

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

---

Honors Theses, 1963-2015

Honors Program

---

1998

## Ella Fitzgerald: The Music, The Woman, The Voice of America!

Eleanor C. Mamer

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors_theses)



Part of the [Music Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mamer, Eleanor C., "Ella Fitzgerald: The Music, The Woman, The Voice of America!" (1998). *Honors Theses, 1963-2015*. 658.

[https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors\\_theses/658](https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors_theses/658)

Available by permission of the author. Reproduction or retransmission of this material in any form is prohibited without expressed written permission of the author.

# **Ella Fitzgerald: The Music, The Woman, The Voice of America!**

**A Thesis**

**The Honors Program  
College of St. Benedict / St. John's University**

**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Distinction "All College Honors"  
and the Degree Bachelor of Arts**

**In the Department of Music**

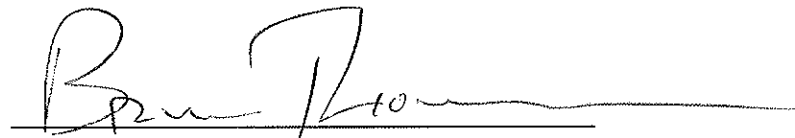
**by  
Eleanor Mamer  
April, 1998**

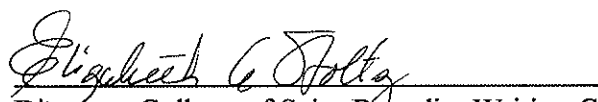



**PROJECT TITLE: Ella Fitzgerald: the Music, the Woman, the Voice of America!**

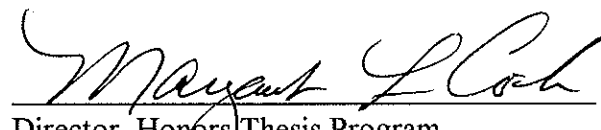
**Approved by:**

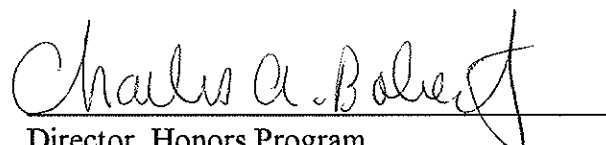
  
Professor of Music

  
Professor of Music

  
Director, College of Saint Benedict Writing Center

  
Chair, Department of Music

  
Director, Honors Thesis Program

  
Director, Honors Program

# Table of Contents

Prelude - Angelou Poem.....	3
Introduction.....	4
The Music - a discussion of jazz history.....	6
The Woman - a discussion of Fitzgerald's life.....	20
The Voice of America - a discussion of Fitzgerald's influential style.....	38
Conclusion.....	52
Works Consulted.....	53
Recordings Consulted.....	56

## Ella Fitzgerald

*Those who seek the Singer: for Ella Fitzgerald*  
by Maya Angelou

Those who seek the Singer  
May stand upon the highest hill  
And watch the wind create itself  
And hurl its billows through the air  
There if you seek her  
There you will find her voice  
Sighing in the sweet soul of the wind  
Those who seek the Singer  
May wait upon the water's shore  
As seas taunt and tease the eye  
Drawing the view into the briny glare  
There if you seek her  
There you will find her voice  
Cooing in the awful roar of mighty waters  
Those who seek the Singer  
To lay wreaths at her feet  
Adorn her shoulders with  
Epaulets of glory  
May lie on the valley floor  
And place an ear upon the earth  
There if you seek her  
There you will find her voice  
Murmuring to blinded animals  
Moving beneath the sod  
Lilting to the roots of trees who stretch  
Gigantic limbs up toward God  
Those who seek the Singer  
May stay where they are  
And listen.  
Listen. That is life living and loving itself.  
Listen.  
That is the sound of Ella.

### **i. Introduction and Background on the Thesis Process**

What is jazz and where and how did it originate? How does one describe jazz and jazz singing? What makes some people argue that Ella Fitzgerald is a true jazz singer and others that she is merely a pop singer influenced by jazz? These questions are ones that typically remain absent in a music curriculum. I hardly knew who Ella Fitzgerald was until a friend and a tributary concert formally introduced me to her. My newfound interest in jazz and jazz singing then fostered my need to know the answers to the above questions. To find the answers, I began by listening to jazz, especially that performed by Ella Fitzgerald. The provocative, intense rhythms, smooth-flowing lines, and sometimes-soothing and predictable, sometimes-alarming and surprising melodies fertilized a desire to listen more. But listening was not enough. I wanted to know how this music came to be, why more people did not enjoy it as much as I, and why it was not studied in music curriculums to the extent that more “classical” forms of music were. I knew that the more that I learned about the genre in which Ella Fitzgerald worked, the more I could come to fully appreciate her talents.

I began my thesis journey by researching Fitzgerald’s life and music. I then was introduced to Don Molloy, former educator and jazz trumpet player. Over lunch at Bo Diddley’s on Wednesday, November 19th, 1997, I came to know a man who grew up amidst the changing history of jazz styles. By listening to Mr. Molloy, I got a personal look at the music that was Ella Fitzgerald’s life. By discussing the contrasting styles of jazz vocalists, I came to formulate my opinion on Ella

Fitzgerald's personalization of jazz and also realized her place in jazz history. More than ever, I had an excitement to study this woman and her music. As I continued to research Ella Fitzgerald and jazz history, interview jazz musicians Bruce Thornton, Laura Cavianni, Lucia Newell, and Karrin Allyson, and listen to jazz recordings, I began to comprehend the amazingness of this woman.

My thesis is organized into three sections. The first, "The Music," gives background on jazz history which makes it possible to place Ella Fitzgerald into the development of jazz. The second, "The Woman," explores Fitzgerald's experiences as a jazz musician. The third, "The Voice of America," identifies the elements of Fitzgerald's musical style that make her distinctive and shows how these elements insure her immortality in jazz history.



# The Music...

## I. History of Jazz

*Jazz is a feeling more than anything else....Jazz is not what you play but how you play it. (Gridley 8)*

### A. African Influences

When listening to jazz, audiences find that tapping a foot and drumming fingers along with the hypnotic beat comes naturally. If people like dancing, they want to grab a partner and start twirling and swinging to the music. Music lovers have been tapping, drumming, and dancing to formalized styles of jazz since the early 1900s, but the roots of jazz go much deeper. In order to better understand where jazz comes from and how it transformed into the different styles that we appreciate today, a study must begin in pre-eighteenth century African societies and then move to slave-ridden America.

Jazz is American music; it originated and grew in the United States with the help of the musicians that formed it. People proclaim New Orleans as the birthplace of jazz, but ultimately the history goes back to African tribal traditions in which fervent rhythms and unrestricted improvisation were trademark to their musical style. When the African people were transported to the United States during the slave trade, they brought along the music of their culture and the memories of their past lives as free human beings preserved only in their minds and hearts. Once in

the United States, they were forbidden from learning to read and write. They were forbidden from communicating with other slaves while working, for fear that camaraderie would get in the way of completing tasks in the fields.

How could anyone survive in such a climate? Slaves turned to the power of music to uplift themselves in the midst of dehumanization. Singing became a way to pass time and mask personal messages to one another across the fields. Slaves began to form a sense of community by gathering at night to sing together. This was one way of preserving their culture and humanity. These community evenings of singing eventually grew into the first African-American Christian churches. The songs used for worship in these early churches were usually European hymns from the White tradition that African-American worshippers modified and embellished melodically, rhythmically, and harmonically (Gourse *Swingers* 10, 11). How ironic that in a society where Blacks and Whites were separate and unequal music could serve as a linking force between the races.

The types of music that came out of these churches formed a base from which early American jazz styles developed. African-derived call-and-response techniques, often referred to as antiphonal performance, in which one musician presents a line of music and a group repeats and embellishes it, found its way into the church, helping to shape the new musical tradition which we call gospel music (Dahl 6). After church, worshippers came home with hymns fresh in their minds and kept singing them. They modified the sacred hymns, changing the words and melodies, and came up with secular songs that they could use to sing about the

disappointments in their lives. These songs that rose out of the fields and churches were called the blues (Gridley 11). Along with hymns, slaves also modified European folk songs and dance music to fit their own musical tastes and traditions (Gridley 32). Thus, the African slaves combined their rhythmic tradition with popular European harmony and instrumentation, planting the seed that grew into American jazz.

### **B. New Orleans Influences**

From as early as 1722, New Orleans offered a unique community in which blacks could live freely. Spain and France were the first countries to rule New Orleans until it was sold under the Louisiana Purchase to the United States in 1803 (Gridley 33). Many different racial and cultural groups mixed in New Orleans. Free Blacks mixed with Whites, American Indians, Cajuns , and slaves with a status closer to that of the white person (Gourse *Swingers* 18). From these groups emerged the Creoles, who were a mixed race of French, Spanish and Black origin.

