

Ella Fitzgerald – The First Lady of Song

Lead: A Virginia girl, product of an unhappy home and a common law marriage, at times homeless, a delinquent, street dancer and a numbers runner for the mob, but, oh my goodness, could Ella Fitzgerald sing.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: The Great Migration in the late 19th and early 20th century lured many blacks from the south to northern cities thinking that there were jobs there. Too often there were not. Caught up in that diaspora was

Temperance Williams and her three year old daughter Ella Fitzgerald. They struggled in their new home, Yonkers, New York even as Temperance acquired a new beau, Joseph Da Silva, a Portuguese immigrant who probably abused Ella but with whom Temperance had another daughter, Frances Da Silva, Ella's only sibling and life-long intimate.

The death of both of their parents in the 1920s found Ella and Frances in Harlem living in poverty with an aunt and under little supervision, usually on the streets. Ella was an excellent dancer and would pick up tips from passersby, she was a numbers runner for the mob, and in

1934 was sent to reform school though she quickly escaped back to the streets.

During this period Fitzgerald began her lifelong love of jazz and show business. On a dare she entered an amateur night competition at the Apollo Theater and carried the crowd with her clear beautiful voice, perfect pitch and fresh stage presence. She soon joined popular band leader Chick Webb and after his death in 1939 was the featured singer of the band. She sang with other groups such as the Ink Spots but then went out on her own.

Fitzgerald had dozens of hits with Decca Records in the 1940s and then

began in 1956 her most successful decade recording on the Verve label a series of magnificent musical anthologies, the Songbook series featuring precise and lyrical, near-perfect renditions of the songs of Porter, Gershwin, Kern, Berlin, Ellington, Arlen and Mercer.

By the 1970s, disappointments in love and ever-increasing health problems were slowly abridging her career. She had open heart surgery in 1986 and the following year both legs were amputated due to diabetic complications. Nevertheless, she still had a hearty set of pipes proving it as the source of the high-pitched sounds that broke the glass in the Memorex commercial. Ella Fitzgerald died in

1996, receiving the ultimate compliment, that from Ira Gershwin, “I never knew how good our songs were until I heard Ella sing them.”

Resources

“Ella Fitzgerald.” *The Times*. June 17, 1996. Section: Features.

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Harrington, Richard. “The Voice of a Lifetime.” *The Washington Post*. June 17, 1996: C 1

Nicholson, Stuart. *Ella Fitzgerald*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1993.

“Norman Granz American Jazz Impresario who Managed Ella Fitzgerald and Oscar Peterson and Fought Racial Segregation.” *The Daily Telegraph (London)*

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

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