

ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



ELLA

[This is the third article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Born Ella Jane Fitzgerald in April of 1917 in Newport News, VA, she became, from humble beginnings, “Lady Ella” and “America’s First Lady of Song.” Let’s examine what made her so special.

After a tumultuous childhood, including spending a good deal of her time “running numbers” and acting as a lookout for a brothel, she appeared on “Amateur Night” at nearly 16 at the Appolo Theater in Harlem. Her intention was to dance, but following a local dance duo, she decided on the spot to sing instead. Singing “The Object Of My Affection” and “Judy,” she won the competition that night and was noticed by a member of Chick Webb’s band, who persuaded Webb to hire Ella. By 1935, she was singing with Webb’s band at the famous Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. In 1938, Ella recorded a playful version of the nursery rhyme, “A-Tisket, A-Tasket,” which she co-wrote. (One million copies later, #1 on the pop charts for 17 weeks, Ella was famous!) Then in 1939, Webb died which left Ella as the Bandleader, known as Ella Fitzgerald and Her Famous Band.

As she continued during the 40’s to perfect her art, Ella was recognized throughout the music world as one-of-a-kind. She had a clear tone, a wide vocal range, perfect rhythm and timing, perfect pitch and the ability to improvise. Ella had a tendency to forget her lyrics. But she could always work herself out of self-painted corners by “scatting,” the ability to mimic instrument sounds with nonsensical syllables; for example, “doo-be-doo-bidily-op,” or the like. Her audience loved it! And continued to love her for another 40 years.

Three of her show-stoppers were “Oh, Lady Be Good,” “Stomping At The Savoy,” and “How High The Moon,” in each case setting the gold standard for female jazz vocalists. The final two decades of her life saw a marked decline in her health, wherein she had quintuple coronary bypass surgery. And then her voice began to fail her due to diabetes complications. The disease robbed her of her sight, and eventually both legs in 1994. She died in June of 1996 at her home in Beverly Hills.

She left a legacy that can’t, and won’t, soon be forgotten. During her long and successful career, Ella recorded over 200 albums and about 2,000 songs. Her record album sales exceeded 40 million. She received 13 Grammy Awards, the NAACP Image Award For Lifetime

Achievement, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, France's Commander of Arts and Letters Award, and in 2007 was honored by the U. S. Postal Service with an Ella Fitzgerald Commemorative Stamp (see photo). Upon her death, *Time Magazine* wrote "She had simply become part of the life of everyone who listens to music, a part that runs from a musical past into a shared tradition, and will not ever pass."



Having very little self-confidence, Ella was painfully shy. As pianist Billy Taylor reportedly quipped, "She never believed that she was really Ella Fitzgerald." To me, however, she was always in command. The reader is left to make up his/her own mind. For reference, I suggest listening to her 1960 concert in Berlin (Original Verve release from 1960 *Ella in Berlin: Mack the Knife (Live)* on MG VS-64041).

Ella was remembered by the popular vocal group, The Manhattan Transfer, who in 1983 sang with Fitzgerald. Janis Siegel remembers one afternoon rehearsal. "We were all around the piano. We did our little four-part harmony, and then she scatted a couple of choruses. And she turns to us and said, 'Was that alright? I was so flabbergasted. It's like God asking his angels after he just created the world and turned and said, "Well, whaddya think? The Grand Canyon? Could it use a little tweaking?"'"

Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at www.JustMeLiveMusic.com. See them on Facebook at www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic