

# Ellingtonia

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Theodore R. Hudson, Editor

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## Jerry Valburn Passes

Jerry Valburn, a member of our Society and one of the most prominent international Duke Ellington authorities and collectors, died on 26 March in Deerfield, Florida, where he spent his winters.

In an announcement to his “many friends and fellow music appreciators worldwide,” his wife of 62 years, Barbara Valburn, states that “Despite being separated by a great deal of geography, he felt very close to so many of you.”

Beginning relatively early in life, by 1991 he had amassed one of the largest collections of Ellington recordings and other materials, which he donated to the Library of Congress. Known officially as the Valburn/Ellington Collection, it contains, according to a Library of Congress document available online, some 15,000 Ellington commercial as well as un-issued and private sound recordings. The collection also has photographs, printed music, articles and clippings, memorabilia, and other collectibles.

He is well known for his production of recordings, especially the Duke Ellington Treasury Series (DETS) of radio broadcasts. The latest, Volume 14, was released by Storyville in 2009. Over the years he was joined by Jack Towers, who did the re-mastering and other technical preparations for the series.

Among Valburn’s publications are reference works *The Directory of Duke Ellington’s Recordings* (1986) and *Duke Ellington on Compact Disc: An Index and Text of Recorded Works of Duke Ellington* (1993).

He was a key person in the 1981 formation of the Duke Ellington Study Group of 11 devotees, which led to 20 International Ellington Conferences. After several meetings in members’ homes, including one at the Valburns’, and at a breakfast for the group hosted by him at the 1982 International Association of Jazz Record Collectors convention in Detroit, the idea for an international conference was solidified, the first of which was hosted by our Society in 1983.

We extend to Barbara Valburn, the family, and his other loved ones our sincere condolences.

## Swing It, Alice Babs

by Peter MacHare, Program Coordinator

Our program for the merry, merry month of May will feature another Ducale vocalist, the glorious Alice Babs. Ellington fans know her best as a vocalist for the second and third Concerts of Sacred Music, but Alice Babs has enjoyed a long and wildly successful career. Performing since the age of 12, she achieved instant fame in her native Sweden as a music and movie idol. Her discography includes more than 800 recordings.

We will present *Alice Babs-Swing It*, a video documentary of her life [see our page 2] as well as recordings with and without Ellington. If you would like a homework assignment, go to YouTube.com, search Alice Babs, and you will be able to see many fine moments from her astonishing career.

The program will be on **Saturday, 1 May 2010 at 7 pm at Grace Lutheran Church, 16th and Varnum Streets NW**, in beautiful, pollen-filled, Washington, DC.

## Naming of a West End Park In Honor of Ellington Proposed

A small park in Washington, DC’s West End, commonly referred to as Triangle Park, will likely be officially named Duke Ellington Park. It is bounded by New Hampshire Avenue, M, and 21st Streets and is abutted on one side by the east end of Ward Place, the block where Ellington was born.

A resolution to do so has already been unanimously passed by the District of Columbia’s Advisory Neighborhood Commission 2A (ANC2A). As we prepare this issue of *Ellingtonia*, Rebecca Coder, AAC2A Chair, writes that the “legislation is currently moving through DC Council and should be ready for this year’s event.” The event of which she speaks is a program at the park on Ellington’s birthday on 29 April.

Anita Diliberto, an ANC2A board member who is a member of neighborhood group West End Friends,

*Continued on page 3 under “Ellington Park”*

## Alice Babs - Swing It! by Lasse Zackrisson

Vax Records DVD1011. Dialogue in Swedish, Subtitles in Nine Languages.

Reviewed by Theodore (Ted) Hudson

In addition to her superb voice, those fortunate enough to have met her, for example at the International Duke Ellington Conferences, have found much about Alice Babs the person to admire. She is congenial, gracious, and although a consummate artist, engagingly unassuming. This documentary shows more attributes for which to admire her.

