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Ella Fitzgerald publicity portrait c. 1950s. Photo © CTS Images.

## Celebrating Ella At 100

Ella Jane Fitzgerald was born on April 25, 1917 in Newport News, Virginia. Her mother, Tempie, worked as a domestic and she never knew her father, William. She went on to become the world's most celebrated woman jazz singer. Her long and illustrious musical career included 13 Grammys, numerous *DownBeat* Awards, the Kennedy Center Honors, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the National Medal of the Arts and many other honors — and more than 40 million albums sold. Ella performed

her last concert at New York's Carnegie Hall in 1991. She died due to complications from diabetes in her Beverly Hills home on June 15, 1996. During this year's centennial anniversary of her birth hundreds of tributes in her honor are taking place worldwide, including a two-day "cELLAbration" at the Rutgers Institute of Jazz Studies in Newark on May 24–25. *Jersey Jazz* contributor Jim Gerard talked to several of the distinguished participants and his report on the IJS symposium and more begins on page 28.

# Ella at 100

## REFLECTIONS ON "THE VOICE OF JAZZ"

By Jim Gerard

The headline of the *The New York Times*' obituary for Ella Fitzgerald called her "the Voice of Jazz." Over the course of her nearly 60-year career Fitzgerald became the most popular singer in jazz history — an honorific that, due to America's chronic indifference to both jazz and history, can safely be retired.

Fitzgerald achieved global renown, significant wealth and veneration by listeners and musicians alike. She sold over 40 million records and was beloved by both black and white audiences. Yet by all accounts she remained a shy, insecure and unpretentious woman. It's likely that the singer would've felt honored but chagrined at the prospect of an academic symposium devoted to her life and work<sup>1</sup>.

The colloquy, titled "cELLAbration: A Celebration of Ella's 100th Birthday" hosted this past March by the Institute of Jazz Studies in Newark, NJ, measured the magnitude of Fitzgerald's enduring contributions to jazz and popular music<sup>2</sup>.

For two days, scholars, music historians, musicians, record producers, critics and fans expressed their deep appreciation for the singer Lester Young dubbed "Lady Time."

Distinguished presenters such as Judith Tick, author of an upcoming biography of Fitzgerald, and Jim Blackman, a close friend of the singer, shone spotlights on hitherto-under-examined aspects of Ella's biography and long-held assertions about her life. (See Sidebar: "Ella Liked to Do Dishes.")



Ella Fitzgerald performing in the late 1950s. Photo (c) CTS Images.

IJS director of operations Vincent Pelote discussed Ella's early years with Chick Webb and her history with Benny Carter. (Pelote took the baton from the late, greatly lamented Ed Berger, who'd been scheduled to make the presentation.) Tad Hershorn, author of a biography of Norman Granz and public services librarian and archivist at the IJS, spoke about the "historic partnership" between Granz and Fitzgerald that "laid the foundation for the rest of Ella's career."

In "Ella the Improviser," Lewis Porter took an analytical deep dive into a few tracks (from among the over-2,400 songs Fitzgerald recorded) that he felt best displayed Fitzgerald's soloing brilliance. (See Sidebar: "The Tracks of Ella's Art.")

IJS director emeritus Dan Morgenstern<sup>3</sup> and WBGO's Sheila Anderson collaborated on a program titled "Reflections on Jazz Singing." Another WBGO host, Rhonda Hamilton did a curated listening program

focusing on the importance of the eight Songbook LPs Fitzgerald recorded at the behest of Granz for his Verve label. Using the m.o. from his popular "Clip Joints" soirees, author-historian Will Friedwald proffered a montage of film and TV segments comparing and comparing Ella and Nat Cole's interpretations of Cole Porter songs in the 1950s.

A trio of record producers comprised another segment of the symposium. Harry Weinger of Universal Music spoke about the label's new release, *Ella Fitzgerald: 100 Songs for a Centennial*, a

<sup>1</sup> Who knows what she would've made of scholarly papers such as *Ella Fitzgerald: syllabic choice in scat singing and her timbral syllabic development between 1944 and 1947* by Justin Garrett Binek.

<sup>2</sup> It was only one of a staggering number of events honoring Fitzgerald's musical

legacy. The Smithsonian Museum, Library of Congress, Grammy Museum and Jazz at Lincoln Center are just a few institutions who celebrated. In tandem comes an avalanche of new and re-releases of Fitzgerald recordings.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this, see "Dan's Den" in the April 2017 *Jersey Jazz*.

collection of Fitzgerald's most popular songs, from "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" with Chick Webb's orchestra in 1938<sup>4</sup>, to "Mack the Knife" from her 1960 Live in Berlin concert. (See Sidebar: The Tracks of Ella's Art") In a statement both totally believable and somehow awe-inspiring, Weinger said that Ella remains one of the label's best-selling artists, over 20 years after her death.

