

Duke Ellington, performing at Fargo's Crystal Ballroom. Right, Richard Burriss and Jack Towers
Photos taken by Jack Towers during Fargo recording, except where indicated.





THE TWO MEN WHO LUGGED SOUND EQUIPMENT OUT THE STAGEDOOR OF THE CRYSTAL BALLROOM IN DOWNTOWN FARGO IN THE EARLY HOURS OF A NOVEMBER 1940 MORNING HAD NO IDEA THEY CARRIED WITH THEM A PIECE OF JAZZ HISTORY. SOME 40 YEARS LATER, AS A RESULT OF ONE OF THOSE PRECIOUS ACCIDENTS OF HISTORY, THE SIX ACETATE DISCS THEY RECORDED WOULD WIN A GRAMMY AWARD.

THURSDAY NOVEMBER 7, 1940.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt has just been elected to a third term as president of the United States. The attack on Pearl Harbor is 13 months away, but North Dakotans are anxious about the war in Europe.

Students at North Dakota Agricultural College, still licking their wounds from a Homecoming gridiron loss to North Dakota University the previous weekend, warm up for a fun-filled evening of dancing at the Crystal Ballroom. An NDAC Extension Service employee prepares for the arrival of his friend from South Dakota State College in Brookings, S.D. The two men have permission to record the performance.

Downtown, a Pullman car carrying Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington and his orchestra pulls into the train station from Winnipeg, Manitoba, where they played the previous evening.

A MAGICAL NIGHT Richard Burris and Jack Towers shared an affinity for recording and music, especially the genius of Duke Ellington. While at SDSC, both men worked at the college radio station. After graduating, Burris landed a job handling information for the NDAC Extension Service. Towers, who graduated two years later, became his counterpart at SDSC.

One night in 1939, Towers saw Duke Ellington and his Famous Orchestra in Sioux Falls, S.D. When Burris learned Ellington would be in Fargo the following year, he wrote to the William Morris Agency in New York for permission to record the session. The agency granted it, with provisos. He had to promise to get the go ahead from Ellington and the manager of the Crystal Ballroom, Ralph E. “Doc” Chinn. He also had to promise not to use the recording for commercial purposes.

“We went out to the Crystal Ballroom plenty early,” Towers recalls. “We saw the guys in the band up on the stage sitting around playing cards, and they hadn’t even put on their uniforms yet.” Towers and Burris approached one of the band members and learned he played the trumpet. He was new to the band, a replacement for Cootie Williams. “Well, that was just terrible news, because Cootie was one of our men, the great trumpet player,” said Towers. “This was Ray Nance’s first night on the job.”

As the band prepared to play, the two men searched for The Duke for the OK they’d promised to get. Just before the band started they found Ellington. He gave them permission, but couldn’t understand why they would want it, saying the trumpets were in “bad shape.”

Burris and Towers set up in a rush. They had a recording turntable with a sapphire-tipped cutter

that carved v-tracks in 16-inch acetate discs. They placed the recorder next to Ellington’s piano with two additional microphones, one up high and one down low at the front of the stage. After the orchestra played two or three warm-up pieces, Ellington came out to his piano. The band played “Sepia Panorama,” its broadcast theme — local radio station KVOX broadcast part of the show live — and, “Away the program went.”

By all accounts the night was magical. Between 600 and 800 people paid the \$1.30 advance ticket price to see the show. Bill Snyder, a 1942 NDAC graduate, was one of them. He remembers band members propping their sheet music on satchels because there weren’t any music stands. “I used to go there all the time,” Snyder said of the Crystal. “Ballrooms were a big deal in those days. It was a lot of fun.”

