Civic leaders and the city fathers recognized early on that a sizeable auditorium capable of hosting name attractions would be an important asset to the city. In April 1926 even before such an auditorium was a reality Mayor Ewing had approached the Southwest Chautauqua Organization about bringing its major performers to the city. It had toured such stalwarts as the violinist Efrem Zimbalist, Polish pianist Ignacy Jan Paderewski, and lecturer Herbert Hoover.

It is in 1927 that the Harlingen Municipal Auditorium, 1114 Fair Park Blvd., is approved for construction at a cost of $125,000. Its site is where the annual Valley Mid-Winter agricultural fairs are held, and it is expected to be utilized as part of the fair activities. It is completed before mid-1928 and seats 1,800. The Hurricane of 1933 causes extensive to the auditorium, so it is extensively renovated. Reopened in late 1935, a new cornerstone dated 1936 is placed in it. The entrance offers a art deco façade. The interior is also of art deco design and has a state of the art stage. Reconfigured, it then seats over 2,200. The city government people who approved the expenditures were: Mayor Sam Botts; commissioners J.J. Burk, George Waters, Neil Madeley, Dr. E.A. Davis, and H.C. Ware. The architect was Stanley Bliss with the Ramsey Brothers doing the contracting.

Since the year 1928 when Harlingen was first blessed with one of the finest civic auditoriums in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, the community has always enticed topnotch entertainment. This was made possible by performing-arts-lovers who organized to bring to Harlingen American and foreign artists of note. In late October 1928 at the official dedication of the facility, John Philip Sousa with his 80-man band played two concerts in the auditorium. The afternoon performance was largely attended by Harlingen schoolchildren and Souza critiqued local musicians. A month later saw the performance of Victor Herbert's operetta "Naughty Marietta". On 12/17/28 the hit musical Broadway "Rio Rita" is performed with a cast of 96 including a beauty chorus of 50. The NY Times labeled it "The Queen of All Musical Comedies."

A performance of the Freiburg-im-Breslau Passion Play takes place in it in 1929. Another prominent attraction utilizing the theater in its early years is the Broadway production of George White's Scandals. Celebrated dancers Ted Shawn and Isadora Duncan, who was later to die in a tragic accident in Italy, graced the stage. They brought with them 16 boys who performed Indian dances in appropriate costuming and makeup. This same year saw famed, but aging, soprano Madame Schumann-Heink offered a concert after which the audience rose to its feet in appreciation. She, who appeared very early on, brought with her a boy violin virtuoso.

William T. "Uncle Billie" Chase was to play an important role in the auditorium's operations. Born in Hiawatha, KS 9/20/1866, he had gone to Oklahoma's Cherokee Strip when it was opened to settlement on 9/13/1893. He moved on to the Valley on 9/14/14. Here he purchased 60 acres of land on S. Dilworth Road. He moved into the Lon C. Hill house
at Fair Park in the spring of 1927. Then he was to take on the position of theater manager at $170 per month plus the free housing. He would not relinquish the job for 30 years just before reaching age 91.

In the 1930s polar explorer and aviator Richard Byrd would lecture here on his adventures.
In the March of 1939 the Harlingen American Legion Post will sponsor two lectures in the auditorium by Eleanor Roosevelt, wife, of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and esteemed in her own right.

In was the year 1933 that saw the formation of the Rio Grande Valley Civic Music Association. Its leaders were responsible for obtaining and scheduling the many first-class performers who were to grace Harlingen's wonderful venue. In the 1940s this membership-only organization dedicated to bring reasonably-priced artistic attraction to the city embarked on a different track. It contracted with Civic Concert Services, Inc. based in New York City, and the Civic Concert Association. These provided performer services to cities nationwide. These entities had a history extending back to the year 1927 when people began to think "Why not raise some money first and then hire the artists?" The idea soon caught on. Between 1945 and 1950 the total number of community associations rose to an all time high of 1,008. Artist fees were relatively reasonable, therefore, for instance, seasonal membership for 1959 was only $9.00.