The Creole people developed a rich musical reputation. They trained themselves in European classical music, formed a symphony orchestra, and opened an opera house in New Orleans. In 1810, Whites became a minority and, under their threatened status, took over businesses and governmental power in New Orleans, making life worse for Blacks and Creoles (Gridley 33-34). Thrown into commiseration with Black citizens, the Creoles blended their knowledge of European music with the African tradition of the Black citizens (Gridley 39).

In 1890, segregation was institutionalized in the United States, but the citizens

of New Orleans carried on their rich cultural lifestyle which included associating with people of all races. Music permeated the atmospheres of New Orleans' bars, clubs, brothels, and honky-tonks where police were paid to ignore desegregation (Gourse *Swingers* 19). Because of these places, music became a primary way of providing entertainment.

Because there was no radio or television in the late 1800s and early 1900s, live music was very important as a way of entertaining. In New Orleans, bands were hired to play music for festivals, carnivals, holidays, and even funerals. The music played by these bands was intended for background, concert, or dancing. Most of the repertoire came from musical theater, church hymns, marches, and folk songs which were then fashioned according to elements of a mixed African and European style (Lees 14). Brass bands became very popular. They were meant to be heard outside in parades and such, so the instrumentation consisted of loud instruments: brass, drums, and cymbals.

Bands called the music they played dixieland, an ensemble takeoff on ragtime. A form of jazz for the piano, ragtime popularized syncopation, the idea of accenting in between the beats (or accenting the "off-beat"). Ragtime incorporated some of the African tradition of improvisation mostly in the form of ornamentation (Gridley 34-36). Along with gospel and blues, dixieland and ragtime emerged as two important forms in jazz history which were pre-cursors of later jazz styles.

New Orleans was not only the birthplace of jazz, but it also fostered more overall popularity and demand for music. Jazz, which had become associated with

low morality, was considered evil music. It was thought to deteriorate the behavior of good people. Still, people were drawn to jazz and the release it gave them from the constraints of their society (Dahl 15). Because of the party atmosphere of the city, live music was always in high demand. As Mark Gridley explains:

The reason the party atmosphere of New Orleans is important to the beginning of jazz is that it generated so much work for musicians.

There was so much demand for live music that there was a continuous need for fresh material. This caused musicians to stretch styles. They blended, salvaged, and continuously revised odd assortments of approaches and material. This ultimately became jazz. (37)

The need for new music and the musicians to create it put the birth of jazz into the hands of musicians, not strictly composers. The original composers of old standards had an indirect hand in creating jazz, as they were the ones to provide the basic materials, but the actual musicians did the work of making those standards their own.

### **C. Technology that Changed Jazz History**

Most early forms of jazz heard in clubs, at parties, and in parades, were performed by instrumentalists only. Ragtime and dixieland were purely instrumental forms because most singers would be lost in the pounding piano or loud drums and brass. So, in these early bands, vocalists remained separate from instrumentalists. But, in the 1920s, a technological invention made it possible for singers to be a part of the popular music scene. The carbon microphone, first used

in 1925, made it possible for singers to be heard in theaters, bars, and clubs (Friedwald 3).

Along with the carbon microphone, 78 rpm records made it possible to mass-produce recordings and market them for specific demographic groups. Recordings of blues singers were made and sold around the country. Now available to a majority of the population, the blues became very popular and laid the foundation for jazz-style singing (Gourse *Swingers* 14-15).

#### **D. Everybody's Swinging with Armstrong!**

*Every musician agrees that Louis Armstrong created modern jazz by the way he played his horn and sang. He took all the music that he heard in New Orleans, fused and embellished them. And he became the first jazz singer - the one that everybody...looks to as the master.*

(Gourse *Louis'* 13)

It was in party town New Orleans where Armstrong got his start. Armstrong, inspired by the music of New Orleans, played the trumpet in his own unique way. "By embellishing everything he heard in New Orleans, and making his blend swing with dixieland's characteristic two-beat rhythm, he was creating modern jazz" (Gourse *Swingers* 22). Armstrong took the heavy beats of ragtime and dixieland and made it swing by adding his unique phrasing and improvisational smooth-gliding, thus playing a part in forming jazz swing style (22-23).

The way Armstrong chose to sing mimicked the way he played his trumpet. Armstrong was the father of jazz singing because his characteristic, inventive style

influenced so many later musicians. Armstrong favored a way of singing that was unfettered and straight from his soul. This emotive quality of singing was the most important part of his style. Vocal accuracy was not important to Armstrong, only the emotive content of a song. Armstrong said, "'...a cat sings from his soul, with feeling'" (Gourse *Louis* 23). Many voice care experts warn against a harsh, raspy sound like Armstrong produced, but his fans listen for the emotion that he put into each song, rather than his vocal technique. Jazz musician Jon Hendricks explained the thinking behind the Armstrong school of singing:

I don't care if my voice is not as clear as a bell....Jazz is feeling and emotion. The right notes are for the classical field. Guys may be more technically proficient than Louis Armstrong. But he could make you cry. That was his greatness. (Gourse *Swingers* 108)

Playing and singing music from his soul meant that Armstrong didn't always remain loyal to original notes and rhythms of a piece of music. He let musical phrases from his imagination meld with a composer's. In this way, he popularized a way to take part in the compositional process through improvisation. When soloing, Armstrong used extremely imaginative phrases. Many musicians learned and copied the improvisational techniques he used. As Don Molloy explained:

Before Louis Armstrong...everybody played all together  
...there was no...trumpet solo...everything was all going at  
once....Then little by little [2-measure solos] grew into  
maybe 4 and then they decided, 'Hey Louis, why don't you

take it?' and it grew into a free solo where the rest of the group was subdued and playing maybe the chordal background while the soloist took off....It freed jazz from what was binding it, as far as giving rise to an individual solo kick.

Armstrong made improvisational solos an essential element in whether or not one can call a certain kind of music jazz.

As a part of his experimentation with improvisation, Armstrong developed scat singing. He had heard songs sung without words (called 'monkey-shine singing') from the Cajuns and popularized it by adding his own personal style and phrasing (Gourse *Swingers* 22-23). In the past, instrumentalists tried to achieve a vocal quality in their playing. They wanted to be able to 'sing' the melody of each piece. Louis Armstrong, by carrying over his trumpet instrumental style to the way he sang, inspired vocalists to sing like a horn player, or whatever instrument they wanted to be (Gourse *Louis'* 29).

### **E. The Rise of the Big Band/Swing Era**

*I grew up during the swing era....In my day, in the '30s and in the '40s, when you turned on the radio morning, noon, and night you got swing music....Up until World War II guys and gals went out every Friday and Saturday night to big dance pavilions and danced. And it was cheap; it was a buck a head ya know and drinks were fifty cents or*



*whatever. And you danced and you drove and you  
 parked and you came home and kissed mom goodnight  
 and it was week after week. And that's when the big  
 bands were in their heyday because they were affordable.  
 And you went to hear the Glen Millers and the Tommy  
 Dorseys because that's what you heard on the radio.  
 (Molloy)*

The decline in popularity of blues music began after World War I with the start of the Depression in 1929. People wanted to listen to dance music that would cheer them up, not depress them or make them think more about their sadness. Thus, swing music, which was an extension of blues and ragtime music, emerged (Gourse *Louis'* 16). Swing instrumentation came from New Orleans' marching bands, but the loud, bulky, slow tuba was replaced by the string bass, which could more easily 'swing' with the rest of the instruments (Lees 73-74). Swing music was more upbeat, influenced by American musical theater and pop songs, as well as the blues and grand opera (75). Its themes were often romantic or silly, anything uplifting.

Dance halls became popular during the Depression. They were cheap, and transportation there was affordable as well. These factors made dance halls and the music played there especially attractive to young Americans, since most people in those days did not have the money to afford other forms of entertainment, or their own automobile to transport themselves. Mostly small bands were employed in

dance halls. The music they played was written for bigger bands, and since there often weren't enough players to cover the parts, they had to improvise to fill in the gaps. When the Depression ended, more people wanted to go out and celebrate, thus the popularity of bands and dance halls increased, as did the demand for musicians (Gridley 38). To celebrate the new era and the new America that was recovering from the Depression in the 1930s, musicians formed large bands of ten or more that played great arrangements of American songs. The swinging music that they played was smoother, and it necessitated musicians who had better speed control, agility, and intonation. Solos within the pieces were few, and small and conservative if they existed, because of swing music's primary use as dance music (86).

Most big bands had singers who acted as a bridge between instrumental melodies and the public's desire for musical stories. The popularity of radio brought many bands and singers to public attention and popularity; Duke Ellington and Count Basie were household names. Singers Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Jo Stafford, Frank Sinatra, Helen Forrest, Ivie Anderson, and Anita O'Day attracted many people to the glamour of big band music (Gourse *Swingers* 56-80). People travelled to dance halls to hear these big bands and singers that they heard on the radio and to dance the night away (45-49).

#### **F. The Fall of the Big Band/Swing Era**

*The guys come home from being overseas for four years.*

*You think they wanna go dancing? They wanna lock the*

*doors and be with their wives. And along with this came a sort of isolationist trend in the United States. We had the do-it-yourself tools, ya know, where the guy went down to the shop at night and built his own bookcases. We had TV, you didn't go out to the movies anymore, it was in the home. You didn't go dancing, you were raising a family. It was very insular. I don't know if it was healthy or what. But that was the end of the big bands* (Molloy).