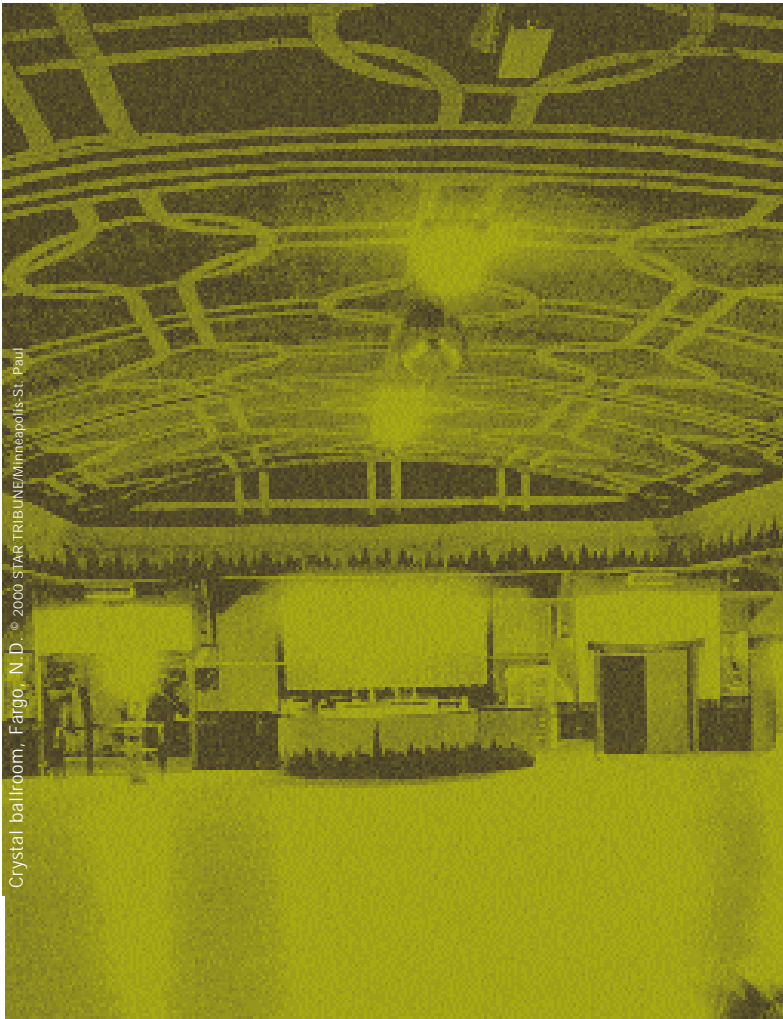
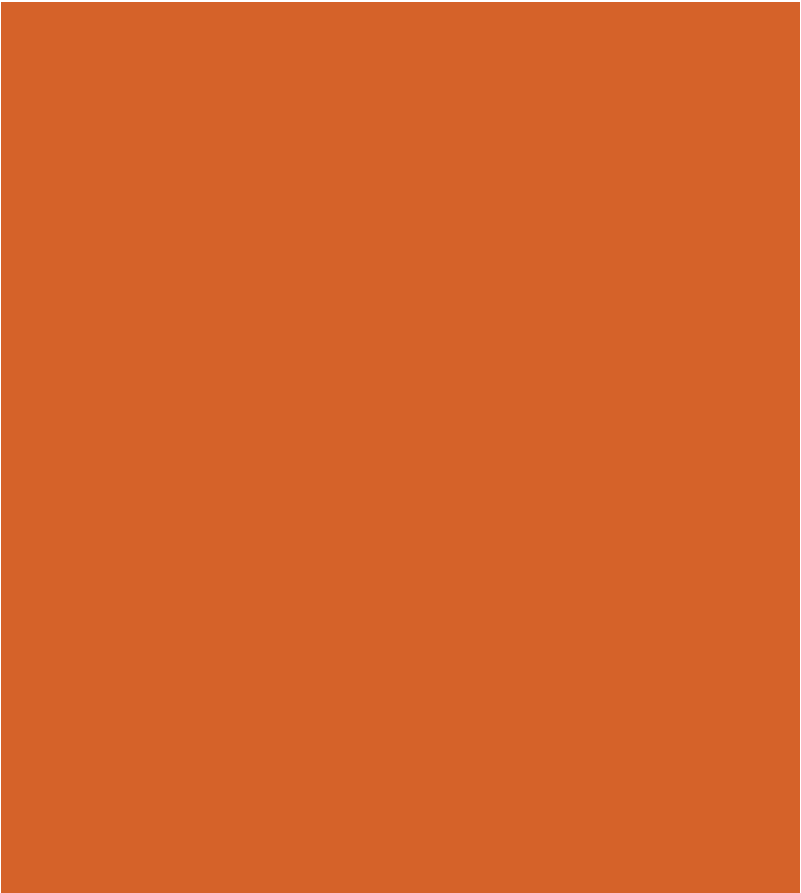
Some of the revelers twirled through the lights reflected from the two-foot diameter glass ball suspended from the ceiling, while others gathered around the stage to watch the greatest band in the land swing the house.