Scott Wenzel of Mosaic Records focused on that label's *Chick Webb & Ella Fitzgerald Decca Sessions (1934-41)*, and historian/radio host/producer Phil Schaap spoke about the 1958 tapes he unearthed from the Verve vaults that constituted the 1988 CD *Ella in Rome: The Birthday Concert* — the singer's last hit.

Ella's accompanists were heard from, as well. Both pianist Richard Wyands, who backed Ella for three months in 1956, and Mike Wofford, her pianist for the last four years of her career, conveyed their testimonials to Ella in words and music — Wyands playing "Yesterdays" and Wofford "How High the Moon."

In between, the symposium audience was treated to the screening of *Pure Love*, a 2016 documentary film by German director Katja Duregger. The film focuses on Fitzgerald's voice and her influence on succeeding generations of singers.

Hershorn says that the complexity and sheer volume (over 200 albums) of Fitzgerald's art may more readily yield insights than strictly biographical investigations. "You have to dig for Ella's personal details far more deeply than with many other artists. Ella shielded from the public the impact of life's bitter blows — from racism to disappointments in love — and how she handled them." Blackman relates an anecdote that underscores Fitzgerald's stoic attitude: "Once I said to her, 'It must've been difficult touring in the South and confronting its racism and segregation.' She replied, 'You go through things and pay your dues, and that experience makes you a

better person.'"

The curtain Fitzgerald drew over her past, especially her early adolescence, hasn't dissuaded Judith Tick from further excavation of the singer's early years, the results of which will appear in her forthcoming biography, *Becoming Ella: The Jazz Genius Who Transformed American Song* (to be published by W.W. Norton in 2018)<sup>5</sup>.

Tick, professor emerita at Northeastern University in Boston, has done years of archival legwork scouring hitherto-unexplored sources such as African-American newspapers and regional and local records, such as progress reports, almost a century old, that Tick discovered in the files of the public school system in Yonkers, N.Y., where Fitzgerald grew up. Her teachers described Ella as an excellent student with a good memory. Two reports seem eerily portentous. "On Ella's 1924 first-grade report card, her teacher described her as 'Self-Reliant.'" Tick says, "And her third-grade teacher in 1926 called her 'Ambitious' and 'Very musical.'"

Tick says she was inspired to chronicle Fitzgerald's life because "She was a transformative artist, completely recasting vocal jazz as a domain worthy of the greatest respect from jazz instrumentalists at a time, the Big Band Era, when singers were regarded as little more than decorative stage props thought necessary for commercial success. She liberated jazz singing from its confines, transforming scatting into a genre



Louis, Ella and Lionel, three marquee first names in jazz in the early 1950s. Photo © CTS Images.

of its own and bebop into a mainstream vocal idiom." Hershorn agrees: "Ella is one of the great popularizers of bop. When she joined Jazz at the Philharmonic in 1949, it was already successful, but Norman Granz said that Ella's vocal improvisations elevated it to a much higher level."

Fitzgerald, a woman with little formal musical training<sup>6</sup>, reached such empyrean heights by means innate and self-willed. She was born with a three-octave range, perfect pitch (she hardly needed Auto-Tune; she was Auto-Tune) and "big ears" that enabled her to hear deeply into the innards of songs, effortlessly summon their discrete elements from memory, and weave them into extemporaneous vocal compositions. She had an unerring sense of the right tempo for a song, and her diction was impeccable.

She was a quick study; she could eye a lead sheet, assess the song's suitability and how to best integrate it into a set. Like another seminal American artist, Fred Astaire, Ella was a self-professed idea person. She once said, "A lot of singers refuse to look for new ideas and new outlets, so they fall by the wayside...I'm going to try to find out the new ideas before the others do."

<sup>4</sup> The song was written by Fitzgerald and arranger Van Alexander, and was a huge hit. Ella reprised the tune in the 1942 Abbott & Costello movie, *Ride 'Em, Cowboy*. Director John Ford used it in a scene in his 1940 film, *The Grapes of Wrath*. In 2012, a version was performed in Paul Thomas Anderson's film *The Master*, about the early years of Scientology.

<sup>5</sup> Tick's will be only the second comprehensive Fitzgerald biography. The first was

Stuart Nicholson's 1994 *Ella Fitzgerald: A Biography of the First Lady of Jazz*.

<sup>6</sup> In 1974, she told a CBC reporter, "What I sing is only what I feel. I had some lady ask me the other day about music lessons and I never, except for what I had to learn for my half-credit in school, I've never given it a thought. I've never taken breathing lessons. I had to go for myself, and I guess that's how I got a style."