Alice Babs has had a lifelong love for music. Ellington devotees know her primarily, of course, as singer of his sacred music. The video reveals her versatility as a jazz, swing, Elizabethan, pop, folk, and classical vocalist as well—the latter, we learn, without traditional formal conservatory training.

The DVD is chock full of photographs, running commentary by her and others, and excerpts from concerts, commercial and private recordings, and films. Among them are scenes from the movie *Swing It Magistern*, of her singing with the Ellington orchestra at Santa Maria del Mar in Barcelona, and at the end a photo of Alice as a very young girl standing in an arm chair.



Hildur Alice Nilsson was born 26 January 1924 in Kalmur, Sweden, the daughter of Hildur, a “telephonist,” and Jean, a silent movie piano player until sound movies replaced them. She recalls that she learned to sing more from her mother than from her pianist father and that at 3½ she sang carols “and people danced around me. That’s where my desire to entertain was born.” As a school girl she was interested in everything to do with music, including yodeling, which she learned with young friends and for which her father put together a “proper” yodeling song for her. At age 13, she had a line in a film, and at 15 her father obtained from government authorities permission for her to sing in a café. Fortuitously, a woman once chanced upon Alice singing, was impressed and offered to give her lessons. An agreement was reached whereby Alice and her mother would stay in the woman’s home while Alice was being taught, and her mother would compensate the mentor by serving as the homemaker.

Her career took off with four films. An important one because of the controversy it generated was *Swing It Magistern*, about a teacher who got into trouble when caught teaching a student played by Alice to swing. Hostility to swing, common among adults at the time and place, was represented by the school principal. Some considered it a sin to sing jazz. Publicly, Alice was a “hussy,” but such sentiments did not bother her: “They simply didn’t know better,” she says. On the other hand, she was a hero among youth, or as one commentator states, “Alice Babs was a pin-up for the young.”

During the war years, the Nazis would not let Alice sing in Copenhagen, which they controlled, because she sang jazz. But when she, accompanied by her mother, did get to Malmo, Denmark, despite the town’s being occupied, there were crowds of people in the streets around her hotel. The occupation in Norway was much worse, so she was not allowed to sing. Her concerts in Finland were for charity.

The first time she saw Nils-Ivar Nilson was at a dance with which his father was involved as secretary of an association. “I saw this boy who I liked so much as soon as I saw him [laughs]. It was like for the king and queen . . . We caught each other’s eye and he understood that we would dance.” Later she was to say, “I am so happy to have married a man who knew what it entailed” to be married to a career singer.

And where does Ellington enter the picture? “Duke Ellington caught my interest from the very first moment. . . I’d seen him at the Concert Hall when I was 15 and I thought, ‘Imagine singing with such an orchestra!’” Her chance came when a promoter she knew arranged for Ellington and orchestra to appear on a Swedish television show during which she, in Duke’s words, gave “proper melodic contour” to “Take Love Easy.” Later, Duke was to ask her to come over to do a sacred concert with him at St. John the Divine in New York. And the rest, as they say, is, for Ellington aficionados, marvelous history.

An valuable extra treat comes on this DVD, a “Complete Discography of All Alice Babs Recordings 1939-2002” by Lasse Zackrisson, graphically presented and easy to use.

*Alice Babs-Swing It!* is a delight!

**Ed. Note:** If your regular supplier does not have this DVD in stock yet, contact Vax Records at Rådhusgatan, SE-185 31 Vaxholm, Sweden or online at [www.vaxrecords.nu](http://www.vaxrecords.nu) or [lasse.zackrisson@telia.com](mailto:lasse.zackrisson@telia.com).

## Short Sheets . . .

### ♪ Ear Candy ♪

It's possible to go online to get Alice Babs ringtones for your cell phone.

### ♪ Ellington 78 RPM Labels ♪

"A Portfolio of Ellington 78 rpm Labels: Courtesy of *The Dooji Collection* and Others as Noted" may be accessed via "Ellington on the Web," [ellingtonweb.ca](http://ellingtonweb.ca). Once there, click on "Ellington 78 rpm Record Labels."