The big band era came to an end with the advent of World War II. Many of the musicians were taken away by the draft, or were employed overseas to entertain troops (Gourse *Swingers* 54). A twenty percent entertainment tax was imposed during the war, which made music less available for many people (Lees 91). Singers had to make it on their own, thus they made recordings without instruments, sometimes with vocal chorus background. The decreased number of musicians and the extreme costs of transporting large numbers of people and instruments around the country made the small combo band more popular. Singers were now more in the limelight. They were the most important entity in ensuring record companies' good sales. It was the late 1940s and singers were in their heyday (Gourse *Swingers* 54).

Back from the war, men and women wanted to stay at home and celebrate alone, not go out and celebrate in dance halls. The invention of the television

reinforced this isolationist trend in America. People were mesmerized at this technology which could bring entertainment right into their living room. Interest in radio declined, as well as interest in live music (Lees 95). New advances in automobiles led to declined use of good public transportation. A group of corporations, including General Motors, Standard Oil, Firestone Tire, BF Phillips Petrol, and Mack Manufacturing had their own interests in mind when they strove to do away with the rail lines. At the same time as the public transportation system was falling apart, these corporations commercialized the automobile immensely so that people would see that they couldn't get around conveniently without their own vehicle. Young people, unable to afford their own automobile or find a way to get to the ballrooms, found other ways to entertain themselves, thus live big band audiences decreased (97).

The big band era ultimately ended with a shift in tempos. Musicians wanted to play for concerts, as they were more focused on showing off their abilities than playing for dwindling dancers. Tempos were either too hurried, enough to give dancers heart palpitations (showing off virtuosity of certain performers), or too slow, enough to make them fall over on the dance floor (showing off the singer's ability to croon a ballad) (Lees 94). The new social scene, or lack of it, and the desire of musicians for performance gradually moved big band swing to the back burner. From here, bebop took over as the main jazz style of the time.

#### **F. Bebop through Modern Jazz**

*They think that the bebop era helped dig the grave of the*

*jazz musicians at about that time because jazz had always been a dance music. And if you want to follow it back to Africa or back to tribal fertility cults, it's there. You know, the rhythmic thing and the heartbeat thing and the sexual thing. So, young people have always wanted to dance; it's a social thing. And when the beboppers went frantic and you couldn't dance to it and you had to go to a nightclub and listen or a concert setting for jazz. (Molloy)*

Bebop grew out of the minds of musicians Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and Dizzy Gillespie. The music they played was more hurried and virtuosic. Listeners had to work harder to appreciate the music, as it was more complex. The tempos were generally faster, solos required more virtuosity and complexity, drummers switched to more use of cymbals and high hat for a lighter sound that worked with faster tempos, and the accompaniment figures were more varied. The harmonic structure was much more complex as well since bebop had more of an unresolved, dissonant quality (Gridley 139-140). Often, bop musicians built pieces around the musical elements and organization of foreign cultures (Gourse *Swingers* 99). Bop was not popular with the general public, rather, it reformed jazz into primarily an art form.

Jazz suffered a decline in radio broadcast because Top 40 shows needed to play catchy, simple, trivial songs that would sell (Lees 99). Most people wanted to listen to music that they could comprehend, sing along with, and dance to. Bop bands

rarely employed singers (they failed to keep up most of the time), so there was no one to translate the musical ideas into literary ones (Gridley 164). Because singers didn't perform with other bop musicians, they took a variety of career turns. Some incorporated bop styles into their popular performances, while others chose to remain in the big band style (Gourse *Swingers* 99).

In the 1950s, cool jazz emerged as an opposing form to bebop. Where bop was fast, virtuosic, dissonant, and highly improvisational, cool jazz was simpler, more relaxed, softer, and melodic (Gridley 176). Hard bop and funky jazz also grew out of bebop as simpler alternatives to the complexity of bebop (95, 215). Free jazz, based completely on improvisation, did not rely on chord progressions, was extremely complex, and turned off many listeners because of its strangeness.

A decline in jazz interest heightened in the 60s with the assassination of President Kennedy. Young music listeners turned to music that was simple, heavy on the beat, and loud which mirrored, yet helped them escape, the feelings of anger and confusion they were feeling (Gourse *Swingers* 127). In the late 1960s, jazz was recognized as an art form and projects were funded for its continuance. In the 1980s, a resurgence in jazz popularity occurred as people sought out more sophisticated forms of musical entertainment (130). Today, jazz interest is on the rise. Live music in bars, clubs, and coffee shops has become very popular, and a lighter, more relaxing listening music is often the preferred. Thus, a new decade in jazz history has begun, a resurgence and rekindling of the jazz genre.

## **...The Woman...**

### **II. Ella Fitzgerald: The Early Years**

#### **A. Family life**

In spite of reference books, which peg the date of Ella Jane Fitzgerald's birth as April 25th, 1918, she was actually born a year earlier in Newport News City, Virginia. She was the first-born child of William Fitzgerald and Temperance (Tempie) Williams Fitzgerald. Although William and Tempie were not married, the former verified that he fathered Ella (Nicholson 4).

When Ella was a little over three years old, her father left the family and her mother brought a new love interest into the family -- Joseph Da Silva, an immigrant from Portugal. The three of them then moved to Yonkers in Westchester County, New York (4).

In 1923, Tempie and Joe gave birth to another daughter, Frances, who took Joe's last name. Ella formed a relationship with her sister that would be one of her closest. Ella started primary school at Public School 10 in September of 1923. Friends remembered Ella as "shy but very ambitious." Said friend Annette Miller, "'She would tell us, [Someday you're going to see me in the headlines. I'm going to be famous]'" (5).

#### **B. Musical Training**

Young Ella Fitzgerald was always more interested in dancing than singing. In third grade she started to dance and aspired to make it big as a dancer. Since one has

to have an extremely good sense of rhythm in order to succeed at dancing, perhaps her interest in dance trained her for musical performance (later on critics heralded her rhythm as flawless) (6).

At the Bethany African Methodist Episcopal Church, where Ella attended as a child, she was able to participate in formal music-making. The church was her first outlet for vocal training as she imitated and followed other singers, learning indirectly about intonation, harmonics, rhythm, and voice projection.

When Ella entered seventh grade in September of 1929, it is possible that she began a short series of piano lessons that occurred whenever her mother could afford them. Although these were probably few, they most likely fostered more musical confidence in Fitzgerald (7).

Ella Fitzgerald's musical training may seem nonexistent, but that is normal for any jazz or pop musician. In fact, jazz musicians usually have no classical musical training before they start performing with a group. They are trained with the help of more experienced members in the band who shape the former's talent by their unique performance practices (Dahl ix). Because Ella "remembers everything, absorbs everything, and uses everything...I steal everything I ever heard" (as she told an interviewer), she was able to absorb and imitate the styles of influential musicians of her time (Friedwald *Jazz* 142). This was her real musical training.

### C. Influencing Musicians

*You grow up, you learn all the tunes, you stretch out,  
maybe you imitate somebody on a record, and maybe you*



*[sing] it note-for-note...and then you make it your own again by sort of embellishing what that imitation is. And then, after a while, you have an amalgamated style made up of all those different voices that you've heard growing up over the years. (Molloy)*

As a young teenager, Ella would listen to the radio and imitate the artists that were played. She was especially attracted to the singing style of Louis Armstrong. She perfected her own impersonation of Armstrong's voice at a young age (Nicholson 9). Armstrong was extremely influential in his scat, improvisation, instrumental style, phrasing, feeling, and wit (social commentary) (Gourse *Swingers* 30).

Fitzgerald was also inspired by Ethel Waters. Waters mixed musical theater techniques and blues feeling. She had strong vocal technique and excelled in storytelling by the way she phrased and emoted in her music. Words were as important as the music to Waters; this was evident in her phrasing, pronunciation (accent of the words), and enunciation (good diction at any tempo) (Gourse *Swingers* 42-43). Also important to Waters and other early singers like Bing Crosby was intonation, rhythm, appropriate use of vibrato, and imagination/ originality in performance (44). Like Waters, Fitzgerald developed a beautiful voice, was able to tell stories with her diction-precise presentation of music, had an impeccable handle on intonation and rhythm, and used vibrato to heighten the emotional effects of a piece.

Ella revealed that her most profound singing influence was Connee Boswell,

a white singer from the Boswell Sisters singing group. Connee Boswell sang tight harmonies with an energetic, girlish, pretty style (Gourse *Swingers* 64). Tempie gave Ella one of Connee's records, and Ella worked diligently so that she would sound like her (Nicholson 10). When performing in her first talent contest, Ella sang two of Boswell's pieces.

Leo Watson was another influence to Ella (besides Armstrong) because of his scat singing style (Friedwald *Jazz* 139-140). Watson used nursery rhyme and folk tune ideas when improvising and sometimes combined those with the lyrics he was singing (140). Later on, Ella's first big hit was a jazzed-up version of a nursery rhyme. This style became her early signature. Watson was preceded by Armstrong, Bing Crosby, and Clif Edwards (18), who were all directly or indirectly influential to Fitzgerald's scatting style.