World renowned artists were to grace the stage in Harlingen over the years. It may be hard to imagine the likes of romantic-style composer and pianist Sergei Rachmaninoff, accomplished pianist Arthur Rubenstein, Wagnerian tenor Lauritz Melchior, and violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz being here, but they were. Audiences enjoyed the talents of performer like Rudolf Serkin, Paul Robeson, and the Van Trapp Family Singers. Jan Peerce, Metropolitan Opera tenor, performed in Harlingen as did Met sopranos Vivian Della Chiesa, versatile Eleanor Steber, and coloratura soprano Lily Pons. The talented and amusing blind English pianist, Alec Templeton, was a special treat. The acclaimed Original Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo was a great attraction. The Symphony Orchestras of Minneapolis, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and St. Louis filled the stage and theater with gorgeous melodies. Arthur Fiedler of Boston came to conduct the Washington Symphony Orchestra.

Before the 1960-61 concert season the Rio Grande Valley Civic Music Association was superseded by the Harlingen Community Concert Association which in turn was now to be serviced by Community Concerts, a division of Columbia Artists Management, Inc. Similar associations were formed in Brownsville and McAllen. This came about as all three cities had populations large enough to sustain their own organization. Kingsville also had its own concert association. All four groups offered reciprocal allowances for members to attend the individual concerts. Because the same artists were frequently booked for all four locales in order to save travel expenses and reduce costs, the privilege wasn't often used. In later years as membership in each city grew the reduction of available surplus seats led to the abandonment of reciprocity.
In 1969, the Casa de Armistad building was added on the east side of the auditorium. It had a seating capacity of around 900. On a few occasions when conflicting rentals came to fore the HCCA held a concert in this facility. The auditorium building underwent some renovations in 1976 at which time the glass windows on either side were removed and replaced with solid walls.

In the years 1992 and 1993 the Harlingen Municipal Auditorium and adjacent Casa de Amistad receive major renovations and modernization including a unifying façade which enlarges their entrances. The lobby is much enlarged to a spacious 6,300 sq. ft. In the auditorium there is a reduction in seating to 2,200 padded ones. The acoustics are greatly improved as are the dressing rooms. A computerized lighting system is installed along with two new follow lights, a new grand drape in peacock green and two new stage curtains. City government officials leading this effort are Mayor H. William Card and Commissioners Nat Lopez, Donna P. Bonner, Jessie Robles, John T. Garrett, and Dr. James R. Rowe. A. Brent Brahnham is city manager, Peacock Construction is the general contractor, and Gignac and Associates are architects.

During this two-year concert season period, the Harlingen Community Concert Association found a home for one season at the Jacob Brown Auditorium in Brownsville and in the second season at Harlingen High School South Cafetorium. The long nighttime drive to and from Brownsville was an imposition for some older patrons and membership dropped the following season. This was just as well for, the cafetorium seated only 1,200. With portable seats, less stage accommodations, and poor to average acoustics the facility barely satisfied normal performance requirements.

In the year 2000 the service corporation Community Concerts was purchased by the Trawick Company. Over time it was poorly managed, so the Harlingen Community Concert Association severed its ties with Trawick in 2003. The local association revised its Constitution and By-Laws in March 2004, changing its name at that time to Harlingen Concert Association.

A partial listing of the artists and performers who have come to Harlingen reads like a Who's Who of both American and international stars. The list of artist may surprise even the most blasé and jaded theatergoers. Can you believe?

