

Ella Fitzgerald
1918 - 1996

by L. Margaret Pomeroy

Although Ella Fitzgerald was born in Newport News, Virginia in 1918, she grew up in Yonkers, New York, her mother having moved them there shortly after Ella's birth. As a youngster Ella wanted to be a dancer, but that desire changed in 1935 when she won a talent contest at the Apollo Theater with a rendition of "The Object of My Affection. Jazz musician Benny Carter heard Ella sing that night and introduced her to bandleader Fletcher Henderson. Although Ella auditioned with him, nothing came of it. However, she did get an engagement at the Harlem Opera House for a week with Tiny Bradshaw's band. During that week friends snuck her into Chick Webb's dressing room and forced him to listen to her sing. Reluctantly, Webb took her on a one-night performance to Yale. The week after that she opened with his band at the Savoy and Ella Fitzgerald's singing career was launched. Ella remained with Webb's band, making her famous recording of *A-tisket, A-tasket* in 1938. After Webb's death in 1939, Ella took over the band and renamed it "Ella Fitzgerald and Her Famous Orchestra." It was dissolved in 1941 due to the outbreak of WWII.

Following the war Ella joined Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts and toured worldwide with noted jazz instrumentalists. Her career soared. During this time Ella was recording on Decca, but no hits resulted. In 1955 Granz bought out her Decca contract, and she began recording on his label, Verve. From 1956 to 1964 she made her "songbook" recordings accompanied by orchestras such as Nelson Riddle and Billy May, singing tunes by Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, and Johnny Mercer. Ella's career went on to span sixty years and included fourteen Grammy awards, Best Female Singer in *Down Beat* magazine's reader's poll 21 times, honorary degrees from several universities, and various other awards and honors. Critics and fans called her "The First Lady of Song."

Ella Fitzgerald's personal life was less glamorous than her professional one. She married a shipyard worker in 1939 but it was annulled a few days later. In 1948 she married jazz bassist Ray Brown, and they adopted a son in 1951 but divorced a year later. Ella raised Raymond Brown, Jr. by herself. As she aged, Ella suffered from multiplying health problems. In 1971 she had cataract surgery, then in 1986 open-heart surgery. In 1993, the year of her 75th birthday, she lost both legs below the knees due to complications from diabetes. On June 17, 1996, Ella Fitzgerald passed away in her Beverly Hills home; "The First Lady of Song" was gone.

Sources used:

Harrison, Joyce. "Ella Fitzgerald," *Contemporary Black Biography* (1995ed.), VIII, 70-73.