



Interview No. SAS4.10.02
James Crockett

Interviewer: Daniel Thomas Davis
Location: Baltimore, Maryland
Date: April 10, 2002

Edited by: James Crockett

Q: Today is Wednesday, April 10, 2002. I'm in an interview with Mr. James Crockett, 2500 Eutaw Place, Baltimore, Maryland. Thank you, Mr. Crockett.

Crockett: You're welcome sir. It's my pleasure.

Q: You were born here in Baltimore?

Crockett: Born here in Baltimore. In a street that's called, was called Haw, H A W, Haw Street, in South Baltimore. There was only two blocks of it, and after the war, they changed the name of the street to Melvin Drive.

Q: So you lived there for your entire childhood?

Crockett: I lived there until I was about six years old, and then we moved on West Fayette Street. And that's where I started to school and lived there most of my young life until I married.

Q: Tell me a little bit about your family background.

Crockett: I come from a large family, four boys and four girls. And I was the fifth child in the family. Originally came from North Carolina, Charlotte, North Carolina, and they moved up here in the early '20s, and we've been here ever since.

Q: For years you've been a sort of music advocate, but you never played anything yourself. How did you initially become involved in music and interested in music here in Baltimore?

Crockett: I became interested in music because I had an uncle who was sightless, and he played piano. And when I would come from school, I would hear music coming from his home, and I would stop in, and he would have a fellow by the name of Alfonso Mariano and a man by the name of Johnny Craig. Johnny Craig played the snare drum. And if I'm not mistaken, that was the only drum that he had, and some sticks, and he didn't have a bass or anything else, no cymbals, he just played drums, and Mariano was an accomplished violinist, and my uncle played

the piano. And I would hear the music, and I'd go and just listen to them. And that's how I became hooked on music.

And then in elementary school, we had a principal by the name of Clarence Roberts. He was also a violinist, and he would play marches in the morning, John Philip Sousa's marches, when we'd come into the school. Didn't have a loudspeaker, but he would turn the record player up loud so all the kids could listen to the music. And it just became imbedded in me from that time on.

Q: Was this near Fayette Street?

Crockett: No. This was at Pierce and Schroeder Street. Neither one, Pierce Street doesn't exist anymore because of the Social Security complex that's there, but it was a very wonderful area. Lots of schools, competent, quality schools in that area.

Q: And that was your grammar school?

Crockett: That was my grammar school.

Q: And then you went on to Douglass?

Crockett: And then I went to Douglass High School, and I graduated there in 1944. There we had a wonderful musician by the name of W. Llewellyn Wilson, who played the piano, and he also directed the Colored Park Band. And he would take the best students and move them over into the Park Band while he was still conducting the band.

He also taught Bill Kenney, who used to sing with the Ink Spots; Avon Long, who played in *Porgy and Bess*; Cab Calloway; Anne Wiggins Brown and quite a few other people.

Q: And you knew him personally?

Crockett: I knew him personally.

Q: Did you go to a lot of these Park Band concerts.

Crockett: Went to a lot of the Park Band concerts, and there were at least two Park Band orchestras. One was the white orchestra that used to come up to Franklin Square. On the end of Franklin Square there was a German Methodist, a German home. They had one for female and one for males, and they used to come up at Calhoun and Lexington Street and block the street off at night time, and the white band played for them, and the Colored [Park] Band played for the colored people in Druid Hill Park.

Q: At what point were you beginning to be drawn to jazz?

Crockett: My jazz started, I guess, around 1938 when I first went to the Royal Theater on my own, and I saw a stage show.

Q: How did you come across the Royal? Had you heard about it?

Crockett: I'd heard about the Royal, and my sisters and brothers had been going to the movie for years, and I was afraid to go to the movie, and I just took it upon myself this one day to go to the Royal because I saw all of these statues and signs outside saying that the orchestra was there, and I just decided to go in. I think it cost me something like twenty-five cents.

Q: So, your parents didn't want you to go into the movies?

Crockett: My parents didn't want me to go — none of us to go — to the movie because they were Baptists, and they were staunch Baptists, and they thought the movies was the devil's workshop. And I believed them, and I was frightened to go to the movies.

Q: And so the Royal was.

Crockett: The Royal was my first entrance into jazz and going to the movie.

Q: So tell me about that first time at the Royal then.

Crockett: I couldn't believe it. I never saw a stage show in my life, and I saw these people on the stage, and I couldn't differentiate as to whether or not they were on the screen or on the stage. And the reason was because they had a screen that you could see through, and you could see the musicians, but you had to look through the screen. It was transparent. Then eventually they raised the curtain, and then you could see the orchestra. And I was just a little confused. I didn't know whether they were on the stage or on the screen.

Q: And so they were singing and dancing?

Crockett: Singing and dancing and comedians, and it was a terrific show. And on my way out I was fearful because I thought somebody had told my mother that they saw me going to the movie, and she was going to be waiting for me on the outside of the movie when I got out, and she was going to whip me all the way home.

Q: But she didn't.

Crockett: She didn't.

Q: Did you even tell her about your experience?

Crockett: Never told her about the experience. I guess maybe twenty-five, thirty years later, I convinced her that she should see some of Cecil B. DeMille's productions of religious subjects, and she went with another lady to the Regent Theater to see one of the productions, and she just thought it was grand.

Q: Do you remember who that first show was at the Royal?

Crockett: The first show I saw was Fats Waller.

Q: Really?

Crockett: Fats Waller. And it was just amazing. This man had on a shirt, and he had garters on his shirt sleeves. At that time manufacturers didn't make sleeve lengths the way they do today and — collars. So you either bought a small, medium or large. Now they have sizes. And so men during that time wore garters to pull the sleeves up, and they would blouse them over the garters, and I saw him on the stage and I was, I was just fascinated.

Q: I guess he probably needed a pretty big shirt.

Crockett: He needed a big shirt, and he was really a showman.

Q: That must have been right before he died.

Crockett: No. This was a good while because I saw him again at the Royal Theater later on.

Q: That's got to be quite a first.

Crockett: It was quite an impression. And I wondered how they got on the stage because I didn't see anything, any doorways or anything. And I looked at the catwalk and I looked at the klieg lights and everything else to see what was going on, and I couldn't find out how they got on the stage. And I was just fascinated by that.

Q: Who would be at these Royal Theater shows?

Crockett: They had a circuit in New York that was called the "Chitlin" circuit. And the show started at the Apollo Theater, and it would change each week. It would start at the Apollo in New York, and then it would go to the Earl [Theater] in Philadelphia, and it would come to Baltimore at the Royal Theater, and then Washington at the Howard Theater, and it would go all the way down South. And then another week, the next week, another show would follow it. And that's how you kept abreast of your favorite musicians. You wanted to know where they were and how they were doing.