**Ballet and Dance Troupes:** The Chicago Opera Ballet, Robert Joffrey, Dallas Ballet, Ruth Page's International Ballet, Jose Molina Bailes Espanoles, Ballet America, Hungarian Folk Ballet, Richard Thomas Ballet, Czechoslovakian Folk Ballet, Ballet Folklorio National Mexico, Gisela and Her Flaming Flamenco, Trula Yugoslav Dancers, Bayanihan Philippine Dance Company, Chamber Ballet, and the Nevada Dance Theater;

**Big Bands:** Guy Lombardo, Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, Bob Crosby and the Bobcats, Les Brown and his Band of Renown, the Jack Daniels Silver Cornet Band, Stars of the Lawrence Welk Show, Salute to Benny Goodman, and the Big Band Cavalcade;

**Orchestras:** the Boston Pops, the Symphonies of Indiana, St. Louis, Madrid and Warsaw, and the Washington Symphony with guest conductor Arthur Fiddler, Prague Chamber Orchestra, Paul Krentz Chamber Orchestra of Paris, Irish Pops Orchestra, the New Orleans Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Pan American Symphony:
Choral: Fred Waring and His Pennsylvanians, Helsinki University Choir, Norman Luboff, Vienna Academy, Mitch Miller, Little Angels of Korea, Krsmannovich Chorus, the Roger Wagner Chorale, Robert Shaw Chorale, William Hall Chorale, the Westminster Choir, Swingle Singers, New Christie Minstrels, Johnny Mann Singers, Tony Sandler Singers, and the Black Mountain Choir of Wales;

Piano: Leonard Pennario, Peter Nero, Daniel Epstein, Hodgens and Howard, James Dick, Andre La Plante, Rosal and Schaefer, Constantine Orbelian, Lincoln Mayorga, Leonid Kuzman, Markham and Broadway, Jean Casadeseus, Stan Freeman, and the Hambro Quartet of Pianos;


In addition there have been brass, string, and saxophone ensembles, organists, banjo quartets, guitarists, harpists, harmonica virtuosos, and Chinese acrobats. Texas State Opera productions have seen the limelight as well as such Broadway productions as Brigadoon, Camelot, I Do I Do, Forever Plaid, folk singers, and numerous festivals for various American composers.

With four to six season performances each winter season over a 46-year span the scope and variety of entertainment having graced the stage of the Harlingen Municipal Auditorium is truly dizzying. The success of working in unity to provide low cost access to quality entertainment is no more evident than with the Harlingen Concert Association and what it has accomplished.

Addendum February 2011

From the Encyclopedia of Music in Canada we learn of the start of the civic concert movement: "The concept of organized audiences began in the 1920s in the USA as the Civic Music Association, an attempt to bring the best possible performing artists to medium-sized cities and small towns without involving financial risk to the organizers. Previously, whereas larger cities usually could be assured of good audiences and thus no deficit when important musicians were engaged for performances, smaller communities frequently were faced with discouraging losses if they were to make up the difference between an artist's fee and ticket sales. Following the efforts of Harry P. Harrison and Dima Harshbarger in 1920, a young US musician, Ward French, developed the Organized Audience Movement in 1922, establishing a new plan which would avoid such losses and yet would encourage volunteers within the community to participate in the organizing of concerts. The plan was based on the principle of the local community gathering the audience first, through a one-week membership campaign, and then engaging such artists as the proceeds of that campaign would allow. In this way the community would hire only the artists it could afford, and at the same time everyone interested in the community's music could be involved in the membership campaign.
The idea was so successful that in 1928 it was taken up in New York by Columbia Concerts Corporation, which in 1948 became Columbia Artists Management Inc. Impresario Arthur Judson and CBS founder William Paley played a role in formulating the entity. A subsidiary company, Community Concerts, Inc, began working with local communities to help them form their own Community Concert Associations. Representatives from New York visited the communities, bringing information about available artists. [Later there would be regional representatives who could provide customized services.] In return, the associations were required to agree to book all their performers through Community Concerts, Inc, in New York. Once the local association had chosen the artists, the New York office arranged contracts, provided the local association with publicity material, and subsequently forwarded program information in printed form ready for distribution at the time of the performance. A Community Concert Association was free to choose any available artist it could afford, and the New York office made the arrangements. However, in some cases the New York office contracted artists or groups of artists to do Community Concert tours, from which local associations also could benefit, if geographically appropriate. Fees were assessed on the basis of an amount agreed to by the artist, plus a margin fee to Community Concerts, Inc. These fees were paid directly by the local association to Community Concerts, Inc, New York, who in turn paid the artist his or her share."