### ♪ Speaking of This Source ♪

Want to explore a wealth of material online about Ellington? Then begin at David Palmquist's splendid "Ellington on the Web" at <http://ellingtonweb.ca/>.

### ♪ Jeffries as Historian ♪

"A Driving Force to Be a Hero" by Herb Jeffries, a sort of memoir of "Old Hollywood," appears in the current Special Music Issue of *American Legacy*.

## An Opportunity for "Artsy Kids"

*We reprint the following from the current issue of Rhythms, a publication of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. It should be of particular interest for youngsters in the Mid-Atlantic area.*

Do you have, or know, a 10-14 year old who loves the arts? Someone who wants to spend the summer painting, singing, dancing and acting? A child who is artistic, creative and ready to work hard? Sign them up now for Duke Ellington's summer camp JOURNEYS!

The camp runs from July 2 to July 30, 2010 and will be directed by veteran artist and teacher Carol Foster. Your child will spend four weeks under her wing and her highly qualified staff, working towards a final production which will include works from Broadway hits such as *Rent*, *Hair*, *High School Musical* and *Lion King*! This is a rigorous program for kids who really want to learn what it's like to participate in a full production.

Don't miss on this opportunity to immerse your child in an enriching program that will help them evolve in the arts. Sign up today by visiting our website at [www.ellingtonschool.org](http://www.ellingtonschool.org).

## Ellington Park (Continued from page 1)

wants, once the park is officially Duke Ellington Park, to have a celebration that would become an annual event. Further, Gary Griffith, that group's secretary, hopes to have a jazz group play on Ellington's birthday and is asking area restaurants and hotels to celebrate the event by playing recorded or live music. That's not all: thinking "long, long" term, Ms. Coder envisions a statue in the park.

If finally approved, Ellington Park would join such Washington landmarks as the Ellington Bridge, the huge mural on the side of True Reformers Hall, and the Ellington School of the Arts.

## "GOD" and "LOVE" in Duke's Life

On 14 and 15 March 1970, Ellington presented his then current Sacred Music Concert at the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C.

Following is an excerpt from a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Douglass Learned, "Bath Time: Make Yourselves Clean," on 12 August 2007, as reproduced on the Church's web site: [www.natpresch.org](http://www.natpresch.org). We thank him for his kind permission for us to publish this excerpt.

Recently I have been reading a book by Janna Tull Steed, titled *Duke Ellington: A Spiritual Biography*. As many of you know, Ellington was born and raised in Washington, DC. Ellington did not always live the most churchly of lives, but much of his music and personal insights were shaped by his Christian background in the Baptist and AME Churches. Later in his life, his devotion to God became quite intent and shaped the composition of his music and public mission.

As a side note, one of my favorite pictures in Steed's book is of Ellington standing on this very step, at the front of this chancel on an evening in March of 1970, surrounded by NPC [National Presbyterian Church] singers with hands raised up during a benefit concert to support a scholarship fund for students of the arts with financial needs in DC.

Choir, when is the last time you raised your hands like that?

Those close to Ellington knew that in his personal time for devotion there was an image he liked to keep in sight. It was a depiction of the Cross shaped by the letters of two words: L-O-V-E from top to bottom, and G-O-D from left to right, with the O as the common letter. It was this image he tacked to a wall and contemplated in the final hours before his death.

\* *Inscribed on the back of the card containing the two words in the form of a cross is "from Montreal - Nov. 2 - 1971 to Duke with love Gerry" (most likely Fr. Gerald "Gerry" Pocock).*



Courtesy the Duke Ellington Collection, Archives Center, Smithsonian's NMAH  
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## Quotation of the Month

Playing a large, double bass drum kit [Ed] Shaughnessy dedicated his set to the man who pioneered the set up, the great and recently deceased Louie Bellson. . . [his] enthusiasm for the music and his affection for the lost comrade Bellson made his set a touching celebration of the music's immortality.