#### **D. Ella On Her Own**

Early in 1932, when Ella was only 14, Tempie died of a heart attack. After her mother's death, there were reports that Joe was not treating his step-daughter very well. So, late in 1932, Tempie's sister Virginia came to take Ella into her home in Harlem. Fitzgerald only returned to Yonkers to visit her sister, who soon joined her after Joe's heart attack and death (Nicholson 14). The next years were difficult for Ella; she ran numbers for the Mafia, worked at a whore house as a lookout, and was then sent to Public School 49, which was a kind of orphanage. In 1934 she ran away from Public School 49 and made her way on the streets for a while. This is when she decided to enter in a talent contest at the Apollo Theater on a dare from two

friends (15-16).

## **II. Ella Breaks Into the Jazz Scene**

### **A. The Talent Shows**

Ella was 16 years old on Wednesday, November 21, 1934 when she decided to enter the Apollo Theater talent contest and perform as a dancer. When she found out that two of the best dancers at the time, the Edwards Sisters, were also performing, she decided to enter as a singer instead. She sang two pieces, "Object of My Affection" and "Judy." The top prize in the contest, which Ella won, was a week-long engagement at the Apollo. However, she never got her week-long engagement. Managers thought she was too dirty and was not dressed well enough to perform in their establishment (Nicholson 17-19).

Later, she entered a contest at the Harlem Opera House. It was here that Fitzgerald won and cashed in on the top prize of a week-long singing gig at the same location starting on February 16, 1935 (redsugar 3). It was her performances here that formed her relationship with Chick Webb, one that would secure her entrance into the entertainment world.

### **B. The Chick Webb Band**

In the spring of 1935, Chick Webb, the leader and drummer in a swing band, needed to find a new singer to replace Charles Linton, his male singer who was planning to sign on with the Ink Spots. Webb hoped to find a "girl singer," because he knew that females were a marketing boost for bands. Girl singers' looks were often times more important than their singing (Dahl 122). *Swing*, a magazine of the

big band era stated that a beautiful girl singing with a band "'...in front of a mike looks pretty good to the paying males'" (124). The sexism was blatant; talent didn't matter, only a pretty face. Fitzgerald didn't have the looks, so she relied on her engaging voice to make up for what she lacked in beauty (128).

Linton started looking for his own replacement in March of 1935. It was during this search that he got Ella Fitzgerald's name from a chorus girl at the Harlem Opera House. Linton tracked Ella down, asked her to sing for him, and brought her to meet Chick Webb. When first introducing Fitzgerald to Chick Webb, Charles Linton pleaded, "'Listen to the voice, don't *look* at her'" (Dahl 128). In spite of this harsh statement that would be crushing for any young girl to overhear, Fitzgerald was able to transcend the 'canary' image of women vocalists, join the Chick Webb Band, and go on to secure herself as a household name.

Early on, Fitzgerald had an established sense of intonation, diction, and swing. At a performance on July 10, 1935, at the Apollo Theater, *New York Age* reviewed that the real audience enthusiasm came not with Charles Linton's performance with the band, but with Ella's: "'Her voice is tinged with honey, and she sings with a rhythmic tempo that puts her over with a bang'" (Nicholson 42). Ella's first cut with the Chick Webb band, "Love and Kisses," was produced on June 12, 1935. Chick Webb arranged only 14 more instrumental numbers (compared to over 60 vocal ones) after signing Fitzgerald on. Apparently, he realized that a focus on Ella could be a source of commercial success for the band (39). And she was.

In January of 1936, *Metronome* magazine proclaimed that the 17 year old

Fitzgerald was "...number one for 1936....[with] a great natural flair for singing....[S]he's one of the best femme hot warblers...and there's no reason why she shouldn't be just about the best in time to come" (Nicholson 42). An incredibly accurate prediction to come so early on in Ella's career! Webb's band became more popular with the help of Ella, and, in November of 1937, she won the title of Number One Female Vocalist in the premiere of the *Down Beat* and *Melody Maker* readers' polls, which were popular music magazines of the time (47). Because of her new title, Ella was given all the hit songs first to record. Getting the best new songs before other vocalists gave her the name, "First Lady of Swing" (52).

### C. Fitzgerald's First Big Hit - "A-Tisket, A-Tasket"

In May 2, 1938, Ella and Chick Webb's band went into the studios to record what would become one of her most well-known hits. For decades after, this tune personified the early Fitzgerald's genre and style. Recording "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" was Ella's idea; it was a tune that she used to sing in Yonkers. At first, the idea of recording a nursery rhyme tune was abhorred by manager Moe Gale and other Decca executives, especially Milt Gabler who also looked out for Fitzgerald's career, but it hit number one and remained on the hit parade for 19 weeks (53-54). "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" won over both White and Black pop and jazz fans, as Fitzgerald's voice defied racial stereotypes and thus was equally attractive to all music listeners (*Jet* 60). With "A-Tisket, A-Tasket," Fitzgerald, at the age of 21, became the most popular female vocalist in America (Nicholson 55).

The text of this song is familiar to many: "A-Tisket, A-Tasket, a brown and

yellow basket. I send a letter to my mommy, on the way I dropped it. I dropped it, I dropped it, yes, on the way I dropped it. A little girlie picked it up and put it in her pocket...." As the rhyme continues, Fitzgerald sings about losing her basket to the 'little girlie.' If she doesn't get it back, she will 'surely die'. Fitzgerald's presentation is as funny and pouty as the rhyme. People were attracted to her cute and girlish performance. The popularity of "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" assured a place in her repertoire for the nursery-rhyme genre for all of her early recording years and the optimistic playfulness in her voice for almost her whole career.

### **III. Ella Fitzgerald in Full Swing**

#### **A. Leader of the Chick Webb Band**

On June 16, 1939, Chick Webb died due to complications with his kidneys that stemmed from his physical birth defects (Nicholson 61). Soon after, the Chick Webb band's name was changed to "Ella Fitzgerald and Her Famous Orchestra" (63). She continued to crank out novelty-pop hits (which was the genre of choice in the swing era) with her band. In 1940 she joined the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers because of her work with composing. She was credited fully or partially for composing "A-Tisket, A-Tasket," "You Showed Me the Way," "I Found My Yellow Basket," "Betcha Nickel," and "Chew, Chew, Chew (On Your Bubble Gum)," among others (64). In 1940, Fitzgerald's child-like voice gained more depth as her vibrato matured (Fidelman 34, 42).

Fitzgerald wasn't a little girl, despite the image that her musical repertoire formed. She had normal desires of any young woman, especially desires for

attention and love from men. Ella's first marriage was to Benjamin Kornegay on December 26, 1941 in St. Louis, Missouri. Manager Moe Gale quickly stepped in and had his protege's new husband's records checked. He had a criminal record and was becoming more interested in his wife's career. In mid-1942, they were divorced; this was only the first of Ella's disappointments in love (Nicholson 68).

### **B. Start of solo career - Decca (1935-1955)**

At the end of July, 1942, Ella played her last gig with Her Famous Orchestra and the band members went their separate ways. Ella Fitzgerald's band breakup paralleled the downfall of the big band era. With economic demise came a new recording ban which required a fee for every record played over the air. Members of the musician's union went on strike, forbidding instrumentalists to record. Companies began to focus on vocalists, who were not members of the musician's union and the strike (Nicholson 74-75). In addition to this, many of Fitzgerald's musicians were drafted for World War II. Her first small combo was called 'Ella Fitzgerald and the Four Keys' (Gourse *Swingers* 64).

Fitzgerald was then marketed primarily as a soloist and would sing with different groups of musicians, depending on where she was touring. When Ella was given the tune "Flying Home" to perform in October of 1945, a new realization in her musicality emerged. This was the first tune that really showed off Ella's musical abilities as a scat singer. Singers had scatted before this performance, but "...never with such dazzling creativity" (Nicholson 89). In this performance, Ella used the knowledge of scat-inspirator Armstrong and Watson and also of instrumental

soloists; in the introduction she uses lines from Illinois Jacquet's famous tenor sax solo on the same piece (91). Her performance foreshadowed the leaps she would make during the bebop era (83).

Fitzgerald starts with a scat introduction, then goes on to scat through the entire two-and-a-half minute piece. Her improvisation stays closer to the original melody and harmony of the piece than in her later solos, but it is a landmark performance. Although her solo could have been a practiced improvisation, she brings great originality to what came before her in the scat singing world. The syllables she chooses to scat with, the flow of the musical lines she creates, and her ability to quote from other songs were the basis for the scat style she would continue to develop.

