

January/February 2005

# Chicago's Aragon Ballroom

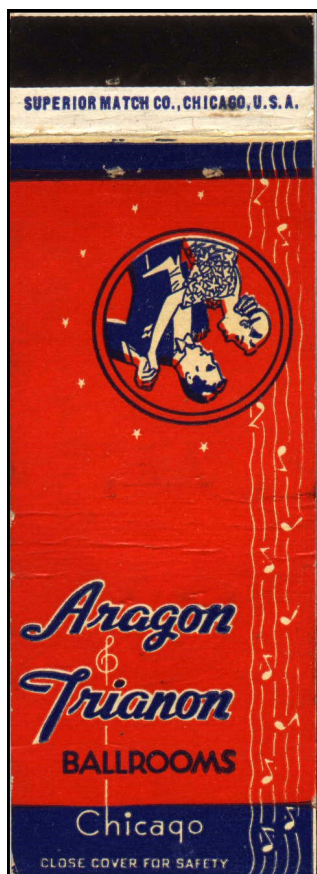
by  
Mike Prero

The Aragon was built in 1926 by two brothers, William and Andrew Karzas, at an exorbitant cost of two million dollars (considering the price of admission was only .90c). The Aragon, named after a providence in Spain, was the crowing jewel in a cluster of lucrative properties owned by the Karzas. It was designed to replicate a Spanish palace courtyard with its crystal chandeliers, mosaic tiles, garishly painted plaster, terra-cotta ceiling and beautiful arches. The shiny bent wood floor was created for dancing and rests on a cushion of cork, felt and springs. It appears to be a palace of illusions, where artificial stars twinkle overhead and projectors beam clouds scudding across the domed roof some 60 feet above the dance floor. Even the "wooden" beams located throughout the venue are make-believe (simulated from concrete).

On opening night, July 14, 1926, Mayor William Hale Thompson bought the first ticket and more than 8,000 people jammed the Aragon to enjoy its unprecedented beauty. It was dubbed the most beautiful ballroom in the world. The Aragon was a smashing success and soon became the most famous dance hall in America.

And in the Midwest those who weren't dancing perhaps sat at home by their radios and waited impatiently until the announcer ended his station break by saying: "... we return you to our studios in the Aragon Ballroom, where the dancing is now in progress." The announcer spoke of the beauty and described the happy crowd enjoying the music of the best orchestras in the nation. Radio broadcasts were of paramount importance to the Aragon for advertising. These broadcasts were made live six nights a week from 10:05 PM to 11:00 PM on WGN Radio. The ballroom was closed only on Monday.

Many out of towners traveled great distances to dance at the famous Aragon. The venue's close proximity to public transportation was also a key factor in its ability to attract large crowds. The Aragon enjoyed near capacity crowds every day. Weekly attendance regularly topped 18,000 during the 20's, 30's, and 40's. Men were obligated to wear jackets and ties. Attire for women was semi-formal evening wear. Smoking was



prohibited on the second floor and tuxedoed floorwalkers prevented close dancing or jitterbugging. It was the place in Chicago to meet single men and women. Many couples meet for the first time at the Aragon later to be married. On one special occasion, 800 couples gathered to share their stories of how they met at the Aragon under the twinkling stars.

Every big name band played the Aragon, which became a status symbol separating the orchestras that had "arrived" from the amateurs. Playing the Aragon was regarded as having obtained "big-time" status. Acts like Frank Sinatra, Lawrence Welk, Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller, Guy Lombardo, Dick Jurgens, Harry James, Xavier Cugat, Eddy Duchin, Carmen Cavallaro, Kay Kyser, George Olsen, Benny Goodman, Sammy Kaye, Art Kassel, Artie Shaw, Ted Fio Rito, Jan Garber, Frankie Masters, Russ Morgan, Orrin Tucker, Griff Williams, Ben Bernie, Tommy Tucker, Abe Lyman, Henry King, Bernie Cummins, Shep Fields, Gus Arnheim, Ted Weems, Eddy Howard, Wayne King and many more frequented the Aragon.

By 1955 an era in which an estimated 50 million people had danced at the Aragon to the very best of America's orchestras was in decline. They danced through Prohibition and danced during the Depression. In 1958 the Normandy Cocktail Lounge, located next door to the Aragon, caught fire and an explosion erupted. The blast, probably set off by pressure from heat generated by the fire, ripped off the glass and brick storefront of the saloon, hurled bar stools, glass and shreds of fancy draperies across the street and punched a huge hole into the wall that separated it from the foyer of the ballroom. Damage to the Aragon was estimated at \$50,000.00. The explosion occurred at 3:35 am, three hours after the Aragon had closed. No one was injured. Consequently, the Aragon closed for a few months in order to repair the lobby. When it reopened, attendance dwindled. In 1964, William Karza sold the famous Aragon to Oscar Brothorn and Leonard Sherman for a price far less than the two million dollars it cost to construct. On February 9, 1964, regularly scheduled dances ceased. The new owners transformed the 100 by 175 foot dance floor into a skating rink. This, however, was unsuccessful. In 1971, Harmond Harvey and Arthur Holleb bought the Aragon. They began restoring the venue to its original splendor. For a short time, Thursdays were nostalgia nights. The house band, "The Aragon", played through a dance music library that spanned from the turn of the century to the '70s. On Saturdays there were ethnic parties and wrestling matches were held every other Friday. Harmond, like every other owner before him, thought he could bring back big bands and dancing but low attendance soon stopped those dreams.

The Aragon reopened its doors to rock and roll concerts in 1972. Bands included the Doors, the Kinks, the Fabulous Rhinestones, Dr. John and many more. Although rock and roll was quickly carving its niche, the current promoters

were unsuccessful. In 1973, two Latin promoters, Willy Miranda and Jose Palomar bought the Aragon. They concentrated their efforts on restoring the appearance of the venue while continuing to promote their dances. Shortly after they purchased the Aragon, they were approached by two new concert promoters Army Granat and Jerry Mickelson of JAM Productions. Jam possessed what it took to make rock concerts work and the new rock era at