They were on, baby. Stanley Dance, freelance writer and long-time Ellington friend, says the recording captured an evening when the orchestra was hitting all the notes. Dance wrote “The World of Duke Ellington,” helped write two other books about the legendary bandleader, and delivered the eulogy at Ellington’s funeral. “The Duke’s career covered a long period and this was a very happy illustration of the band at that time, when it was a very good band, indeed,” he said. “I would add that there are few live recordings (of Ellington) any better than this.”

Burris and Towers worked their equipment, only missing sections of songs when they were forced to change discs or when the microphones couldn’t pick up the soloists.

During intermissions they played back numbers for the band members. Ben Webster, tenor saxophonist, asked them to put on a fresh disc for a piece he’d worked up with bassist Jimmy Blanton. It was the first time the rest of the orchestra had heard “Star Dust,” but the musicians joined right in. Later, Ellington, “in his coat and porkpie hat,” requested a playback of “Whispering Grass.”

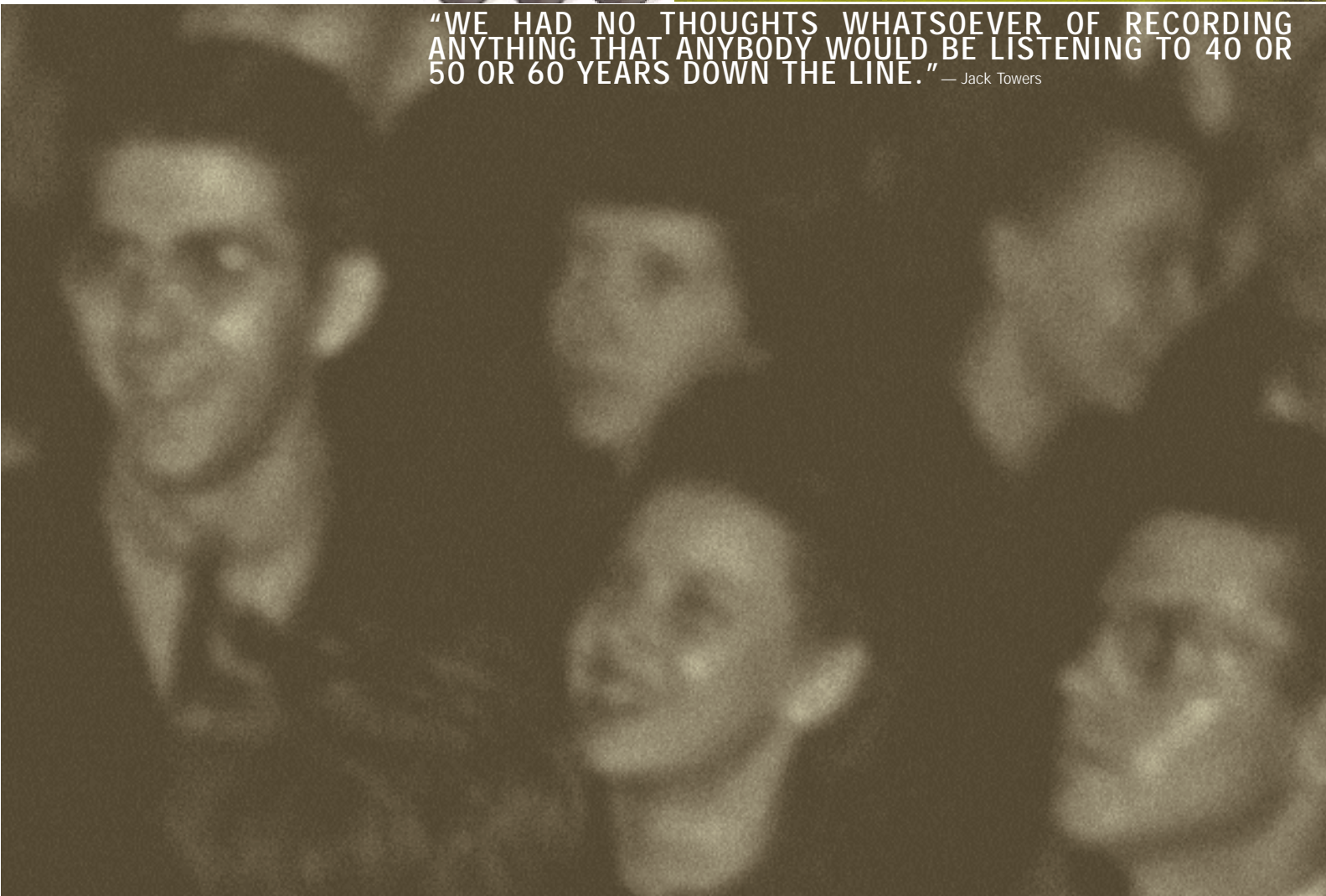
The two men cut 5 1/2 discs, 15 minutes per side. “We had no thoughts other than just the thrill of being there, recording, and having something we could play for our own amazement,” Towers said. “We had no thoughts whatsoever of recording anything that anybody would be listening to 40 or 50 or 60 years down the line.”



