Chick Webb Orch. ], Drums
Theme Song: Let's Get Together
Little Chick Webb came up from Baltimore in the Mid-20's. He put together an orchestra that included such sidemen as: Taft Jordan and Louis Bacon on trumpets; Sandy Williams on Trombone and Edgar Sampson on alto sax. Edgar slowly became the band's arranger, and a good one at that. He went on to arrange for many other bands.

"Crippled" Chick Webb, a hunchback dwarf, led one of the most swinging bands of the era from the drummer's throne. His was the 'house band' of the Savoy Ballroom 1931-1935. His manager, Moe Gale, was also the owner of the Savoy. When other big bands came into the Savoy Ballroom for "Cutting" contests, Chick's orchestra usually "blew them away" with Edgar Sampson's great swing scores.

Chick is remembered today as the discoverer of Ella Fitzgerald (b. April 25, 1917, Newport News, VA, USA, d. June 15, 1996, Beverly Hills, CA, USA), but she was really discovered at one of the Harlem Opera House, (one block up from the famous Apollo Theater), Amateur Nights, by one of the Chick Webb band members, Bardu Ali. (In those days, if a bandleader didn't have an outgoing personality, it was common practice to hire a "Frontman" who would 'lead' the band, while the band's owner was playing as a 'sideman'. Bardu Ali was the 'frontman' for the Chick Webb Orchestra.) Ella was on stage at the Harlem Opera House the night Bardu Ali was in the audience. He heard Ella imitating her favorite singer, - Connee Boswell. (She sang 2 of Boswell's big hits - "Judy" and "The Object of My Affection". The audience loved it, and she caught Bardu's attention.) (Incidentally, she won a prize of $25.00 for her efforts.)

About this same time, she had another Harlem Opera House Amateur Night tryout, and won a week-long professional engagement at the venue (beginning February 16, 1935) with the band of vocalist Tiny Bradshaw, who had recorded eight titles for Decca the previous year.

Not much later, Bardou Ali, 'frontman' for the Webb band, escorted her backstage to Webb's dressing room. Ella later told music critic Leonard Feather:

"I sang the only three songs I knew - all the things I'd heard Connee Boswell do. Chick had a boy singer and didn't want a girl, and he grudgingly said, 'well, 'we're playing Yale tomorrow. Get on the band bus and, if they like you there, you've got a job."

But even that concession wasn't enough to get Ella a job with the Chick Webb Band. Here's a photo of Trumpeter Taft Jordan and Ella, at a recording session. Taft later recalled that once Webb himself had been convinced, Fitzgerald still had to audition for the band's manager, Moe Gale. Moe was not only the band's manager, he was also the owner of the Savoy Ballroom. Taft has said:

"Moe came in and took a look at her and said 'Ah no, Chick.' Chick said, 'No, no. Listen to the voice.' Chick said, 'Don't look at her.'" Upon hearing Fitzgerald sing, Jordan continued, Gale was speechless, leaving Webb to have the last word, "Okay, I'll hire her."

And so, Chick Webb hired Ella, in 1934. Later, Chick and Mrs. Webb adopted the young orphan.

Ella's big hit "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" was arranged for her by Al Feldman (later called Van Alexander). Ella wrote some of the lyrics herself. During her stint with the band, almost EVERYBODY 'borrowed' Ella Fitzgerald from him at one time or another.

Chick died June 16, 1939 of Tuberculosis of the Spine. His mother was at bedside. It was
reported that Chick said "I'm sorry. I gotta go", closed his eyes and died. 30 years old.

After Webb's death, the band became briefly (2 years) the Ella Fitzgerald Orch. Ella tried desperately to hold the orchestra together, but by 1942, Ella was out on her own, and the Chick Webb Orchestra was a part of Swing History.