As early as 1942-1943, Fitzgerald was extremely interested in bebop and would use inflections of it in her performances. Then, in November of 1946, Fitzgerald went on tour with Dizzy Gillespie and his band in hopes that her presence as a post-swing era star would boost their appeal to the masses. To their surprise, Fitzgerald was able to extend her talents beyond the swing era style into their new, more virtuosic one (Nicholson 93-97). Fitzgerald started scat singing to fit the style of the fast, rhythmic music played by Dizzy and his band (originators of bop)(Gourse *Swingers* 66). She was one of the first to apply bop style to the voice (Gilmore 26). Later, Ella would say, "These bop musicians have stimulated me more than I can say....Bop musicians have more to say than any other musicians playing today." How interesting that she went on to become one of the most famous bop musicians!



She was able to absorb the complex harmonic structure of bop and translated it into something that audiences were continuously entertained by. She always used new ideas -- surprising, and never boring her fans (Friedwald *Jazz* 143-144).

It was during the tour with Gillespie's band that Ella met, fell in love with, and eventually married, on December 10, 1947, bassist Ray Brown. They adopted Ella's half-sister Frances' boy and named him Ray, Jr. shortly after they were married. Their union was to be a lengthier one, as they didn't divorce until August 28, 1953 (108, 142).

Starting a solo contract with Decca under the direction of manager Mo Gale built a solid foundation for her successful career, but it never really showed off Ella's full talents as an artist. She was able to expand her musical knowledge, learning from bop musicians how to be more virtuosic and imaginative in her soloing. Her voice grew and matured while still retaining its essential purity. Although the 17 years with Decca were monumental (she could have retired with her name etched in the history books at that point), her role was as primarily a pop singer who sang novelty songs that would sell (McDonough 18).

### **C. The Verve Years and Norman Granz (1956-1967)**

*When the big bands went under from economic reasons among others, like the cult of the individual and Elvis and the soloist and then rock and roll came in, the jazz musicians didn't have any place to play. And Norman Granz decided to put them on a stage in a concert setting*

*and sell tickets.* (Molloy)

Norman Granz, born on August 6, 1918, fostered an interest in jazz during his college years and went on to create the Jazz at the Philharmonic (JATP) concerts. Granz not only gave talented jazz musicians a stage, bringing great music to the public in a concert setting, he also combatted racial injustices by refusing to sell to segregated audiences. All ticket holders had equal rights at his concerts.

Granz became familiar with Ella Fitzgerald and her popularity as a performer during her Decca years. In 1949, while she was still under her Decca contract and Moe Gale's management, Granz negotiated to add Fitzgerald to his JATP concert on February 11. The results were fantastic; she brought the house down.

Granz had a special interest in Ella's management team because he did not feel that her talents were being fully realized with the flimsy material she was doing (Nicholson 117-119). He scheduled Fitzgerald for the Fall, 1949 JATP roster, and again her talents amazed the concert-goers (123). Frustrated by not being able to sign her under his own management, Granz released recordings of the JATP concerts so that the public could hear Ella in the setting that most became her (126).

Granz's JATP concerts fostered an environment in which she formed relationships with some of the most talented jazz musicians and learned their styles. Since she was already a master at mimicking vocalists, mimicking instrumentalists came naturally to her and her musical vocabulary expanded (McDonough 18).

In December of 1953, Ella's four-year contract with Moe Gale expired and she

took Norman Granz as her new manager (Nicholson 144). Granz and Ella worked together for the next few years without having a record label until, in January of 1956, Ella officially signed with Granz's new label, Verve. Under that label she began recording the songbook series, which were to become her most popular and well-known recordings. Even people who don't know Ella Fitzgerald would recognize her performances on these albums (158).

The live albums compiled from Granz's JATP recordings showed Fitzgerald at her very best. Listening to these recordings, one can hear not only her fantastic performances, but the way she related to her audiences as well. She was incredibly personal in her performances, from scatting about a particular audience and the city of the performance, to the genuine laughter and interaction with the crowd in between sets. One particularly amazing performance came from a concert on October 25, 1957. She sang that evening in Los Angeles with pianist Oscar Peterson, bassist Ray Brown, drummer Connie Kay, guitarist Herb Ellis, trumpeter Roy Eldridge, trombonist J.J. Johnson, and saxophonists Coleman Hawkins, Stan Getz, Flip Phillips, Illinois Jacquet, Sonny Stitt, and Lester Young. The group performed "Stompin' At the Savoy," taking an extra chorus to continue soloing and improvising. Fitzgerald scatted an amazing piece, fitting in messages to the musicians and audience through her solo. The crowd went wild and they encored with "Oh, Lady Be Good." Again the presentation was incredibly personal. These two pieces, played right after each other, showed off Fitzgerald's originality and imagination in performance, as well as her incredible ability to perform to a crowd.

Recordings of Fitzgerald's live performances with JATP, as well as other live performances (especially her first concert live in Berlin and her famous version of "Mack the Knife"), prove that music connoisseurs cannot know the true talent of Ella Fitzgerald until they hear her in front of an audience.

Granz was a great agent who recognized her true talents and what she could do with them. With Granz, "[h]er career soared above almost everyone else's, man or woman, singer or instrumentalist." A dozen Grammy awards were bequeathed upon her; she and Granz became millionaires. She sang all over the world, working endlessly throughout her life and becoming an inspiration to many (Gourse *Swingers* 67).

#### D. The Verve Songbooks

*"I never knew how good our songs were...until I heard  
Ella Fitzgerald sing them."-Ira Gershwin- (Cocks 83)*

Norman Granz's decision for Ella Fitzgerald to do her first *Songbook* significantly changed her career. Through her recordings of the *Cole Porter Songbook*, *George and Ira Gershwin Songbook*, *Johnny Mercer Songbook*, and *Duke Ellington Songbook*, among others, Fitzgerald was able to capture the beauty of American music on a medium that was everlasting. Her clear, clean, honest presentation of these pivotal pieces has been heard in countless movie soundtracks, television shows, and commercials, as well as in many homes around the world (Cocks 83).

In each of the *Songbooks* Fitzgerald gives a similar musical presentation.

Most of the accompaniments are done by full orchestra. Fitzgerald sings each of the arrangements in a straight manner, but her characteristic light, flexible, and rhythmic voice adds a profound touch to these classic songs. There is a relaxing, yet titillating nature of the arrangements and Fitzgerald's voice singing them. Since one of the main objectives of the *Songbook* series was to preserve fine American composers' works, Fitzgerald's straightforward presentation of the melody and flawless pronunciation and enunciation serve as the perfect kind of performance.

#### **IV. Ella Fitzgerald's Later Years**

##### **A. The Pablo Years (1972-1989)**

From 1967 to 1969, Norman Granz took a break from recording, thus, this two year period is referred to Ella's "independent years" as she worked without a record label. Many of her recordings during these years were released under the Capital label (Fidelman 183). Then, in 1972, Granz changed the name of his record label to Pablo Records, named for the artist Pablo Picasso. Fitzgerald continued recording with Granz under his new label, completing over 20 albums in spite of health problems.

Just as the late '60s and early '70s was a time of political and social change, so too was it a time of musical change. Ella adapted herself to these changes, wanting to speak to the new generation just as she had done in the early '60s when she recorded a few Beatles hits (Fidelman 160, 210-211). But, although she gave the new style a good try, she focused on the jazz idiom with Pablo records for the remainder of her career (216).

### B. Fitzgerald's Vocal Health Decline

As the '70s neared to a close, Ella was still "...in top form vocally..." the only noticeable changes being a wider vibrato and a harder attack at the onset of tone (Fidelman 244). She was still touring 40 weeks a year, sometimes doing two shows a night (225). At this point she had already lasted longer than most of her peers but, as with any singer, vocal decline was inevitable. In the 1980s, Fitzgerald's voice began a transformation. She could no longer depend on it for a solid vocal performance: sometimes she was on, sometimes she was off. She lost some of her upper register and a harsh, straining quality forced her to reform her style a bit (248-250, 255). By 1991, breath control became a more serious obstacle, making the "...sound that she had worked so hard to come by...based on clarity, smoothness, and easy manipulation of a voice that could, on a good day, swing through almost four octaves" more difficult to rely on (278).

It is difficult to chart the breakdown of Fitzgerald's voice. Due to health complications, she experienced times when she couldn't rely on the strength of her voice. In spite of this, she continued touring and gave mind-boggling performances. One of her last albums, *All That Jazz*, recorded in 1989, is extraordinary for a woman of seventy-some years. If one tries to pinpoint some limitations in her vocal abilities, a few things become apparent after listening very closely for flaws. Towards the end of her career her range was not as wide; she developed a deeper, richer quality to her voice. Her vibrato, once fast and bird-like, slowed and widened to a slight quiver. She had a more mature sound; it was not as smooth and pure

sounding as her earlier recordings, but that is to be expected of any aged performer. Fitzgerald may have lost a little of her vocal prowess, but until the very end her voice still possessed its characteristic happy lilt, sense of rhythm, and pitch accuracy.

Fitzgerald suffered major eye problems and in the 1970s underwent cataract surgery (Schoemer 80). She also suffered from arthritis problems, diabetes and experienced high blood pressure problems because of obesity (Fidelman 234). On September 3, 1986, Fitzgerald underwent open-heart/bypass surgery after experiencing heart failure (Fidelman 274). In 1993 she had both of her legs amputated below the knee which complicated possible future performances (McDonough 16).