The Redmond, California Community Concert Association also provides some background on the movement: "In 1927, an idea that would revolutionize the performing arts in America sprang up simultaneously in the Great Lakes region and in several Eastern states. Communities that struggled to make up deficits after hiring performers, decided to raise money first and then bring arts to their audiences. This principle of raising funds to secure a season in advance of contracting grew into the organized audience plan and ultimately Community Concerts, the largest, most enduring network of performing arts presenters that has ever existed.

Once money-raising problems were solved, families and individuals who did not previously belong to the sponsoring organization – usually women’s clubs – were now attracted to an entire season of a variety of entertainment at a very reasonable price. People who had never attended highbrow concerts before were being invited by people they knew who were just ordinary folks who lived in their neighborhoods, went to their churches, and whose children attended schools with their own children. An added benefit of this groundswell of arts appreciation was the germination and growth of local symphonies, theater and dance companies that now flourish in all parts of the country.

The stock market crash of 1929 plunged America into its darkest economic period ever. At the time of the crash there were 42 Community Concert Associations in America and by 1940 there were 335. Undaunted by economic deprivation, communities would not allow the beauty and meaning of live performance to be taken away. It was obvious that concerts were more than mere entertainment; they were the lifeline to humanity, sanity, and normalcy. Food for the soul was as important as food on the table, and even the Great Depression could not stop the growth of Community Concerts."
The managers of Columbia Artists Management, Inc. adopted Community Concerts in the 1930’s. With Columbia Artists’ impressive roster of artists and attractions, the success of Community Concerts was assured. “A Carnegie Hall in Every Town” became the company’s proud slogan and soon the world’s greatest artists graced the stage of the affiliated associations, even in the smallest towns.

After more than six decades Community Concerts began to dissolve its relationship with Columbia Artists Management, Inc. allowing Community Concerts to operate more independently. Autonomy allowed for rapid adjustment in an age of competition from television and radio, competing performing arts presenters, changing life styles, and rapid transportation to metropolitan centers with their larger venues of arts and artists. The traditional organized audience associations managed by local volunteers is still at the heart of Community Concert business.

Columbia Artists Management sold the Community Concert business to Brenda Trawick in 1999 and the name changed to Trawick Artists Community Concerts. Trawick financially collapsed in January, 2003. Soon Live on Stage (LOS) came on the scene and now Community Concerts continues in the same vein as it had in the past when it was part of Columbia Artists Management, Inc. RCCA, however, has chosen to act on its own behalf, booking directly with agents and artists.

The Harlingen Municipal Auditorium when it opened in 1928 was the largest and best equipped theatrical venue in the Valley. The Labor Day Hurricane of 1933 as noted previously seriously damaged it and after its reconstruction it lost some seating capacity. From 1936 when it reopened until 1991 little was done to the structure. In 1991 the city decided to conduct a major face-lifting of the facility. This would take several years extending through 1992 into 1993. The Harlingen Municipal Auditorium and adjacent Casa de Amistad received major renovations and modernization including a unifying façade which enlarges their entrances. In the auditorium there is a reduction in seating to 2,200 padded ones. The acoustics are greatly improved as are the dressing rooms. The lobby is much enlarged.

For many years when a grand piano was called for in a performance, the association would utilize the one that was at the Harlingen Cultural Arts Center. It had an agreement to use this piano since, in February 1989, the association had made a donation of $1,436 to the Cultural Arts Board towards the purchase of a 9' Baldwin piano. Having to contract a mover every time the piano was needed was a headache and not good for the piano itself. Eventually the association asked the city if it could send the excellent Baldwin grand piano at the Municipal Auditorium to Corpus Christi to be fully restored with the association picking up most of the costs. This was agreed to and upon its return to Harlingen the piano was stored in a locked, humidity and temperature-controlled room that had been built for this purpose.