—*International Review of Music*  
re Shaughnessy's performance at the Playboy Jazz Festival, as quoted on the Official Louie Bellson Website, July 2009.

## "Dramatis Felidae" (To Use Our Man's Term from *MIMM*)

### About Our Members

#### Harvey Cohen

It's official: The University of Chicago Press has announced the release of Harvey Cohen's eagerly anticipated *Duke Ellington's America*, mid-May in the US and mid-June in Europe. He is set to make several appearances meanwhile, among them: 2 May at London's Playhouse Theatre in connection with the Cheltenham Jazz Festival and 8 May as the featured speaker at DESUK's annual general meeting. United States appearances may take place during May. Soon there may be two web sites in connection with the book: [www.dukeellingtonsameric.com](http://www.dukeellingtonsameric.com) and [www.dukellingtonsameric.co.uk](http://www.dukellingtonsameric.co.uk).

#### Theodore Hudson

Among Amazon.com's "Editorial Reviews" of John Howland's *Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson and the Birth of Concert Jazz* is a quotation from Ted Hudson's review of the book in our June 2009 issue.

#### Dick Spottswood

Dick Spottswood's entertaining and educating radio shows have remained popular over some 40 years. On his weekly Dick Spottswood Show over WAMU-FM he presents selections from the beginnings of recorded music to the LP era, much of which may be called folk music, including bluegrass. For making accessible to listeners what he calls "obsolete music" and for more reasons, the International Bluegrass Music Association awarded Dick Spottswood a 2009 Distinguished Achievement Award.

#### Davey Yarborough

Davey Yarborough will direct "Why Ellington...the Duke of Earl Comes to Duke," with special guest Gene Chandler and featuring the New Washingtonians, at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts on 29 April, Duke's birthday. For tickets and other information call 202-298-1777 or e-mail [thesax@aol.com](mailto:thesax@aol.com).

#### Attention Members

Please check your membership expiration date on the upper right of your address label. Remember, our membership is by the calendar year, so if you have not paid for 2010, please get your dues in right away. Thank you.

### To Join or To Renew Membership

Send your check payable to  
The Duke Ellington Society, Inc.

Our dues remain a bargain:

Member, \$30; Couple, \$50; Student, \$5;

First-time-ever member, just \$20.

Please keep in mind that our memberships are for the calendar year.

## Spotlight on Herb Jeffries

by Art Luby, Secretary

The April meeting of the Society focused on the oldest living veteran of the Ellington Orchestra—singer, actor, and man about town Herb Jeffries. Peter MacHare presented an excellent DVD chronicling Jeffries' life. Jeffries was the son of an Irish mother and Sicilian father who, Herb was told, died in World War I before he was born. Later his mother met an Ethiopian named Jeffreys who became Herb's stepfather. His racial lineage was murky enough that he could have easily passed as white (a choice he, apparently, made on several of his numerous marriage certificates), but—as the DVD stressed—made a personal and career decision to remain part of the black community.

The decision paid off professionally as Jeffries parlayed his voice and good looks to become the first black cowboy film star, the "Bronze Buckaroo," in the 1930s.

When the run of films ended he answered Ellington's call and became the lead singer for the orchestra for several years. His sensual rendition of "Flamingo" was preserved on a famous video and stands as one of the most memorable performances of any Ellington singer.

Jeffries' long life and personal success is testament to the adage that living well is the best revenge. As he moves into his 98th year he continues to sing and, in his final three decades, fashioned a career as a television character actor, personality, and celebrity.

Much of his later singing work was in the country western vein and, while fun, is obviously not an addition to the Ellington tradition. However, Jeffries fashioned several excellent jazz records in the 1950s, some of which were sampled in the second part of Peter's presentation. His creative and passionate focal on Berlin's "Say It Isn't So" clearly illustrates that there was a bona fide artist beneath the show business exterior.

### THE DUKE ELLINGTON SOCIETY, INC.

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