### **C. Fitzgerald's Last Stage Appearance**

Fitzgerald's final stage venue was on December of 1992 in Palm Beach, Florida. Most of her stage appearances for that Fall had already been canceled because of her unstable health conditions. Helped on and off the stage, she performed to still-adoring fans (Schoemer 80). Critics said that her voice would have been sufficient for more years of performances, had her health not interfered. But, Fitzgerald had higher standards for her own performance and would not have wanted to deliver a song in anything less than her best voice (Friedwald *Jazz* 152).

Ella Fitzgerald passed from this life to one more melodious on Saturday, June 15, 1996 at her home in Beverly Hills, California (Friedwald "Ella" 1). Even in death, Fitzgerald brings more life to jazz music than most musicians can ever hope to. Geoffrey Mark Fidelman, in writing her biography, professed that:

Ella Fitzgerald's legacy is so large, her presence will be felt for decades to come. Every singer with a measure of discernment has and will continue to steal liberally from her. She has set the tone for good music for almost sixty years, and has set standards in taste, quality, musicality, and musicianship that will never be surpassed. She got the title the First Lady of Song the old-fashioned way: she gave her life for it. (294)

Ella Fitzgerald lived the life of a true musician. She was able to use her life as a tribute to the music of her time. When she died, many people reported a feeling of profound sadness and emptiness. The world had not only lost an incredible musician, it had lost optimism, warmth, and hospitality personified in music. For 62 years, Ella Fitzgerald brought happiness to the world in a form less tangible, but perhaps more profound than other human experiences.



## ...The Voice of America!

### V. Fitzgerald's Mark on the Musical World

*"To many, she personifies American music." - James*

*Billington, Librarian of Congress - (Moret "Ella's music" 1)*

Ella Fitzgerald's voice has become the sound of the twentieth century American vocalist. The characteristic style that she developed is one that most musicians look to when they are trying to culminate their own vocal style. Her influence as a musician and a strong African American woman will remain endless. Ella Fitzgerald is the most inspiring and influential jazz vocalist of the twentieth century because of her prolific recording career, versatility as a performer, vocal musicianship, treatment of melody, and scat singing.

#### A. Recordings and Subsequent Awards

Ella Fitzgerald was one of the most prolific musicians in history. She completed over 200 successful albums, more than any other female vocalist. Countless recordings have been reissued in compilations and never-produced recording sessions are becoming albums in themselves (Nokhanya 2). Most of her albums made record-setting sales. For instance, *Ella Fitzgerald Sings The Cole Porter Songbook* is one of the biggest-selling jazz albums ever and the Gershwin and Ellington songbooks are almost as sought-after (Friedwald Jazz 147, 150). Besides having a repertoire of over 800 arrangements that she recorded and performed to

adoring crowds all over the world, Fitzgerald also succeeded in movies and on television. She appeared as a featured artist and sang soundtrack titles for numerous films. Many people know Fitzgerald solely for the Memorex tape commercials in which she shattered glass, but left the Memorex tape intact with one of her clear, high pitches (*Jet* 58).

Fitzgerald's list of awards is tremendous. From being the first to acquire the title of 'best female vocalist' in the Down Beat Poll in 1953, to being awarded honorary degrees from educational institutions, most professionals would gawk at the amount of praise that this one woman got. In the world of music awards, Fitzgerald dominated Down Beat's 'best female vocalist' classification for 18 straight years, then went on to win it again after being upset from her throne for only one year. Before her Down Beat title, she dominated other magazine polls for 'best female vocalist'. She won first place in the Playboy poll for 13 years (redsugar 4). In 1981, Fitzgerald won her 11th Grammy, more than any other jazz musician and more than any female ever (Gourse *Louis'* 178). But Fitzgerald didn't stop there. She went on to win two more for a total of 13 as she closed out her over-fifty year career (Moret "Ella's music" 1).

Fitzgerald succeeded outside the world of music awards as well. The Women at Work organization in Los Angeles chose Fitzgerald as their Bicentennial Queen and proclaimed April 11, 1976 "Ella Fitzgerald Day" (Fidelman 235). The Society of Singers created the "Ella Award for Lifetime Achievement" to honor her. The President of the United States presented Fitzgerald with the US National Medal in

1987. She received awards from foreign countries as well. In 1990, she was awarded the French Commandeur Des Arts et Lettres (redsugar 4). Fitzgerald was commended at the Kennedy Center for her achievements and was given the Whitney Young Award from the Urban League for her service to the African American community. Fitzgerald received honors from universities across the country, among them: honorary music degrees from Yale, Dartmouth, and others, as well as a Performing Arts Center in her name at the University of Maryland. (Nokhanya 2).

## **B. The Elements of Ella Fitzgerald's Influential Style**

### **Versatility as a Performer**

*"Coming through the years, and finding that I not only have just the fans of my day, but the young ones of today-- that's what it means....It means it was worth all of it."*

- Ella Fitzgerald - (Moret "Ella dies" 2)

Ella Fitzgerald was not a one-faceted singer. She had her musical 'signatures' within the jazz genre: her distinctive happy portrayal of pieces, her nursery-rhyme novelty hits, her pure, untainted ballads (she considered herself primarily a ballad singer), but she excelled outside of those typicalities. Fitzgerald's art is extremely diverse. Her repertoire of swing, bebop, blues, bossanova, gospel, calypso, Christmas carols, rock 'n roll, and even opera and songs in foreign languages truly show her versatility. Fitzgerald believed that "If you don't learn new songs, you're lost.... It's a drag if you don't have anything to offer [the younger generation].... There's always

somebody else coming along, so you try to keep on your toes'" (*Jet* 61). Fitzgerald was even willing to try rap music out to keep herself well-rounded as an entertainer. It was very important to Fitzgerald that she reach people of all generations with her music.

Fitzgerald was aware of the variety of musical work going on around her. She absorbed and perfected other musician's talents, incorporated their signatures into her performance. Her cunningly accurate impersonations of Louis Armstrong, Sophie Tucker, Della Reese, Pearl Bailey, Dinah Washington, and others added a bit of sarcasm and comedy to many of her acts (*Friedwald Jazz* 142).

Fitzgerald could perform under many different circumstances. She traveled all over the world and performed with many different groups of musicians: Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie Count Basie, Oscar Peterson, Louis Jordan, Roy Eldridge, Nelson Riddle, The Mills Brothers, Billy May, and Joe Pass, to name to most recognizable (*Friedwald "Ella" 2*). With each group she adapted amazingly well, often using only one take to record a song. When looking for singers, Fitzgerald was always on the top of these influential instrumentalists' lists. Fitzgerald could perform with any kind of accompaniment and with other vocalists as well. It did not matter what kind of environment she was performing in, either. Whether in the recording studio, in a huge concert hall, small auditorium, or on a movie set, she gave equally admirable, personal performances (*redsugar 2*).

Fitzgerald was able to attract fans not only of all ages and musical tastes, but all races as well. Being a performer in the early to middle 1900s meant dealing with

prejudices, especially racial ones. There was even a belief that a person's color dictated their vocal sound. Ella Fitzgerald negated that belief. Her vocal sound transcended the black/white sound. When listening to Fitzgerald, people couldn't tell what race she was. They couldn't make talent judgements based on her race, so they were forced to judge on her sheer talent. Just like Fitzgerald's voice, the jazz genre brought blacks and whites together, both physically and spiritually. When the Creoles and African Americans mixed classical with African traditions to create jazz, they symbolically merged their cultures through the music. When Blacks and Whites heard the music that was produced, they were indirectly bonded by a shared interest in a music that became a lifestyle for many musicians and fans.

### **Vocal Musicianship**

*[H]er voice possessed a heavenly perfection that could make a poignant ballad or a silly ditty sound equally sublime. She was a master of technique, able to leap octaves, split tones, reinvent melodies and dance all over complex rhythms. Above all she had class. She never sang an unsophisticated note, and she always left a song better than she had found it. (Schoemer 80)*

Warm, happy, glistening, sunshiny, soothing: these words come to mind when one describes Ella Fitzgerald's vocal sound. Her voice sounded flawless. She emitted a cosmic sense of time and rhythmic accuracy every time she performed. She perfected her pitch early on in the Chick Webb days and was (and still is) the

envy of most musicians for her sense of tonality. The bop era allowed her to play around with and perfect her knowledge of harmonics. Her sense of line and phrasing, propelled by an immense amount of breath support and flow, were inspiring. Her pronunciation and enunciation were excellent; rarely was a composer's text indecipherable with a Fitzgerald performance. Her range, "...wider than most opera singers...", was the envy of classical singer Dietrich Fisher-Dieskau, and her incredible flexibility allowed her to scat at virtuosic bebop speed through all of her octaves (redsugar 4). As far as vocal strength and stamina, she and Sarah Vaughan lasted the longest in the jazz world (Gourse *Louis'* 255). It is amazing that Fitzgerald performed through so many decades when she sang tiring numbers of concerts each year. She ended up surpassing all of her peers as they 'died out', one by one, before her.

