

## The Little Known Legend of Eddie Durham is Not So Little Anymore

By Tim Wilton

**T**he accomplished life and influential times of legendary musician, composer and arranger, **Eddie Durham**, was celebrated August 19th, *Eddie Durham Day*, at the 4th Annual **Eddie Durham Musical Tribute** and Centennial Celebration in San Marcos. Highlights of the two-day event included many musical tributes by various jazz and swing bands, as well as a screening of the film "Born to Swing", and separate book signings by music historians Dave Oliphant and Douglas Daniels.

The name Eddie Durham may not exactly register with the casual Texas music fan because, outside of music historians and jazz purists, little is known about the man credited with the first recording of an amplified guitar, then electric guitar, as well as helping give birth to the distinctly American music idioms, "swing music" and "be-bop."

However, thanks to San Marcos' commitment to honor a native son with an annual festival, as well as funding an archival museum and memorial park; and the commitment of Durham's family to honor his legacy with contributions to the official Eddie Durham website, [www.durhamjazz.com](http://www.durhamjazz.com), more and more "casual" Texas music fans (like myself) are now finding out about one of the 20th century's most important contributors to American popular music.

Born to Joseph "Jose" Durham and Luella Rabb in San Marcos on August 19, 1906, Eddie was the middle child of a musically gifted family. His father, a farmer, was a fiddler who performed at local square dances, while Eddie's mother was a schoolteacher. Remarkably, the innovative Jose built his fiddle out of a cigar box, hatpins, a couple of willow tree branches, and horsetail hair. Even more remarkably, Jose would then amplify his homemade fiddle by placing dried rattlesnake rattles inside it.

Eddie and the rest of the Durham clan would always attend the square dances where their father played and so naturally, Jose's love for playing music was passed down to each of his children. Joe, Jr., the eldest child, could play almost any instrument including bass, trumpet, trombone, violin, cello, and guitar. Eddie's next oldest brother, Earl, played clarinet and saxophone, and his older sister Myrtle was a pianist in area churches. Eddie played the trombone, banjo and some piano, while younger brother Roosevelt could play the piano and violin.

After serving as Musical Director of the Teddy Roosevelt-created RoughRiders Calvary Band during World War I, Joe returned home and formalized his musical training by subscribing to the U.S. School of Music Correspondence Lessons. In turn, Joe then taught each of his brothers and his only sister how to read and write music.

By 1920, Joe formed The Durham Brothers Orchestra with all of his brothers in tow, as well as cousins Allen and Clyde Durham on trombone and bass, respectively. And another cousin, Herschal Evans, on saxophone, soon joined them.

In order to make a living playing music in the 1920's southwest, bands and orchestras (especially black bands and orchestras) would perform with traveling dramatic circuses, rodeos, and minstrel shows. To their credit, The Durham Brothers Orchestra played with the most popular shows of the day, including Doug Morgan's Dramatic Show, and Zack T. Miller's 101 Wild Ranch Rodeo Circus. Additionally, the brothers also backed popular regional singers and bands throughout the rest of the decade, including Mamie Smith & The 711 Show, Edgar Battle's Dixie Ramblers, Gene Coy's Happy Aces, and many others.

By 1927, Joe and Eddie had joined Jesse Stone's Blue Serenaders. Incidentally, Stone wrote the influential song, *Shake, Rattle & Roll*. The constant touring of the South- and Midwest introduced Eddie to other influential musicians of the day, from which he learned new styles of playing, writing, and arranging music for brass and jazz. Amazingly, Eddie spoke mostly Spanish and knew very little English, if at all. And so, it was also while on the road touring that Eddie was taught by a band mate, trumpeter and Fisk University teacher Ed Brown, how to converse in English. Although in hindsight, Eddie was already

"speaking" a common language known to all of his peers--music--and he spoke it with the command of the most fluent of speakers.