This renovation however forces the organization to find other venues for its concerts. For the 1991-92 season the association rents the Jacob Brown Auditorium in Brownsville. This proves a hardship for older members who do not wish to drive long distances at
night. For the 1992-93 programs, the site is the new Harlingen High School South cafeteria. With portable seats, less stage accommodations, and poor to average acoustics the facility barely satisfies normal performance requirements.

The events surrounding Trawick's end were traumatic for many concert associations and the Harlingen Community Concert Association was no exception.

The history with Trawick begins as recounted in this press release: "Columbia Artists Sells Its Concert Business"
Published: June 03, 1999
Community Concerts, which presents about 1,800 concerts a year to pre-organized audiences around the country, has been sold by Columbia Artists Management Inc., to another agency, Trawick Artists, for an undisclosed sum.
Announcing the sale yesterday, Ronald Wilford, Columbia Artists' president, described it as part of an agency reorganization that "makes us better able to focus on our core business," the management of orchestras, conductors, soloists and theatrical attractions.
Organized in 1927 by the founder of Columbia Artists, Arthur Judson, a CBS radio pioneer, Community Concerts played to a coast-to-coast network of subscription audiences whose pooled resources attracted leading performers and ensembles. Artists and groups who have toured through Community Concerts include Marian Anderson, Van Cliburn, Leontyne Price, Samuel Ramey and Beverly Sills, as well as the New York Theater Ballet, the Brothers Four and the Preservation Hall Jazz Band.
Although television and changing performance patterns and technologies have cut into the market, Community Concerts still serves some 350 audience associations throughout North America. It moved out of Columbia Artists' offices on West 57th Street in 1990 and became a separate subdivision of it in 1996."

The country learned more in a detailed NY Times article that was discussed in this release: "Charlotte, NC blog site article by "Sour Notes: Major national classical music group in hot water Published 03.19.03 By Tara Servati"

Few people noticed when Community Concerts quieted slipped into town last summer. Even fewer had heard anything about the trouble the company was facing at the time. Although company owner Brenda Trawick says she chose to relocate to Charlotte because the arts were growing here and this would be a very supportive place for the national concert presenting company, until the New York Times reported last week that the company had neglected to pay artists, had written them bad checks and that the Manhattan district attorney was considering an investigation, many in Charlotte's arts community had no idea that Community Concerts had relocated here from Manhattan. "They don't do anything in Charlotte," said Shelley Bratton, executive director of Carolinas Concert Association. "They don't bring groups to Charlotte."

At its peak, the 75-year-old company was once one of the country's most well-known concert presenters, bringing thousands of opera-style concerts to folks in the country's hinterlands who normally wouldn't have access to such entertainment. In small and mid-sized towns across the country, opera fans pooled their money into community associa-
tions serviced by Community Concerts, which then brought some of the hottest names in opera to town to perform.

Now, according to the New York Times, some of those organizations have begun to pay the artists directly, rather than passing the money on to the company. Others have cut their ties to Community Concerts and are booking acts with other companies. As a group, the artists claim they are owed at least $1.5 million.

Trawick says the NYT didn't print all of her side of the story. She claims that all of the artists to whom her company owes money have been paid "something" and that she has established a payment schedule with each of them.

"Our intention is to make everyone whole," Trawick said.

James Meena, the general director of Opera Carolina, says the organization's dealings with Trawick Artists, Trawick's other company, have been positive.

"The arts management side is very reputable," said Meena. "I suspect there's more to the story that the Times could not print."

"When I acquired the company, it was in disarray," she said. "We made a major turnaround. All of this hit at a time when the company was the most vulnerable."

Unfortunately it was the last hurrah for Brenda Trawick and her association with the Harlingen Community Concert Association. In order to make very clear it had no connected or liability with Trawick, the association changed the name in its constitution to "Harlingen Concert Association" in March 2004.