Within the society of the early 1900s and its demeaning attitude towards women, one had to be extremely talented, self-assured, tough, and forceful in order to succeed as a female musician. That she became so successful in a musical market traditionally dominated by men is a tribute to her talent and true dedication to music in itself (Dahl x, 16). "'Poor Ella....All she can do is sing everything right on the first take'" remarked admirers of Fitzgerald's success in spite of the limitations of female appearance-focused America (Cocks 83).

### **Treatment of Melody**

*[People] go to a record store and can buy Charlie Parker,  
Chet Baker, and Billie Holiday. And it seems like they're*

*buying them for the wrong reasons; these were the people  
with the hangups who died young, ya know of overdoses  
and all that. That's not fair. It's not fair that people  
should be famous for that... But Ella didn't...have any real  
hang-ups.....(Molloy)*

When analyzing performers' styles, it is important to look at the way they treat musical lines, how they express themselves emotionally within the indications of composers, and what kind of drama their personal performances bring to the music they sing. Often a musician's personal life affects the way they treat the music they sing. Unlike other popular musicians, Ella Fitzgerald was a straight person with no 'glamorous' problems that affected her art. Often times people are attracted to a person who is a little dangerous. Perhaps this is because people long to escape their 'normal' lives into something more 'exciting.' Death, drug overdoses, and prostitution are not always the things that make great artists; "...suffering is no more essential to great singing than heroin" (Friedwald *Jazz* 138). Fitzgerald's singing remained pure even though she suffered immense hardships. She never allowed her personal sagas to darken her musical portrayal of melody and text. Rather, she allowed her music to lighten the darkness of her experience. Since her entry into the jazz world, Fitzgerald focused on a heartfelt and honest expression of the warm side of the emotions portrayed in the music she sang.

The drama of Ella's presentation comes in her pure delivery of a composer's lyrics and in her improvisational take on each piece that she performs. Ella

Fitzgerald was dedicated to the music that she sang. She took her art seriously and worked diligently to make what a composer envisioned shine through in each performance. "Fitzgerald proved that the songs can stand completely on their own" (Friedwald "Ella" 2). She does not emote the negative side of emotions and situations, unlike rough or toughened singers like Billie Holiday, but it is important to realize that "...we don't need to cry all the time. We need singers like Fitzgerald to remind us that our great songwriters wrote music as well as words" (Friedwald *Jazz* 153). Fitzgerald sends optimistic messages about life to her audience members. She teaches that lightness is as much a part of the human condition as sorrow. Fitzgerald can excite an audience with her positivity, pure musicianship, and vocal ability as much as any sultry singer. It is perhaps a different kind of pathos, but it is no less moving.

### Scat Singing

*I think from what I've heard and from what people have told me, that her main influence is in how she scatted, and she scatted like a horn player. So, she had a big impact on not only vocalists but on instrumentalists as well....It kind of is a gray area, because when Ella would scat she would imitate horn players, you know? And if you hear it sometimes she'll trade with guys in the band and they'll imitate each other....She treated the voice like another instrument. (Cavianni)*



Scat singing seemed to come natural to Ella Fitzgerald. She took what she learned from earlier scatters such as Armstrong, Wiley, Bessie Smith, and others, and built upon it. There is no evidence that she had to brood over theory practices in order to learn it, like many musicians must do. She simply let the music infiltrate her ears, translate in her brain, and come out in new and glorious musical lines. Ella's early scatting lines stay closer to the melody of the song than during her bebop improvisations when she experimented more with each piece. Ella's carefully-constructed improvisations always stayed true to the harmonics of a piece, so much so that her scat lines can be accurately transcribed (Friedwald *Jazz* 142, 144). The fact that Fitzgerald's solos can be transcribed and re-performed by other musicians insures the immortalizing of her talents.

Ella's scatting is based on instrumental improvisations. The vocabulary that she created fit her instrumental style perfectly. By copying the improvisational practices of instrumental virtuosity, "...she came to possess it" (McDonough 18). Fitzgerald was so well-acquainted with instrumental improvisation that she frequently quoted well-known instrumental jazz solos in her scat improvisations, for example, Illinois Jacquet's climax of "Flying Home" and Count Basie-Bill Davis' solo on "April in Paris" (Friedwald *Jazz* 143).

Ella Fitzgerald's talent as a scat singer is so well regarded, it is often called upon to measure the quality of the improvisation of today's singers. She is still considered the best female vocal improviser ever (Friedwald *Jazz* 282).

### C. Musicians Who Have Been Inspired by Fitzgerald

*It would be in my judgement that she has certainly influenced many, many singers who go beyond singing the melody and try to get into the more improvisatory nature of jazz. And I believe she's also had an influence because of her ability. She certainly serves as an example for people who study jazz. I think anybody who takes a course at anyplace where there is a vocal jazz program...she's certainly one of the major artists that's going to be covered because for a long time she was the one female singer. (Thornton)*

Countless musicians have been inspired by Ella Fitzgerald for the elements of her style, for her personality, and for her prowess as an artist and performer. The following are quotes from noted musicians who herald Fitzgerald as one of their primary influences:

**Frank Sinatra** - "The lady was a champ. Ella was a sweet, shy girl when we met, and she never lost her innocence. Her voice was like a musical instrument. I adored her wonderful talent and loved the lady" (Jet 62).

**Tony Bennet** - "She was my favorite singer. Her recordings will live forever. She'll sound as modern 200 years from now, no matter what techniques they come up with" (Jet 62).

**Mel Torme** - "She was so unique, so original....No one can fill her shoes....She had

that little girl quality, even at the end, yet she could tackle Gershwin and Porter and Ellington tunes and sing them with authority and maturity. It was a very enigmatic quality''' (*Jet* 62).

**Lena Horne** - "'She was the world's golden songbird....We will hear her every day and listen to her make our hearts happy. Nobody could sing like she did'" (*Jet* July '96).

**Helen Forrest** - "'I've been called a jazz singer so many times. I don't agree. It's a compliment. It puts me in a class with Ella Fitzgerald, the greatest jazz singer. I listened to her and to Mildred Bailey from the time I was about twelve to fourteen'" (*Gourse Louis'* 108).

**Ethel Waters** - "'No one in the world can beat Ella as a riff singer'" (*Gourse Louis'* 255).

**Annie Ross** - "'The musicality of Ella Fitzgerald appealed to me and has never diminished one bit'" (*Gourse Louis'* 285).

**Rosemary Clooney** - She admired "'Ella Fitzgerald for the just damn good professional doing it all the time. With her tremendous intonation, she sings in the center of a note. She sounds like a tiny girl, with innocence and a new approach each time she sings'" (*Gourse Louis'* 303).

**Carmen McRae** - Ella represents "'the epitome of jazz feeling and the popular song welded together. With her, the transition from jazz to the commercial context wasn't only smooth, it was artistic'" (Dahl 143).

**Cecilia Bartoli and Renee Flemming** - confessed that Fitzgerald was "...their first

singing idol and influence" (Innaurato 66).

**Carol Sloane** - "'She taught me my ABCs: intonation, diction and swing'"

(Friedwald "Ella" 1).

**Doris Day** - "'The one radio voice that I listened to above others belonged to Ella Fitzgerald. There was a quality to her voice that fascinated me, and I'd sing along with her, trying to catch the subtle way she shaded her voice, the casual yet clean way she sang the words'" (Fidelman ix).

**Flip Phillips** - "'...Ella could keep the greatest time of anyone. That, more than anything, is what made her a musician in the eyes of other musicians....She had a musician's sense of time, and the ears to go with it. She could pick up on anything as well as any player. I could trade fours and eights with her as if she were another horn. A horn with a voice, that's what she was. And always in tune'" (*Down Beat* 24).

**Duke Ellington** - "'Her artistry brings to mind the words of the maestro, Mr. Toscanini, who said concerning singers, "Either you're a good musician or you're not." In terms of musicianship, Ella Fitzgerald was beyond category'" (redsugar 4).

**Karrin Allyson** - Kansas City-based jazz vocalist - "Her improvisational skills along with all the heart she sang with have influenced me to do just that. Also, her ensemble-like attitude is a healthy goal. She was a musician who sang" (Allyson).

**Lucia Newell** - Minnesota-based jazz vocalist - "Through the years I have listened to and studied a lot of her singing. Why? Because she was truly one of the greatest jazz singers who ever lived. Her pitch was nearly perfect, her phrasing was unique,

subtle and as musical as any instrumentalist I've ever heard, she had a great trumpet-like quality in her tone, and she really knew how to swing!...She had exquisite control of what she did technically with her voice and she never abused her instrument when she performed, which is one of the reasons she had such a long and illustrious career...Nobody who is interested in learning about or performing jazz could skip Ella in the vast maze of talent that has come and gone throughout jazz history" (Newell).

When studying vocalists of the twentieth century, Fitzgerald is always included. She became a household name and a worldwide voice. Her claim to fame? The voice of America, a country symbolized in sound.