Q: So 1938 you're hooked?

Crockett: I was hooked.

Q: So up on through high school you would go to the Royal every chance you could get?

Crockett: Go to the Royal. And then we had a lot of shows here. We had four active auditoriums that you could go to. There was the Strand Ballroom, the New Albert Hall, the Good Hope Hall, and...did I say New Albert?

Q: Yes.

Crockett: Okay, the New Albert. And then Pythian Castle. So you could go to these places, and they had dances. And they would bring the musicians here, and you would see very good shows.

Even the white musicians played. We had, oh Louis Prima, Gene Krupa, you just name 'em. Charlie Barnett, Artie Shaw, good musicians.

Q: Quite a line up.

Crockett: Quite a line up. Quite a line up.

Q: And so you would go while you're still in high school?

Crockett: I would go while I was still in high school, and then I would go to the dances. We had record clubs at that time, and we only had the 78 records. But we were introduced to records when they had the Victrola, the wind up Victrola, and you'd put it on, and you'd have to change the needles and things like that.

So we were introduced to records at that time. And then when our favorite orchestras would cut a disk, then we'd go to the local record shop and buy it, and then we'd bring it around and just let everybody hear it. And they would go around to their homes and bring records, and we'd just listen to records.

Q: So you would have records of the people that you heard and saw there?

Crockett: Yes. Yes.

Q: So they were with you even when they were gone?

Crockett: Absolutely. This was one way of continuing listening to the music.

Q: And did your family have a record player?

Crockett: We had a record player. We had the Victrola. We had two of them. And we were introduced, many years ago, in the '20s to those records, and we had a stack of those records. We had Bessie Smith, and a lot of Jimmie Lunceford, a lot of orchestra, and it was very good sound. We didn't know the difference until stereo came out and stereophonic sound, but we enjoyed the records.

Q: But it wasn't like the live shows?

Crockett: It was not like the live shows. And when you would go to the dances, you could get close to the musicians, and you could ask them for autographs, and they would reciprocate, and they were glad to sign autographs and talk to you. Tell you about the conditions, where they live, and where they're going.

Q: How would you meet the musicians?

Crockett: You'd just walk up to them and you'd say to them: may I have your autograph? And he would say yes. And you would say where's your home? And he would tell you. And you'd say how long have you been playing so and so and so and so. He said, well, I've been practicing for a number of years, and I started out when I was seven years old.

And I have one thing that most musicians have in common. Most of them, when their parents started taking them to music lessons, resented going to take the lessons. And eventually after they got accustomed to it and saw that they could make music, then they became really a lover of music.

I still find it true today. Kids don't want to take piano lessons.

Q: Right.

Crockett: And I don't know why, but they just don't want to go. But I have a good friend, his name is James Spencer Hammond. He's a wonderful teacher, and he's one of the best choir directors of African American music in the United States. And he has a unique way of getting children to become acquainted with music and play an instrument. And all he does is to talk to the children and say to them, "Do you know how long fifteen minutes is?" And they'll say "Yeah." He'll say, "Now here's my watch, and all I want you to do is to be here fifteen minutes. And when the fifteen minutes were up, you would raise your hand, and then we'd stop."

So he breaks them in at fifteen minutes, and when he reaches fifteen minutes, the child raises his hand and he stops. He lets them go.

Q: And it works?

Crockett: And it works. The next time he comes back, he gives them fifteen minutes more. And the kid raises his hand. So about the third or fourth session, he'll stretch it maybe to eighteen minutes or twenty minutes. And before you know it, he's got the child hooked on a half hour. And it works.

Q: So how were you hooked?

Crockett: I was hooked just by listening to good music. Good music. And Baltimore was a mecca for it because, we had the Hippodrome, and we had a lot of white theaters that had shows. Some of them had them on the roof. Some of the hotels had rooftop shows, and they would bring orchestras here, and you could go down.

Q: The Belvedere?

Crockett: The Belvedere had a dance hall, but they didn't have the roof. But the Southern Hotel had a roof, and some of the theaters down on Lexington Street. Lexington Street was wide until it got to Liberty Street. When it got to Liberty Street, it narrowed to where just about two cars could pass. And they had a lot of theaters and a lot of radio stations in the block between Liberty

and Charles Street. And they had these places where musicians would play on the roof, right there on top of the theater.

Q: Did you ever get to hear any of these musicians or see them?

Crockett: Never saw them there, but I saw the musicians at the Hippodrome because I'd go down to the Hippodrome when they were changing shows.

Q: Tell me about the Hippodrome. It was a segregated theater?

Crockett: Hippodrome was a segregated theater, but they had black performers. And my brother worked for a transfer company. It was called the Masson Transfer Company, and they used to bring the shows into the Hippodrome, to the Lyric, and to the Royal Theater. And they worked late at night to bring the shows in, and sometimes early in the morning they would still be setting up, and they would ask me, would you want to see so and so. And I'd get up early and go down. And that's how I would see some of the musicians down there, backstage.

And when they got ready to dismantle the shows and move them out, they would go down there early. Of course, they wasn't on the clock at the time, but they were there for the work, and you could see the entire show in the wing of the theater. And nobody complained.

And after the shows, during the summertime, before the sign came out that was attached to the marquee that says it's cool inside, the performers would come out in the back alley, and they would sit in chairs just to cool off instead of being in the theater. So you could talk to them there.

Q: You just walked down there from your home?

Crockett: You'd walk down there, and you'd talk to them. And they were glad to see you. And you'd ask them for autographs and the new things that's happening — what are they doing, where are they going, where they've been? And they were very cordial and very helpful.

Q: How many of you would go down there and do this type of thing? Would there be a crowd outside?

Crockett: Later on when the bobbie soxers started going, coming out, then there would be a crowd, and it became a problem then getting close to the musicians. But during those days, nobody had a bodyguard, so you could get close to the musicians. You could talk to them; you could hug them; you could shake their hands. And they were there for you.

Q: And they were all very responsive?

Crockett: Very responsive. Very responsive.

Q: At the Royal you had some of the same musicians coming?

Crockett: At the Royal you had some of the same musicians. It was a common thing to see them because they were in the Black community. And you could go backstage. You could see them coming and going backstage. And sometimes you could pick them up and take them around, show them some sights in the city. And that's what we would do.

Q: Who was the first person you did this with?