By the end of 1927, Eddie would finally leave the circus and minstrel circuit behind him for good and enroll in an advanced music training school in Chicago. In 1928, Eddie toured the Southwest with the legendary "territory band", the Oklahoma City Blue Devils. The 1979 documentary film, *Last of the Blue Devils*, chronicles the band and the history of jazz music in the American South- and Midwest, and even features Durham performing a trombone solo.

Durham's ascent into music lore started to gain momentum after he made his recording debut with the Kansas City-based Bennie Moten Orchestra, with whom he stayed from 1929 to 1932. Not only was he an accomplished trombonist and guitarist, Eddie was responsible for arranging and composing most of the music, and had revolutionized Moten's rhythm section by recording the very first "single line solos" on guitar. Durham was also responsible for jump-starting the career of another American music icon, Bill "Count" Basie. Eddie had drafted Basie into the Benny Moten Orchestra as a co-writer and pianist and the orchestra's 1932 recordings for Victor Records created a new American musical form: Swing Music. The band would later be renamed The Count Basie Orchestra.

By 1933, Durham's reputation as a composer and arranger had spread to the east coast, and in 1934, he moved to New York permanently. Soon he was arranging for a who's who list of the most well known swing bands of the period, including those led by Harry James, Andy Kirk, Artie Shaw, Willie Bryant and Jimmie Lunceford. And it was during a 1935 recording session with The Jimmy Lunceford Orchestra that Eddie Durham would make music history by playing the very first recording of an amplified guitar on the classic song, *Hittin' The Bottle*.

As the story goes, Eddie had been experimenting with amplified guitar sound for many years, just like his father had done with the fiddle. He had always looked for ways to be heard, *to stand out*, in a band. In addition to pioneering solo guitar (which naturally made him stand out), Eddie would attach wings, plates,

microphones, resonators with tin pans, metal hangers, *almost anything*, to his guitar to amplify its sound. He also created his own amplifier, known to fellow musicians as his "starvation box."

Another important moment in Durham's storied career came in 1936 when *the* Glenn Miller hired him to arrange his orchestra's brass section, as well as teach them the fine art of showmanship. Miller was a huge fan of the bop style of jazz, or swing, that Durham had helped create with Count Basie. In addition to being a top drawing bandleader, Miller was an astute businessman--he thought that Durham's interpretation of swing, *bop*, would play better to the big band/swing music starved audiences that Miller was playing to each night.

During this short yet very productive period of time, Eddie wrote many of Miller's most well known hits, including *Glenn Island Special*, *Sliphorn Jive*, and later on, *Wham (Re-Bop Boom-Bam!)*. Durham also arranged many of Miller's own chestnuts including *Baby Me* and *Tuxedo Junction*. However, it was his 1939 re-arrangement of the popular jazz staple, *In The Mood*, which further cemented Eddie Durham's place in music history, and in turn, earn Glenn Miller an insanely huge pile of money. Ironically, Miller paid Durham a one-time sum of five dollars for this arrangement, which was actually a typical transaction among arrangers and bandleaders of the day.

During this hugely influential period in American popular music of which Eddie Durham was playing an important role, he also managed another "first" for recorded music. The John Hammond-produced 1938 recording sessions of the Kansas City Five, featuring Durham as its bandleader and guitarist, yielded the very first *electric* guitar recording ever, *Good Morning Blues*. In fact, the legendary Hammond wanted to produce the album solely to showcase Durham's infectious, yet difficult technique of "down stroke" electric guitar playing. It was also during this time that Durham started to mentor perhaps the most celebrated jazz guitarist of all time, Charlie Christian.

In the 1940's Durham organized his own band and arranged music for an all girls orchestra, The International Sweethearts of Rhythm. During the next couple of decades, Durham performed mostly abroad and did a few recordings, including the 1970 West End Cafe Series recording with Franc Williams & The

Swing Four. In 1976, Eddie joined the Harlem Blues and Jazz Band and remained with them until his 1987 death in Brooklyn. He is inducted into the American Jazz Hall of Fame, as well as the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame. His excellent 1981 album, *Blue Bone*, is available to buy online.

For more information about Eddie Durham, be sure to check out [www.durhamjazz.com](http://www.durhamjazz.com).