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## ELLA AT 100

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Lewis Porter, jazz pianist and historian at Rutgers University in Newark, points out that one of Ella's greatest, over-looked qualities is "Her capacity to go into 'the zone' immediately, consistently, quickly. She never struggled with warming up or had off nights, as many other singers do."

Hershorn says that this consistency was the result of the singer's ceaseless pursuit of perfection. "Ella approached each performance from scratch, making changes to the tunes and charts before every show. She never phoned in a performance."<sup>7</sup>

Fitzgerald constantly refreshed her act by dipping into the broadest imaginable repertoire: jazz tunes, pop tunes, show tunes, carols, blues, calypsos, bossa-novas, Latin music and opera. Her book was so vast that by the late 1980s, when Wofford became her pianist, he says "Her library of arrangements — for trio, big band and symphonic orchestra — was so enormous it filled a large suitcase that her road manager schlepped around from gig to gig."

Fitzgerald launched her career during a brief, halcyon moment when jazz and pop were synonymous. She was one of the very few Swing Era musicians whose popularity moved centripetally the further jazz orbited away from the mainstream, peaking in the 1960s — the commercial nadir of jazz.

Hershorn attributes Fitzgerald's longstanding acclaim to her ability to share with audiences her own revelry in music. "Ella is loved more than any other singer even today, because of the joy she conveyed to audiences, and her lengthy career of nonstop concertizing allowed several generations to see her." (For decades, Fitzgerald was on the road for 40 to 45 weeks a year, a regimen that



**Dan Morgenstern pointed out favorite Fitzgerald recordings highlighting the development of the singer's style during a conversation with WBO's Sheila Anderson. He also reminisced about a ride in Ella's limo and an invitation to stop up to her hotel suite for a drink. Fitzgerald's assistant quickly put a kibosh on the offer. Photograph by Mark Papianni.**



**Fitzgerald biographer Judith Tick, a retired professor of music at Northeastern University, and San Francisco attorney Jim Blackman, a friend of Ella's beginning in the late 1970s, opened the IJS Ella Fitzgerald programs on March 24. Tick's research has benefitted through her friendship with Blackman, who is probably the last person who can relate the inner workings of one of jazz's premiere artists. Photograph by Mark Papianni.**

wore out many of her musicians.)

Fitzgerald's vast influence on generations of singers — from Tony Bennett to Cécile McLorin Salvant — and musicians remains undiminished. Tick says, "Young singers listen to her songbooks to learn repertory, and instrumentalists such as drummer Terri Lynn Carrington<sup>8</sup> are inspired by her."

Ella's artistic impact transcends jazz. Her "Song Book" LPs not only made her a crossover pop artist and — along with Frank Sinatra's 1950s "concept albums" — secured the pop LP as a vehicle for significant musical inquiry, but also established a canon known as the "Great American Songbook."

Fitzgerald recorded many of the definitive interpretations of classic tunes, helping to elevate the work of the best American songwriters to a stature of art song. Hershorn contends, "Some of those songs became important because she sang them."

Fitzgerald's perpetual inventiveness has inspired non-musical artists such as actor Frank Langella. When asked about his greatest influence, he replied: "Ella Fitzgerald, because she always treated her concerts as fresh starts and never sang a tune the same way twice. That's how I learned to approach each performance."<sup>9</sup>

Ella Fitzgerald is often depicted as an insecure performer who often walked off the stage after a "standing O" from 10,000 worshippers only to ask her road manager, "Did they like it?" Tick sees it differently: "She only seemed insecure, because she was always aiming for perfection."

That she attained it so frequently is her legacy — and our gift. **J**

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<sup>7</sup> Source: The writer's interview with Jim Blackman, May 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Source: The writer's interview with Jim Blackman, May 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Source: The writer's interview with Jim Blackman, May 2017.

## THE TRACKS OF ELLA'S ART

Tad Hershorn says, “Like baseball, Ella Fitzgerald is a prominent thread in the fabric of American popular culture.” Her purity of tone, formal sophistication, rhythmic brilliance and improvisational genius are unparalleled. In her hands, scat singing alchemically became high art — the vocal equivalent of a brilliantly inventive horn solo. (She once said, “I stole everything I ever heard, but mostly I stole from the horns.”) Ella recorded prolifically, in the studio and at some of the thousands of concerts she gave in over a half-century of near-constant touring. Herein, three of the IJS symposium panelists and I choose recordings that illustrated salient features of Ella’s art.

### JUDITH TICK

“Stairway to the Stars” with Chick Webb, collected on *The Complete Ella Fitzgerald and Chick Webb on Decca 1934-41*. Ella loved the song. It symbolized her ambition. Plus, you can hear the embryonic elements of her mature style: the perfect tempo, rhythm displacement, perfectly chosen embellishing notes and a variety of approaches to each chorus.