Crockett: The first person was Billy Eckstine. He was from Washington, and we took Billy around. And then there was a lady that sang with him. Her name was Madeline Green. They were with Earl Hines' orchestra at the time. And we took them around, and he wasn't afraid, and the next time Madeline Green accompanied us on our little trips.

And then we graduated to Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Pearl Bailey, and just a number of them.

Q: So in these trips around Baltimore with Count Basie and Eckstine, where would you go, what would you do with them?

Crockett: Well, we would take them and show them the city. And we'd take them to somebody's house, and it might be fifteen or twenty of us. And we'd have dinner, and then we'd take them back to the theater because they had a limit on the amount of time they could spend from the station, away from the Royal. And then we'd have to get them back up there for the next show.

But then there was a place in the 200 block of Arlington Avenue, it was called the Jolly Spot Inn. And we would take them down to the Jolly Spot on a Monday because it was the best show in the city. And you had all kinds of musicians that would come there and play for the matinee.

The matinee would start at four o'clock when people started getting off of work and was supposed to end at nine o'clock, but they would play up until one o'clock in the morning. You'd have other musicians that would come in and sit in, and the house band, you wouldn't see any members of the house band for a while because they were on a rest or on intermission and somebody else would be performing.

Q: So people always rotated in and out?

Crockett: Rotated in and out.

Q: And this was just on Monday evenings?

Crockett: That was on Monday. But there was always some type of orchestra or group of people entertainers coming into the city and you could go to them. And I guess the most fascinating event I attended was in 1952 at the Coliseum up on Monroe Street. They used to have the basketball games there, wrestling matches, and they would have entertainment for blacks and whites. And at this particular time I saw Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington for fifty-five cents. It was fifty-cents before date and seventy-five cents on the date.

Q: That's a deal.

Crockett: It was a deal. It was a deal.

Q: And you met Ella, right?

Crockett: I met them. And then we had, in Annapolis, two beaches. And in the '30s the church that I attended was a leading church in the city. They had the best Sunday School in the state of Maryland.

Q: And what church was this?

Crockett: Morning Star Baptist Church in the Ten-Hundred Block of West Fayette Street. People all over the state would come, black and white would come, and observe the Sunday School that they had set up, and they would try to replicate the Sunday School wherever they went. They were generous to the children.

They would have an Easter program, and they would have a children's day program which included a parade around the city, and the children marched, and they had American flags, and they had a band. And people that couldn't walk, they had a tractor-trailer, they put chairs on it, and the people followed in the tractor-trailer. And they had cars and things like that.

They decided instead of going out to Druid Hill Park the fourth Thursday in July — and that was the stated event — fourth Thursday in July, they would take, oh, twenty-six, thirty busloads of people out there. The only bus company that was prominent in the city was the United Railway, and this was a forerunner of the Baltimore Transit Company. So you would lease these buses to take these kids out to the park.

And they would play, and you'd have ice cream, cookies and soda pop, and then they graduated from the park and they went down to Carr's Beach and Sparrow's Beach in Annapolis. And during the summer months, the orchestras would come down to these beaches on a Sunday, and they graduated to having Friday night and Saturday shows down there.

You could see the best of them.

Q: Who were the performers who came out for these shows?

Crockett: Oh, when Ella Fitzgerald came out with a *Tisket a Tasket*, she was singing with Chick Webb at the time. So we could go, we would see Chick Webb, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Jimmie Lunceford, Fletcher Henderson, oh just a number of the bands would come in.

Well, it was a fellow by the name — the orchestra had five guys name Moe. It was a very good show. He was a - Louis Jordan — very good musician. He was a colorful dresser, good showman, very good, very good show.

Q: So all of this was under the guise of a church event?

Crockett: Well, the church would go, and the orchestras would be there. And you would just avail yourself of the entertainment.

Q: And some of these performers would be at the Royal as well?

Crockett: Yes. Same performers. And once you met them at the Royal and you talked to them, if you'd meet them at Carr's Beach, or if you met them at the Coliseum or the Strand Ballroom, they would remember you and the conversation, and you would become pretty good buddies.

Q: So when did they start remembering you? You'd been going up to these musicians backstage.

Crockett: Going backstage. Well, we started off with Billy Eckstine because he was young at the time, and then Sammy Davis, Jr., and the rest of them would come through. And you'd go back and you would talk to them, and there were some dancers, Bunnie Briggs. And so you would talk to them, and after the show, you'd come back and talk to them again. So you established a good relationship with them, and things worked out pretty good.

So the next time they were in town, they would just walk up, grab you and hug you. The same thing with Rosemary Clooney, a wonderful person. You met her the first time, she was effervescent. She was outgoing. She'd just walk up to you and say, "Hi jazz, how you doing?" You know, and hug you and give you a kiss.

Q: She called you "Jazz?"

Crockett: Yeah. She still does. The last time I saw her was down at Pier 6. She was down there with Mercer Ellington and the band, and she remembered me. We're backstage, and she just grabbed me. She gave me a bear hug. You know, she just held me for a long period of time and said, "So glad, I'm so glad to see you." Just a wonderful person.

Q: So who were some of these characters you got to know more and more?

Crockett: I guess I knew more about the Duke Ellington orchestra than I did any other musicians — the out of town musicians. Now local musicians I knew them because I would see them, either on Wednesday nights or Friday nights. The local musicians played on Wednesday night, and it would only cost fifteen cents to go to the Strand Ballroom. And they would start at nine o'clock, and they would start at one-thirty, a quarter to two.

Q: Wait. One-thirty, quarter to two on a weeknight?

Crockett: Yes. For fifteen cents.

Q: So would you go to work the next morning, then I'm assuming?

Crockett: Well, I was in school. So you had to leave there about eleven o'clock in order to sneak into the house because we had a curfew of ten o'clock. And you had to sneak into the house because bed check was coming around.

Q: Did you ever get caught?

Crockett: Many times, many times. And I couldn't give an explanation. And I just had to suffer the consequences.

Q: But was it worth it?

Crockett: It was worth it. It was worth it. But I realized the discipline that my parents were trying to instill in all of us. And we started looking at the consequences if you didn't do what they told you to do, the price you'd have to pay.

Q: Tell me about these local musicians on the week nights then. What kind of players were they, how was the quality of the music?

Crockett: The quality was very good because most of these musicians, being the house band at the Royal Theater, backed up the top flight entertainers that came into town. They accompanied them. And, of course, they had rehearsals, but they were top notch. They were top notch.

Q: And a lot of them became friends of yours.

Crockett: Lots of them became friends of mine. Tracy McCleary had the house band for the Royal Theater, and then there was a fellow who played the trumpet by the name of Roy McCoy. They called him Tanglefoot. Very good person. He traveled with Lionel Hampton, a lot of the orchestras, and he played here regularly. He died last year, and I went to his funeral. I think he was in his eighties when he died. He was a wonderful person.

Q: Was this local jazz community tight knit?

Crockett: It was tight knit, but musicians are different from other people. They will spend hours with a person that's struggling with an instrument to help that person catch on to a different style. They just sit there and coach him along until he finally gets it. And a lot of the local musicians do that if you go to band rehearsals.

I know that the bands used to rehearse at Pennsylvania Avenue and Lanvale Street. There was an insurance company that had their office on the first floor, but in the basement on street level, there was a rehearsal hall. And the bands would rehearse there. You could go up and just listen to the music.

Q: Did you ever go up and listen to rehearsal?

Crockett: Many hours you'd spend. They wouldn't let you come in, but you could stand on the outside and listen to it, and then you could easily sneak right down in the doorway and listen. Then eventually, if they got accustomed to seeing you, they wouldn't chase you away. But that's what would happen.

Q: And so they were encouraging these other musicians who weren't quite making the bar?

Crockett: Yes, yes. They would encourage them, and they would spend quite a bit of time with them. And then they would let them sit in at some of the performances that they had. So, and you could see that they're still giving them instructions as they were performing.

Q: While we're on the subject of local musicians, tell me a little bit more about the Strand. You mentioned it before. Those were local musicians then who played at the Ballroom then?

Crockett: No. Local and international musicians came to the Strand.

Crockett: The Strand Ballroom was next to the Royal Theater on Pennsylvania Avenue. And on the first floor was a bowling alley, and in the basement they had a bowling alley. And on the second floor they had this dance hall. It was extremely long, and they sold potato chips and soda. They didn't have beer, no alcoholic drinks. And that's what they would have there.

You could go there and see the local musicians on a Wednesday or Friday night for fifteen cents. And all over the city, people from South Baltimore, East Baltimore, West, North Baltimore would come, and you would meet and you would just form little groups. And then they would say we're gonna have a record session, and they would give you the place and the time, and then you would go down and listen to the records. Didn't have cars. Most of us didn't have cars. So we'd walk. We'd walk to East Baltimore, walk to South Baltimore.

Q: That would take a while I bet.

Crockett: It would take a while, but it the idea was that you were going to hear the music. And when the new records and a person bought a record, it traveled all over the city. You know, so and so has a record of so and so. And you'd go and listen.

Q: Did you dance at the Strand?

Crockett: We danced at the Strand with the local musicians, when the local musicians played. But when the big bands came, we hung on to the band stand and on the instruments. Right there. Because we wanted to get as close to them as possible.

Q: So they were these towering figures?

Crockett: They were these towering figures, and they were very hospitable. And very talkative and just lovely people to be around.

Q: And how would that compare to let's say the Good Hope?

Crockett: The Good Hope was down on Lexington Street, and the Lexington Market extended from Pine Street at the time, and it went all the way down to Eutaw Street. The stalls were in the street at Pine Street, and it went down to Pearl, and then they had the first section of the market. They had three sections. They had a fish market, and then they had a produce market, and then they had the better market between Paca and Eutaw.

The Good Hope was in the 600 block of West Lexington Street. It was a Black- owned fraternal order. And they had this hall, and you would go down there to the dances, but you had a lot of orchestras here. You had Buddy Johnson and his orchestra, you had Tracy, you had Seaman Elridge, and then you had a fellow by the name of Preston Duncan that had the Good Hope, played at the Good Hope Hall. And all of his music without a doubt sounded like Guy Lombardo. It had that beat. And I don't care how modern the music was, the beat was the same in the Guy Lombardo style. And people really enjoyed it.

Q: You mentioned the Good Hope was a Black- owned establishment. How rare was that for these halls?

Crockett: It wasn't. It wasn't rare because the Royal Theater was built by black people from the ground up. And at the time it was called the Douglass Theater. And they brought entertainment here, oh in the '20s, because there was no place for black people to see these performers. And eventually white people bought the Royal, or something happened, and they continued that type of entertainment.

So it wasn't, it was a common thing for Black fraternal organizations to have halls. The best hall that we had was the Odd Fellows, which was on McCulloh and Lanvale Street. They built it from the ground up. It was two stories and a basement. And they had beautiful hardwood floors, and they had offices on the second floor, and in the basement they had a kitchen. This was the best hall, the best Black owned hall that we had in the city of Baltimore.

And then we had the Pythian Castle that was owned by the Knights of Pythias. And then the Good Hope Hall. And all of the local and the international musicians that came here, they played at these halls. Chick Webb played at all of these halls during his lifetime. And Ella Fitzgerald sang in most of these places.

Q: How would this be different from something like the Comedy Club?

Crockett: Comedy Club was a nightclub. And they had a small stage, and they would have a house band consisting of no more than five pieces, and a minimum of three, and then they would have the entertainers: a vocalist, female vocalist, a male vocalist, and maybe a comedian. And that would be the show. And the Comedy Club was owned by a man by the name of Isaac Dixon, they called him Ike Dixon, and he had the Comedy Club, and he would bring musicians here. He was a saxophone player, tenor saxophone player. And he was a very good player, and in Duke Ellington's book, Music is My Mistress, he mentions Ike Dixon. Ike had two sons, Ike, Jr. and Howard, and both of them were musicians. And they played in the high school band while I was up at Douglass.

And I had another unique experience with Ike, Jr. Ike was a half a year ahead of me in school, and he was drafted, and he went into the service. And I was drafted a half a year later, and I was stationed at Camp PlushaPlauche, Louisiana. It was my first experience of being away from home, and a lot of the fellows from Baltimore were with me, and we didn't have any place to go so we went to this non-commissioned officers club in New Orleans, Louisiana, on the base, and sitting on the stage playing drums was Ike Dixon.

Q: So music from Baltimore got around then?

Crockett: Music from Baltimore got around. And he looked out in the audience, and he stopped beating, and he saw all of the people from Baltimore in these army uniforms, and he just held the entire band up. You know, they wondered what happened, so he said, the word was "cut buddy." And he said these are my "cut buddies" from Baltimore. And he just introduced us, and then they started playing again.

Q: After you got back from the service, did the music in Baltimore seem any different?

Crockett: It was. We had, in the service we met a lot of people: Francis Langford, what's the redhead's name? With Desi Arnez. What's her name?

Q: Lucille Ball.

Crockett: Lucille Ball. Lucille Ball came and we saw a lot of entertainment. And Lucille would sing, and they would have musicians. So we go accustomed to the USO shows coming through. And some of the people that we saw at the Royal Theater came through the USO shows, and we re-established ourselves with them, and it was just so good to see them.

