were marvelous musical creations."

When the dance ended, the Ellington band had played to a packed house in the days before air conditioning. When asked to pose for pictures (left and below) with the Galvan family, Ellington replied, "Just give me a minute," and straightened his tie and jacket and combed his hair.

Galvan Jr. recalled that, as Ellington left after the performance, he said to the Galvans, "It has been my pleasure, and we'd like to come back."

Although Ellington's music appealed to people of all walks of life, his appearance in Corpus Christi in 1952 was before the civil rights movement.

In Texas and the rest of the South, state segregation laws forced African-American citizens into second-class status.

There were also "unwritten" segregation rules forbidding racially-mixed groups at entertainment events. For these reasons, the Duke Ellington Orchestra played to an all-white audience in Corpus Christi.

And, because of the racial discrimination that accompanied segregation, there were no hotels and few restaurants in town which would serve Ellington and

his band.

Galvan Jr. recognized the irony: "How could the Ellington Orchestra be good enough to entertain but not good enough to eat at restaurants or stay at hotels?"

After the concert ended, Ellington and his orchestra left Corpus Christi and headed for San Antonio where they performed the next night.

For Galvan Jr. and others, Ellington's 1952 Corpus Christi performance "was a real treat" with a great "quality of music."

The Duke Ellington Orchestra was one of the best bands Galvan had ever seen in his years as a musician and ballroom manager.

Ellington continued to tour with his orchestra until his death in 1974.

He probably did not remember Corpus Christi out of the 20,000 places he performed, but many who saw him and his orchestra at the Galvan Ballroom February 14, 1952, recall the event fondly after 47 years.

Author Jan Weaver was the Galvan Family Photograph Collection project archivist at Special Collections & Archives at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.

Education bills provide tuition scholarships and taxpayer relief

by *Anissia Hadrick*

Among the many bills passed by the 76th Texas Legislature, three education bills should have a direct impact on South Texas.

Effective September 1, 1999, a bill by Rep. Jaime Capelo, D-Corpus Christi, gives law enforcement agencies the option of using seized drug money to fund scholarships.

The scholarships are for graduating high school seniors who want to study criminal justice or law enforcement and who plan to return to the area to work. According to Sheriff Larry Olivarez, the past two years the Sheriff's Department has seized drug money in the amount of about \$1 million. Under the program, the

department plans to give \$5,000 to 14 area high schools.

A bill by Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Laredo, effective June 19, 1999, establishes the Toward Excellence, Access, & Success (TEXAS) grant program and the Teach for Texas Grant Program.

The bill consolidates and revises financial aid, grant, and scholarship programs and provides for the education, certification, and recruitment of teachers and faculty instructors. In awarding TEXAS grants, students with the greatest financial need will receive highest priority.

Each school district is required to notify middle, junior, and high school students, teachers, counselors, and parents about

see "Bills", page 5