## VI. Why Was Fitzgerald So Good?

*[S]he was what I call a 'primitive.' I look at Louis Armstrong as a primitive. I'm talking about the untutored, un-lettered, ill-educated, or non-educated person that has this gift and is able to sell that gift so easily to an audience to rave reviews. Ella had that, Louis Armstrong had that. These were people that really didn't have an education. They lived for what they did. (Molloy)*

Ella Fitzgerald did not lead a perfect life. She experienced hardships and suffered just as all humans do. Money and fame cannot make up for difficult childhoods, lack of supportive family figures, and disappointments in love. She was unable to find meaning in the intellectual world because she never had the

opportunity for a higher education. In fact, if one took away the stories of Fitzgerald's musical travels, there wouldn't be much to read about in her biography. She simply lived a life of music performance: concerts, recording sessions, interviews...there doesn't appear to be much else.

Although Fitzgerald's life was plagued by unhappy situations involving her search for love and acceptance, she never became a cynical, ungrateful, or dark person. She didn't let her personal problems destroy the pure beauty and happiness of her music. Maybe that is why her music has a characteristic happiness; music was her way of filling her inner void with light. It became a safe home that provided a way of transforming her personal traumas into incredible music...a real healing process. Fitzgerald once told reporters, "I get a little tired sometimes...but whenever I get on a stage and the public is there, I forget all the tiredness. Everything comes back and I feel good again" (Nicholson 211).

The love that Fitzgerald sought from the people in her life wasn't always found, but she found an abundance of love from her fans. At a commemorative evening for her work with Decca records, Ella said, "I guess what everyone wants more than anything else is to be loved. And to know that you love me for my singing is too much for me. Forgive me if I don't have all the words. Maybe I can sing it and you'll understand" (Nicholson 146). She never relied on speaking to express her emotions, it seemed as if all she could do was sing her communication. Because she was dependent on her fans for love, she desperately wanted to give them good performances so they would like her. Even in places she had performed

in before where her popularity was assured, "'...she'd still look around the curtain and say, [I hope they like me]'" (177). How could people not like someone who gave of herself so completely, who was willing to share her soul with strangers, and who lived for the people who were intrigued by her talents?

## VII. Conclusion

Music, like other forms of art, has the power to inspire emotions within people. In early music history, as today, people feared that the 'wrong' kind of music would affect the psyche in bad ways. People might become evil, lazy, violent, good-for-nothings if they listened to music that inspired those kinds of emotions. Ella Fitzgerald's music, on the contrary, emits goodness. It is music that makes us feel wonderful about ourselves. Whether we are musical or not, we are encouraged by her timeless voice to sing along, to share positive messages of love and thanksgiving with our surroundings.

Ella Fitzgerald has so much to offer the world. The music that she called her own can tell us who we are; it is the essence of America and the human spirit. The life that she led as an African-American woman in the twentieth century serves as an example of what it means to be a seeker of one's dreams. Her talent as a performer can teach us how we can share at once the surface and depth, and lightness and darkness of our souls with each other. By appreciating her transcendence, we can find our own.

### Works Consulted

Allyson, Karrin. Personal interview. 7 April 1998.

*An Evening of Ella*. With the University of Minnesota Jazz Singers and Jazz

Ensemble I, Dr. Ronald McCurdy, Leigh Kamman, Jeanne Arland Peterson, Debbie Duncan, Yolanda Williams, Connie Evingson, Yolanda Bruce, and Pamela Von Wald. Tedd Mann Concert Hall. 12 February 1997.

Angelou, Maya. "Those who seek the singer: for Ella Fitzgerald." As reprinted in *Essence* September 1996. 98.

Atteberry, Phillip. "Here's Why the Lady Is the Champ." *The Mississippi Rag* February 1996. 1.

Cocks, Jay. "The Voice of America: Ella Fitzgerald: 1918-1996." *Time* 24 June 1996. 83.

Dahl, Linda. *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazz Women*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984.

*Down Beat* June 1993. 24.

"Ella Fitzgerald, First Lady of Song, Dies at 78." *Jet* 1 July 1996. 58-63.

Nokhanya. "Ella Fitzgerald: Great Lady...Grand Duchess of Jazz." *Essential Jazz Tribute*. 1996. Accessed 9 November 1997. <<http://www.jdscomm.com/ellafeat.htm>>.

Fidelman, Geoffrey Mark. *First Lady of Song: Ella Fitzgerald for the Record*. New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1994.

Friedwald, Will. "Ella Fitzgerald, 1917-1996." *Ella Fitzgerald: 1917-1996: A Memorial*. Jazz Central Station. Accessed 9 November 1997. <<http://jazzcentralstation>.



com/jcs/station/musicexp/artists/ella/misc/memorial/htm>.

"First, Last, and Always." *Entertainment Weekly* 12 July 1996. 35.

*Jazz Singing*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990.

Gilmore, Mikal. "Ella Fitzgerald: 1917-1996." *Rolling Stone* 8 August 1996. 26.

Gourse, Leslie. *Louis' Children: American Jazz Singers*. New York: Quill, 1984.

*Swingers and Crooners: The Art of Jazz Singing*. New York: Grolier Publishing, 1997.

Gridley, Mark C. *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis*. Upper Saddle River: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

Innaurato, Albert. "Frank and Ella." *Opera News* November 1996. 66.

*Jet* 1 July 1996. 58-63.

Lees, Gene. *Singers and the Song*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

McDonough, John. "Ella: A Voice We'll Never Forget." *Down Beat* September 1996. 16-21.

Molloy, Don. Personal interview. 19 November 1997.

Moret, Jim. "Ella Fitzgerald dies at age 78." CNN news site. 15 June 1996. Accessed 9 November 1997. <<http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/9606/15/fitzgerald.obit/index.htm>>.

"Ella Fitzgerald's music, papers given to Library of Congress." CNN news site. 25 April 1997. Accessed 9 November 1997. <<http://cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/9704.25.fitzgerald.memorabilia/index.htm>>.

Newell, Lucia. Letter to the author. 30 March 1998.

Nicholson, Stuart. *Ella Fitzgerald: A Biography of the First Lady of Song*. New York:

Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993.

*People Weekly* 1 July 1996. 43.

redsugar. Home page. *redsugar's Ella Fitzgerald Page*. Accessed 9 November 1997.

<<http://www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Studio/5415/ella.htm>>.

Schoemer, Karen. "The Scat Lady." *Newsweek* 24 June 1996. 80-81.

Woodard, Josef. "Memories of Ella: Keter Betts and Tommy Flanagan Recall Her

Great Art and Charm." *Jazz Times Feature Stories*. Accessed 9 November

1997. <<http://jazzcentralstation.com/jcs/statio...stan/jazztime/oct96/>

features/ index.htm>.

### Recordings Consulted

Fitzgerald, Ella. *All That Jazz*. Pablo, 2310-938-2, 1989.

*A Tisket A Tasket*. Excelsior, 7128, 1995. Compiled from original Decca label.

*Best of Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong*. PolyGram Records, Inc., 120485, 1997. Compiled from original Verve recordings.

*Cryin' Mood*. Object Enterprises, Ltd., 40046, 1989. Compiled from original Decca recordings.

*Ella and Basie: on the Sunny Side of the Street*. Verve, 821576-2, 1963.

*Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington*. Verve, 314517953-2, 1957, 1965, 1974.

*Ella Fitzgerald: 75th Birthday Collection*. MCA Records, 2-619, 1993. Compiled from original Decca recordings.

*Ella Fitzgerald: Jazz at the Philharmonic*. Compiled from live concert recordings.

*Ella Fitzgerald Live*. PolyGram Records Inc., 833294-2, 1987. Compiled from original Verve recordings.

*Ella Fitzgerald: Love Songs: Best of the Verve Song Books*. PolyGram Records Inc., 314531762-2, 1996. Compiled from original Verve recordings.

*Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole Porter Songbook Volumes I and II*. Verve. 821989-2/821990-2, 1956.

*Ella Fitzgerald: The Best of the Song Books*. PolyGram Records Inc., 314519804-2, 1993. Compiled from original Verve recordings.

*Ella Swings Gently With Nelson*. Verve, 314519348-2, 1961.

*Ella Wishes You a Swinging Christmas*. Verve, 827150-2, 1960.

*Jazz Image*. Tributary by Leigh Kamman. Minnesota Public Radio, 15 June 1996.

*Mack the Knife: the Complete Ella in Berlin*. Verve, 314519564-2, 1960.

*The Best of Ella Fitzgerald*. Verve, 6-8720, compilation of earlier material.

Allyson, Karrin. *Azure-Te*. Concord Jazz, 4641, 1995.

Carter, Betty and McRae, Carmen. *The Carmen McRae Betty Carter Duets*. Verve, 314529579-2, 1987.

Caviani, Laura. *As One*. IGMOD Records, 49803-2, 1998.

*Great Vocalists of Jazz: the Voice of the Soul*. Esquire, 724383299423, 1995.

*Holiday, Billie*. Radio profile by Arne Fogel. Minnesota Public Radio, 31 May 1987.

Compiled critical listening of female pop/jazz singers: Ethel Waters, Lee Wiley, Sarah Vaughan, Connee Boswell, Mildred Bailey, Anita O'Day.