And then after the war was over, then we started the better shows — really good shows.

The Royal was a mecca for colored people because we saw things at the Royal that we could never see anyplace else, unless we went to New York. I can remember seeing Eubie Blake and Noble Sissel. I saw them twice in my life at the Royal Theater, and they had a complete traveling show. Everything was their show.

Many of the shows there were individuals, the tap dancer, the female vocalist, were all independent and they had these agents so they just got together in forming the show. But with Nobel Noble Sissel and Eubie Blake, it was their complete show that they took along with them. And this was fascinating.

Q: What kind of experience was it?

Crockett: It was a unique experience because it was a complete show. It was entertainment. It might have been Chocolate Dandies or one of the other shows that they had, but it was a complete show. It was entertaining. And to be honest with you, it was longer than the vaudeville shows that they had. So evidently they eliminated a lot of the movie part. You would have the coming attraction and the main feature, but you wouldn't have the comedy or you wouldn't have the newsreels because they cut that short so you could get the entertainment from the orchestra. It was a very good show.

Q: And you met Eubie Blake.

Crockett: Met Eubie, and Eubie and I became very good friends. I'm in the real estate business, and I had a house on Lanvale Street, and I rented a first floor apartment to man who was

sightless, and he was from Baltimore. He lived in Baltimore. And he knew Eubie Blake. So we were talking about the musicians in Baltimore, and we talked about Eubie. He said, "Eubie's a friend of mine." And he said, "When you see Eubie, you tell him that you met George so and so," and I said I will. And so when I saw Eubie, I said, "Eubie, I know a friend of yours." And he said, "who is it?" And I said, "George." He said, "No, you don't have to tell me a last name." He said, "You know, that man went all over France and Paris. He's sightless." He said he went all over Paris by himself.

And he said, "Where is he? I want to see him." So I said "I'll make arrangements for you to see him." But I never did. But whenever Eubie would come to Baltimore, we'd get together. He had some people that lived on Mount Street. He would visit them, and then he would always visit Provident Hospital, just to see the sick people in the hospital.

He was an immaculate dresser — shoes shined to the nth - real neat at all times, and very cordial, aggressive, outgoing, and we became very good friends.

The last time I saw him perform was at the Morris Mechanic [Theater]. It was during the [Gov. William Donald] Schaeffer administration, and they were trying to get Baltimore to be a replica of Churchill Downs during the Preakness. And at Churchill Downs they have a week leading up to the big race, and then we tried to do the same thing here in Baltimore. So at the Morris Mechanic they had a lot of orchestras coming in. Well, they had the Duke Ellington band that night, and they also had Eubie Blake. And I took my wife and my minister's wife backstage to meet Eubie. My wife had met him before, and we stayed backstage, and before long his wife Marian said, "James, it's time to go now."

So he asked if we wanted some autographs, and we said, "Yes." And he autographed "I'm Just Wild About Harry" for me. And he asked my wife if she wanted one. So she said, "No, Mr. Blake, one was enough for the family." So he wrote one out for Mrs. Bascom, and Mrs. Bascom was a music teacher at Lemmel Junior High School. And she took her autographed copy of "I'm Just Wild About Harry," and she showed it to the children in the school, and somehow one of the students kept the music, and she never, it was never returned to her. And she was probably disappointed.

Q: That is a disappointment. While we are on the subject of these "greats" that you've become friends with, tell me about Duke. How did it all begin?

Crockett: It all began when I saw him on stage. It was electrifying.

Q: When was this?

Crockett: It must have been in 1938.

Q: You were quite young?

Crockett: Quite young. And I just couldn't believe the musicians. And in that band at that time, he had a fellow by the name of Juan Tizol! The fellow on trombone, Lawrence Brown. Ivy

Anderson was the vocalist with the band at the time. If I'm not mistaken, Cootie Williams was with him, Bubber Miley, Harry Carney, Johnny Hodges, Sonny Greer to name a few who were in the band.

And I asked him for an autograph. And he just smiled and gave it to me, and I talked to him. I asked him where were they going when they leave Baltimore. And I asked him if he had been to Washington. And then, "Let me tell you something about Washington," and that's how he lead into a conversation, and he says, "Washington is not like it was when I was a boy in Washington." And he just let on. Just give him a little feed and he would go on.

So after that performance, I said, "Wow, that's a beautiful tie." And he said, "You like it?" And I said, "Yes." So he took it off and he gave it to me. So I said what a generous man. And the next time he came to the Royal, I took the tie off and I held it in my hand, and he looked at me and he recognized me and he did like this. And I said to somebody, "He wants me to come backstage." So I don't know how to get back there. So the guy said, "You got to go over to the end, come down this aisle, and go backstage." And I went backstage. He said to me, "I wondered about you. How are you doing?" I said, "Fine." And I said, "I want to show you this tie." He said, "Look, you kept that tie in such a beautiful condition, I'm going to give you another one."

So I said to him, "Do you want this one back?" He said, "No. You can have it." So he gave me another tie, and I was really pleased. So from then on, every time he would come to Baltimore, he would give me the tie that he was wearing. Except one year he came through, and he had something that he called the "Riverboat Gambler." It was a shoe string tie. And he had it tied in a bow, and when the performance was over, he said to me, "I'm not going to give you this tie." And I said, "Why?" He said, "Because I'm not going to give it to you." And I found out that was the only one that he had. And it was part of a uniform that he was wearing. So he didn't give it to me.

Q: How many ties did you get from Duke Ellington?

Crockett: I guess over...I guess I got about twenty-five ties. And all of the fellows that I went around with knew that he was going to give me a tie. So they would borrow the tie. They would say, let me borrow it. And I just want to wear it for the day. And that's what happened.

But when I was in high school at Douglass, you had to go to school fully dressed. You had to wear a tie. You could not go into the classroom unless you had a tie. So if you wore a sport shirt to school, and you knew you had, you were going to certain teachers' classes, you had to have a tie, and you would stand on the outside of her door and borrow a tie to go into her class. And that's what would happen to some of the ties. And they would say, hey, that's the tie from Duke Ellington. You know.

Q: I'm sure when you were in high school, and you wore that tie from Duke Ellington you felt pretty special.

Crockett: Very special, very special.

Q: So you continued to go up to him after concerts?

Crockett: After concerts, we'd talk, and he would tell us about the trips, where he'd been, where he was going. We'd ask him about the music, and how he got the idea of writing certain tunes. And I found out that riding on trains gave him the inspiration to write a lot of that music. And there's the sound of a train in a lot of that music — the cracking of the wheels of the train. And it's a lot of riding.