### LEWIS PORTER

She really started to focus on scat during her tour with Dizzy in 1947, but was scatting a little before that. For example, on the 78 “Cow Cow Boogie,” which she made with the Ink Spots in 1943, at around the 36-second mark, you can hear her scat softly behind the male speaking voice. In 1947 she made two celebrated recordings that are scat from start to finish. In March 1947, “Oh Lady Be Good” and in December of that year, “How High the Moon.” [Both tracks can be found on the box set *Ella Fitzgerald: The Legendary Decca Recordings*.] One of her trademarks is inserting quotations of familiar songs into her scatting. That’s a bebop technique — Charlie Parker and Sonny Rollins are famous for it, among others. [JG: Dexter Gordon, too.] It demonstrates a kind of musical and intellectual virtuosity, the ability to make different melodies fit the

same chord patterns. A standout recording is “Oh, Lady Be Good” with Jazz at the Philharmonic at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles in 1957. [Verve 831369-2; it’s packaged on the CD: *At the Opera House in Chicago*.] In the original liner notes Granz called it the most amazing scat vocal ever recorded — he might be right!

### MIKE WOFFORD

“Mack the Knife” from the Berlin Concert stands out. [*The Complete Ella in Berlin on Verve*, recorded in 1960.] She forgets the words<sup>10</sup> at one point but continues to improvise, chorus after chorus, and there’s not one moment where she lapses or where she isn’t totally creative. No other singer could do that. [JG: Ella also improvises lyrics in rhyme, a form of proto-rapping.] When she was scatting, she’d tear through the changes, the jazz intervals, like a horn player. She knew them all. And she was a master at dropping musical quotes into her solos, but she only picked the best, most atypical ones, from classical music, opera, anything she’d ever heard. [JG: On the concert’s next tune, a 7:13 version of “How High the Moon,” Fitzgerald interpolates “Ornithology” — trumpeter Benny Harris’s bop tune built on “Moon” changes — “Stormy Weather,” “Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?,” “Heat Wave,” “A-Tisket, A-Tasket,” “Idaho,” “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” (changing “smoke” to “sweat”) and a chorus of spot-on mimicry of Slam Stewart’s singing bass.]

### JIM GERARD

“There’s No You” from the 1983 LP *Speak Low*, a duet with Joe Pass (Pablo). Ella’s voice has lost a lot of its power and elasticity, and at times you can hear out front the gears of her vocal mechanism she’d always kept hidden. Yet, her vast musical imagination is undimmed, and when she reaches for a higher register on the words “summertime rapture,” you feel that she’s also trying to recapture the summertime rapture of her once-pristine and impeccable instrument — and it hits you like a quick jab to the gut. ■

## ELLA LOVED TO DO DISHES

James Blackman, an attorney and photographer, was Ella Fitzgerald’s friend for the last 17 years of her life. His portrait of Ella, expressed in the anecdotes he generously shared with JJ, harmonize with other testimonials to Ella’s essential nature: earthy, sensitive, unaffected, guarded about her private life but solicitous of her audience’s affection.

“The first time Ella invited me to dinner at her house in L.A., I was so intimidated. First, she answered the door herself, which shocked me. When it was time for dinner, I found out that the other ‘guests’ were her chauffeur Chester and her maid Rosalie, who she dined with every night. She said to me, ‘I hope you don’t mind, but we always eat dinner in the kitchen.’ After dinner, she started washing dishes and I asked her why. She said, ‘I just love doing dishes.’

“Onstage, Ella emanated warmth. She was genteel, sweet and nice — and that’s the way she was at home. She had a native optimism, genuine humility and respect for people.

“Her love of singing was so pure she didn’t save it for public purposes. She sang all the time. One time we were standing in the back of a hotel elevator and she started singing. A man in front of us turned around, and when he saw who it was almost jumped out of his skin.

“She’d go down to the stores and pay her bills in person. Kids would follow her down the street while she sang.”

While Fitzgerald had little patience for either contrived publicity or sensation-seeking reporters (most of whom were hardly music critics) prying into her personal life, Fitzgerald had a touching naïveté about her fans.

Blackman says, “She told me that when she found out about the tourist buses that came through her neighborhood, ‘I found out about what time they’d come by, and I’d go out and wave to them. If people wanted to see my house, I’d invite them in, until my lawyer told me I had to stop doing that.’” ■

<sup>10</sup> Her longtime pianist, Paul Smith, whose quartet she performed with that night and marveled at how she changed keys in every chorus effortlessly, while the musicians had trouble keeping up.