Crystal ballroom, Fargo, N.D. © 2000 STAR TRIBUNE/Minneapolis-St. Paul



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FROM BOOTLEG TO GRAMMY Burriss and Towers promised the William Morris Agency the recording would never be used for commercial purposes. So how did Dance, or anyone else for that matter, hear it in the first place?

“I had dubbed a tape of this for a guy to listen to, and he gave it to somebody else and in 1964 here it popped up on LP in bootleg form over in Europe,” Towers said. “That was kind of a shock, and I remember talking to Duke Ellington’s sister, Ruth. She was head of Tempo Music at that time. About two days later I got a call from their lawyer, and he almost prevented me from ever listening to the thing again. Of course, they had a point but it was bootlegged, and that was that.”

Bootlegs notwithstanding, the world nearly missed out on this great recording, which one reviewer called “the jazz equivalent of the Holy Grail.” Towers and Burriss played the discs hundreds of times in the 1940s with heavy arms that wore the grooves. Fortunately, in the 1970s Towers learned about different sizes and shapes of playback styli. He found areas in the groove walls that were in good condition to make a reproduction.

In 1978, when the recording was officially released as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, “Duke Ellington At Fargo, 1940 Live,” Towers made the master tape. It won at the 22nd Grammy Awards for Best Jazz Instrumental Performance, Big Band. Vintage Jazz Classics and Jazz Heritage released subsequent versions.

“THERE ARE FEW RECORDINGS



LOOKING BACK The two men who captured one of the greatest live recordings of Duke Ellington and his Famous Orchestra benefited little from it financially. Towers was paid for writing jacket notes for the various releases and for creating master tapes.

Burriss became a radio announcer and station owner in Detroit. He died in 1971, never to witness the phenomenal success and significance of the recording. Towers went on to a long career as a radio supervisor for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, interrupted only by military service during World War II. He retired in 1974.

Today, at age 86, Towers continues to work in the recording business, taping masters for record companies. The acetate discs from the Fargo session rest on a shelf in his Ashton, Md., home. Last year he provided the tapes for “The Duke at Fargo 1940, Special 60th Anniversary Edition,” released by Storyville Records, Denmark.

The old Fargo City Auditorium at the corner of First Avenue South and Broadway, which housed the Crystal Ballroom on its second floor, was demolished in 1962. During the 34 years Doc Chinn operated the Crystal, he hosted acts such as Guy Lombardo, the Dorsey Brothers, Louis Armstrong and Lawrence Welk’s orchestra up to three nights a week.

In a *Fargo Forum* and *Daily Republican* story on Oct. 2, 1949, Chinn spoke fondly of his patrons. “We have a swell bunch of kids in this territory,” he said. “You folks see them at school or at home or at work, but I see them when they are out having good clean fun.”

—Martin Fredricks

ANY BETTER THAN THIS.”

—Stanley Dance, freelance writer and long-time Ellington friend