We only had two questionable encounters. One was in 1948. Duke had been out in St. Louis, and there had been some type of a riot out there — disturbance, and he made the statement that we were not ready for integration at that time. So I saw him in 1948 when he came to the Royal Theater, and it was a situation where the band played at the Royal, and before they left, they played at the Strand Ballroom.

So a lot of us took the instruments off the stage at the Royal, over the fence, to the Strand Ballroom, and walked them up the back steps so that they could get set up right after the end of the show. And so, as usual, we hung on the piano. So I said to Duke, I said, "Duke, you made a statement in St. Louis," and before I could finish my statement, he said, "We're not ready." And I looked at him because the Murphy family and everybody else, the Carnes bunch and everybody else was talking about integration and things should be better. And he made this statement, and I just could not conceive of him making a statement like that.

So I guess he saw tears in my earseyes, and after hanging on the piano for maybe forty-five minutes, he said to me, go get me a soda pop. And he reached in his pocket and he pulled out a dollar, and he said, and get one for yourself while you're back there. So I went out and got two soda pops and I brought them back. And on the way going to get the soda pops, I started thinking about what he said about not being ready. And I said to myself, "Who does he think he is? What does he know about whether or not we're ready for integration?"

And then I took maybe ten steps, and I realized the conversation that we had before he started playing, and I asked him where had he been. And he told me he had been around the world. And then all of a sudden this hit me. Here's a man who's been around the world, twice at that time. He played before kings and queens and potentates and royalty and presidents, and here I am telling him or asking him or questioning him, what does he know? Where has he been? And I hadn't been out of Baltimore.

So it dawned on me that he should know. So when I got the sodas, I brought them back, and I set his on the piano so he could grab it, and I set mine on the piano. And a big change came over him. No, when I set the sodas down, I took my position on the piano again, and you had to wheedle needle your way through the crowd to get to that stop, but they knew I had the sodas for him so they moved aside so I could get up there. And then he said to me, "Why aren't you dancing?" So I said, "I didn't come here to dance." He said, "What did you come here for?" We said, "We came here to enjoy the music." And he said, "Ah." It struck him that we came to enjoy the music. And I said to him, "We can dance to your music anytime because we have your records." And he smiled, and then I smiled, and then that broke the ice, the relationship between us. And everything was fine from there on.

The other time was in 1952 when Ella Fitzgerald and Nat King Cole were on the card at the Coliseum. I took a young lady backstage with me, and Nat Cole and Duke had a heated argument, and I didn't know what the argument was all about. And it never came in the conversation. And Nat King Cole was smoking cigarettes like a fire engine, and he would put on his shoes, and he'd light up a cigarette. He would go over into his luggage, pull out a shirt, unbutton his shirt, and he would light a cigarette. He would go in another place, get his trousers, put them on, and he'd light [another] cigarette.

So I went around his dressing room putting out the cigarettes, because he had, at one time...he had about six cigarettes going at the same time. So I went around putting out the cigarettes. So Duke said to me, "Who told you to put out those cigarettes?" And it was the first time I ever heard his voice like that. So I grabbed the young lady by her hand. I said, "Let's go." So we started toward the door, and I grabbed the doorknob, and he said to me, "Who told you to leave?" So I turned around, let the doorknob go, turned around, we went back and then we sat on one of his suitcases. And then the argument continued.

So when Nat King Cole's time came to perform, when Nat opened the door, we went out with him. And then we saw Nat and then the rest of the show. But it wasn't until, I guess, maybe five years after Duke died when I was talking to Mercer, his son, and I asked him what was the argument about. But prior to that time, I was listening to Ed Sullivan on a Sunday night, and Ed said on his show that Duke Ellington and Nat King Cole had buried the hatchet, and they were very good friends again. And I never knew what precipitated that.

And when I asked Mercer what had happened, Duke wrote a song, and the song is "I Love You Madly." Well after each musician would play his solo, he would announce the musician. Like when Johnny Hodges finished his [saxophone] solo, he would say, "Johnny Hodges wants you to know that he loves you madly." And then, if Cootie Williams played the next solo, he would say the same thing.

Well, these shows are timed because you have different unions. You have a union for the microphone; you have a union for the lights; you have a guy that's the stage manager. So if you go overtime, then you have to get permission from the manager to see whether or not he's going to pay overtime to these people, and if he doesn't pay overtime, then it comes to cutting part of the show. Well, after this dissertation that Duke had with the audience, and by the time he made the third announcement, when he announced the next musician, everybody joined in with "Loves you madly." And that was the introduction to this song.

So they cut Nat King Cole's time so he could not perform all of the compositions that he wanted to perform. And that was what the argument was about.

Q: Here in Baltimore?

Crockett: No. It didn't start here.

Q: But it came to Baltimore?

Crockett: It came to Baltimore, and this is where I found out later on from Mercer what it was all about. It was the usurping of Nat King Cole's time. It prevented him from giving a good performance of what he wanted to perform. And that's what the argument was all about.

But when he said, "Who told you to put those cigarettes out" and "Who told you to leave?" I tucked my tail between my legs and just sat down, you know, amicably and just listened. That was the only two times that, you know, that it wasn't a good scenario.

Q: And you also met the rest of the Ellington band?

Crockett: Met the rest of the Ellington band, and my wife and I became very good friends with the band while Duke was living, and we'd always go backstage. They made one trip to Russia. They left Baltimore that Sunday night. They performed on Lafayette Avenue, the place was 10 Lafayette Avenue; it was called The Scene. And they performed, and they were trying to get the musicians to go to Russia with them. So after the show, they stayed a long time, maybe two hours after the show trying to get some of the musicians to go to Russia with them.

One of the fellows was working in the post office in Philadelphia, and he was trying to check his times, his leave times, his pick time with the post office, and the amount of money he was being paid on the trip, and to cost this out as a factor whether he could take the trip. He was a trumpet player, and I don't know his name now, but he was the main clog that was tying up things. So they left that night to go back to New York to go to Russia.

And after that trip, we saw them at the Polytechnic Auditorium on a Sunday afternoon, and when we saw Duke, he beckoned for my wife and I to come with him, and we went backstage in his dressing room, and we asked him about the trip. And, oh, he was very polite, telling us everything about the trip.

And after the show, Mercer said to us, all colored people should visit Russia at least one time and see the conditions under which people live over there. And he cited one case. He said when we arrived, he said, one person was assigned to us at the hotel. And he said, "He stayed with us, and at one time, he slipped a note under the door asking for an autograph. And we autographed this piece of paper and we were going to hand it to him. When we opened the door, he was not there and we never saw him again. And we were never able to get this autograph to this person." And he said, "That's how close they were in observing them."