The company that stepped into the booking gap was Matt Davenport's Live On Stage. It has served the HCA well since 2003. Each July this company conducts a showcase in Nashville, TN at which time community representatives can view artists in short performances and make personal assessments as to their suitability for their regions and members. HCA board members have availed themselves of this opportunity.

On 8/23/08 the city and the concert society are wracked by a natural disaster—Hurricane Dolly with initial winds of up to 85 mph (Category 2). The roof of the Municipal Auditorium collapses and major damages occur to seating and other parts of the structure. Immediately the HCA seeks an alternative venue. A suitable one is found in the Christian Fellowship Church (CFC) on Vinson Street. The church's auditorium seats about 1200 in padded seats without arm rests in four sections.[Upon reopening the Muni now had about 2000 seats.] The stage is carpeted and would necessitate the rental of wooden flooring for dance companies. The lighting is first class as are the acoustics and an added plus are the two large screens on either side of the stage. On these are shown camera closeups of the performers in action. One drawback however is the lack of dedicated dressing room facilities. The HCA moves to rent this facility with lighting, sound, and camera
technicians included. When the Municipal Auditorium is slow to be renovated and repaired, not only is the 2009-10 season held there but the 2010-2011 as well.

When the city refuses to fully refund the advance rental payments made by the HCA to it or reconsider its new ticketing policy as the HCA believes it should be grandfathered in, the HCA board makes the decision to continue its programs at the CFC. Not accommodating the different ticketing mode of the HCA would create a hardship on the HCA members and raise membership costs.

The membership costs have always been very reasonable considering that programming provides five to six concerts a season. For the 1983-84 season the cost of membership was $15 for adults and $7.50 for students. It remained this way through the 1986-87 season. The following year it rose to $20 for an adult and $7.50 for a student. In 1992-93 a family membership for $50 was instituted.

In order to sponsor more expensive productions, it was thought that a move towards reserved seating would generate higher revenues. This concept was instituted in the 1998-99 season with general membership raised to $35 and $15 additional for reserved seats. Starting in the 2000-2001 season the reserved seating charge was lifted to $25. In 2004-2005 a three-tiered charge brought membership to $70, 60, and 40. When, for the 2008-2009 season, the unnumbered seating at the CFC presented challenges, the $40, 60 and 70 seats were designated by different colored ribbons. For the 2009-2010 season when thoughts were that the association would move back into the Municipal Auditorium after one concert, tickets charges were simplified to $50 and $70. In January when the decision was made to stay the remainder of the season at the CFC, specific rows in sections were assigned with the $60 patrons having the preferred front rows.

The City of Harlingen refused to "grandfather" the association when it came to the issuance of tickets that in the future would be surcharged. Rental and other charges were also to be increased by the city. To not accommodate the association would result in lower flexibility and increased costs to members. That being the case the association returned to the CFC in 2009-10 and 2010-11. The tickets had four front-to-rear sections that were numbered 1, 2, 3 & 4 and the row numbers on them. Patrons could sit anywhere on their assigned row. Ticket prices were set at $50, 60 and 70.

Over the years the HCA has fostered student interest in the performing arts. Complimentary tickets have been issued to students, and more importantly visiting artists have performed at school venues and workshops. On occasion students have performed for the HCA with artists. In addition the association has sponsored Texas performers through partial grants of the Texas Commission of the Arts and providing performances by the Valley Symphony.


While the primary expenses of the association are for artist fees there are many other costs involved in successfully operating each year and concert season. Among these have been: programs/promotions; postage/handling, miscellaneous bank charges, piano/other instrument rentals, piano tuning, auditorium rentals, security personnel, annual worker kickoff dinner, staging/lighting/sound, sustenance via our stage manager for performers, printing, CPA auditing, temporary dance flooring rental, Harlingen Area Chamber of
Commerce membership, music licensing fees of BMI and ASCAP, various insurance policies, and fees for annual Live On Stage previews in Nashville. All of the Harlingen Concert Association board members are non-paid volunteers. For their dedication and long and useful service to the community, they are to be recognized and commended.