And the people in Russia were just outgoing, so glad to see them. And they had a wonderful time over there.

Now Duke had an unusual thing. In writing his songs, he wrote for the musicians in the band. And on his charts he would write Cootie, and that is what Cootie was going to play. So in the rehearsal he would say to Cootie, "I want you to do so and so and so and so," and Cootie knew just how to incorporate that feeling that he was trying to relate to him. For any other musicians, the same thing about Johnnie Hodges. He wrote Johnnie's name on it, on the charts.

And the good thing about it is that when he played at these dances, he would introduce a song, and the music that they were going to play, they had all that music with them. So the fascinating thing, and most of the people would watch the band, and when he would hit the piano and they realized the tune that he was. Like everybody went together, looking through the music to pull that music up, and put it right there in front of them. Everybody watched to see just how well trained these men were.

And I had two good experiences with them at the Left Bank. Have you heard about the Left Bank?

Q: In Baltimore?

Crockett: In Baltimore. The Left Bank was on Charles Street, just before you got to the North Avenue. It was a bowling alley downstairs. I think it was called The Charles, and it was like where the Charles Theater is now. And upstairs they had a dance hall. It was a group of Black guys, incorporated I guess, it was in the '40s, and they called themselves the Left Bank Society, and they had these shows on Sunday afternoon. And we'd invite the musicians. So if the musicians knew that they were playing at the Left Bank, they had a lot of people that appreciated music, and they performed for them.

Well, two of the experiences I had with Duke: He was very timely in his performances, always on time. This particular Sunday afternoon the band was late. And it was a mixed audience. There was always a good mixed audience at the Left Bank. The band was late and Duke was late, and the people started milling around, they were in the lounge, and they were eating and they were talking. All of a sudden Duke came in with Harry Carney. Harry was the chauffeur. Harry played bass sax, baritone sax, and he was the chauffeur. So when they arrived, the band wasn't there.

There was an accident on the New Jersey Turnpike, and the band couldn't get through. Traffic was tied up. So when Duke came in, he wasn't impeccable when he was traveling in the car. When he got to the place he was going to perform, then he would change his clothes, and he had a unique thing he would do when he would get into town, and he did this in every city. Harry would drive into a filling station, and they'd load up with the gas, and Duke would ask the attendant, hey, where is the Duke Ellington Orchestra playing tonight? And the guy would say they're playing so and so and so and so, and Duke would say how do you get there. And the guy would not realize who he was talking to, so he would say, well, this is where you go, so and so and so and so, and would give them directions. So that's how Duke knew where they were playing in any city.

Q: Because everyone knew?

Crockett: Everybody knew. Okay. So when Duke got to the, we'll call it The Famous Ballroom on Charles Street, and so when he got there, he realized that the band wasn't there. So he apologized. He went right to the microphone and said to the people, "My band is late getting here, but I'm going to entertain you until the band arrives." When Duke got onto the stage at the Famous Ballroom, he was not dressed like "the Duke", but he sat down at the piano and he

played for about forty-five minutes — just solos. He didn't take a break; he just played one song after another, and the crowd just ate him up.

And then all of a sudden the band arrived. And when the band arrived, he continued to play, but they took their places on the bandstand. And I guess it was about ten minutes while he was into playing that he struck up a tune, and they all joined in. And when they joined in, he left the stand and went to the dressing room and he changed clothes and then he came back out.

Q: And then he was Duke?

Crockett: And he was Duke. And he played overtime. He made up for the lost time that they played, and everybody was satisfied.

And then the other experience I had there: There was a fellow by the name of Vernon Walsh, who was an announcer, the announcer over at the Famous Ballroom, and I told him and Mercer, I said, "Mercer, you know Wednesday is Duke's birthday, and we want to sing happy birthday to him." So he said, "Well, you know how pop feels about birthdays. He doesn't like birthdays." So I said, "Okay." He said, "But I'll cooperate with you," and he said, "You just let me know when you want us to strike up a song to him." And I told most of the audience, and so they were just waiting for the cue.

Well, Vernon heard about it, and Vernon bought a birthday cake. And then when there was a break, Vernon would normally announce the coming attractions, who's going to come, and then all of a sudden he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, a friend of ours is going to have a birthday on Wednesday, and we want to sing happy birthday to him." And then he said, "The friend is Duke Ellington." And so when he said that, the band struck up happy birthday. So everybody in the audience sang happy birthday to Duke Ellington. So he [Duke] looked out in the audience and he saw me, and he started pointing at me as if to say I'm going to get you.

Q: [Laughter] And did he?

Crockett: No. He just said I'm going to get you because he realized it was me. After that Vernon said, "And we have a cake for you." So Duke blew the candle out, and everybody started applauding, and then the band picked back up again. It was the Famous Ballroom. He was a wonderful person.

Q: So what you're talking about is really a culture then?

Crockett: It was a culture. And later on Mercer and I had been after Duke to revive a show. The show was "Jump for Joy", and they played it out in California, and I don't think it got a good reception. It was almost an opera. And everybody in *Jump for Joy* were selected people that Duke had selected to participate in *Jump for Joy*. I think the Barry Brothers were in it, they were tap dancers Well, I was trying to get them to revive that show, and I couldn't get a consensus from them to do it.

So after Duke died, Mercer decided to do a show that was called *Sophisticated Ladies*, and my wife and I went over to the Kennedy Center on a Saturday night and on the try outs. And it was a beautiful show. And we didn't know how to get backstage to see them. So after the show, we exited the theater, and we were going toward the back of the theater, and my wife said to me, I don't think we're gonna get a chance to see them. And at that time, when she said that, Mercer was right in our face, and he grabbed us and hugged us. My wife said to him,

"Mercer, Duke would be proud of this show." So he said, "Thank you." He said, "I needed that from you because you knew pop and you knew how funny he could be sometimes." And he said, "I just needed that from you." And he said, "I'm in a hurry right now, but he said I want you to come back and see the show next Sunday night. I'm going to leave tickets at the box office for you. So if you can come over, I want you to see the show because we have some revisions that we want to make in the show."

And we thanked him for the tickets and then we left. But we didn't get back to see the show that next Sunday night. And the reason we didn't get back to see the show that next Sunday night was because *Roots* was being introduced that same Sunday night on television, and we stayed home to see *Roots*, and we didn't go to see the show.

Q: Now that we're talking about the later phases of jazz in Baltimore, what effect did integration have on the Royal Theater, on The Strand, and all these venues? How did integration change the music in the Baltimore Black community?

Crockett: Where the Hippodrome was concerned, you could see the white musicians in alleys along Baltimore Street. You'd never see them on Eutaw Street. And you could talk to them. So this was our venue in seeing them. But white people could always go to the Royal Theater to see the shows. So as far as whites being integrated in the Black community, it wasn't a problem. Now, there was a group of white people that continuously went to the Royal Theater to see shows.

Q: So there would be a portion of the audience then in every Royal Theater show that was white?

Crockett: Yeah. And they would sit, and the audience was Black and the audience was accustomed to it. Now, I don't know if these people were the ones that were going to the symphony orchestras, or they went to Philadelphia or other places, and they were accustomed to it. And so it wasn't a big change where they were concerned.

[Pause] It was like...when integration came, it hurt the Black community. Because the shows that we used to see, we didn't see anymore. The theaters that we used to go to see the movie, we didn't go to them anymore. They started going to the Hippodrome, the Town, and the other theaters that you could go to.

But where music was concerned, then you had a larger number of the white people that started coming to the integration of the affairs that we had. Now at the Left Bank Jazz Society there was a group of white people there all the time. And we were very fortunate, and we had a fellow by the name of Harley Brinsfield. Harley was a record collector, and he played records on the radio

station called WITH. They were located at Seven East Lexington Street. And Harley had a sandwich shop on McMechen Street. He was the first one that came out with this sub sandwich. Made a lot of sandwiches on McMechen Street. And he became the sandwich king.

And he played these records and the conversations that he had with the musicians. And so he was a great influence in integrating Baltimore City's white and black community.

Q: What about the demise of Pennsylvania Avenue?

Crockett: The demise of Pennsylvania Avenue came because the white power structure felt that all of the crime emanated from Pennsylvania Avenue. There were a lot of pawn shops on Pennsylvania Avenue, a lot of nightclubs, a lot of package goods stores. So the white community felt that Pennsylvania Avenue was similar to the Block on Baltimore Street.

Now when you mention the Block, it consists of more than one block, because you have the stuff that started prior to Calvert Street. There was a Read's Drug Store on the corner, and part of that was the Block, and then on the other side of Gay Street, all the way down to Market Place, that was part of the Block. And then outside of that, Betty Mills had a club down around the nine, or ten, or eleven hundred block of East Baltimore Street, and they had some entertainment down there. And there were strip shows in the tenth and eleven hundred block of East Baltimore Street, which all was part of this thing of shows, entertainment.

So white people got the impression that Pennsylvania Avenue was similar to the Block, and they wanted to eradicate the crime and all of the bad things, and they decided to demolish the things that were the central attractions to blacks on Pennsylvania Avenue. The strange phenomenon is that a lady by the name of Victorine Adams was in the City Council at the time, and her husband is William L. "Little Willie" Adams. And from Biddle Street up, or from Franklin Street up, the buildings were demolished on Pennsylvania Avenue, and it went all the way up to the block that Mr. Adams had his nightclub in. His nightclub was the Casino, and he owned from Mosher Street up to McMechen, in that block, so all of that was saved. And even today, that one block stands. And from Franklin Street up on the south side, all that stuff was demolished and they put housing.

And then on the other side, they built a school, the Furman Templeton School at Dolphin Street. And that goes all the way to Lafayette Avenue and it encompasses the area where the Royal Theater used to be.

And then on the other side of that you had Glen Dowdy, Doughty, who was part of the Baltimore Colts, and he built the Shake and Bake Recreation Center there, and that took up the space where the Regent Theater used to be.

There were a group of people here, and their name was Rahom, and they owned a number of theaters. They owned the Harlem Theater on Gilmore Street, which used to be a church. They owned the Regent, they owned the Diane, and I think in Annapolis they owned the Star Theater. So they controlled the theaters, and the Diane, the Regent were the ones that they didn't touch, they left the theaters, but the Royal Theater they got rid of.

Q: Why do you think people started to lose interest in the Royal and the Strand? Did people within the Black community begin to lose interest?

Crockett: They lost interest because of the type of shows that they were bringing in. In the early '60s, a group came through throughout the United States called hippies. And originally these were wealthy white kids that were rebelling against their parents. And they took out on their own, and they banded together, had communes and things like that. And a lot of Blacks latched onto that because it was a way of expressing themselves, and many of them did not know who they were.

So this influence came in with a lot of music that people just did not appreciate. It was loud, a lot of guitars, and people just didn't appreciate the music so they just lost interest in going to the shows.

But Duke Ellington said, there are two types of music, good music and bad music. And he said if music is good, it's good. Meaning that if bad music is good to the people that appreciate bad music, then it's music. So actually what he was saying, there's only type of music, and that's good music.

Q: Good music?

Crockett: Yes. Because it appeals, that type of appeal. And that's true. So people stopped going to the Royal, and they started going to other theaters.

Q: What about you?

Crockett: What about me? I go to theaters. I go to the Arena, I go to, what's the name of it on Calvert Street? Seven hundred block of Calvert Street. I can't think of it now...

Center Stage. I go to Center Stage. I go to some of the shows down at Peabody. The Maryland Historical Society had a theater in there at one time. I used to go in there to some of their shows — live shows. But my theater experience goes back, again to the '30s at the Ford's Theater when it was on Fair Street.

Crockett: She [Ella Fitzgerald] would make you feel so at ease. She would watch you while she was singing, and then after the song and you start applauding, she would say thanks for your help. She'd say, I saw you over there helping me sing that song. I couldn't have put it over if it hadn't been for you. That kind of relationship is what she established with the people. And she never outgrew that, you know, just a friendly, friendly person.

Q: And the audience knew that?

Crockett: And the audience knew it. And you could just wrap your arms around her, and she'd wrap her arms around you and say, hello. You know, that type of thing.

Pearl Bailey was like that too. But Pearl was a little more sophisticated, and we'd take her around Baltimore on these tours, visiting nightclubs and things like that. And Charlie Barnet and Artie Shaw, and Charlie SpevackSpivack. All of these musicians, we would do that for them.

So it was just a wonderful relationship. And the big change is that now they have bodyguards, and, you know, you have to be careful how you go up to them. They won't let you see them. He's busy or she's, you know, she's engaged in something else.

But the Ellington orchestra is still friendly like that. You can see them at any time. And I advise people to go back and speak to them because they want to know what's going on in the city, and they want to feel how you appreciate their music.

Q: That's great. Thank you very much, Mr. Crockett. It's been a pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW