

# Ella Fitzgerald

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# Ella Fitzgerald



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## Correlation

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Ella's career as a performer began at the Apollo Theater.

## One Night on Stage

By most accounts of that fateful evening, Ella stood **petrified** in the spotlight when called to the stage. She felt sweat beginning to trickle down the side of her face. She peered down at her heavy, scuffed work boots. There was no way she could possibly dance the way the Edwards Sisters had only moments before. The audience began shifting restlessly in their theater seats. They wanted more, and this big, awkward-looking teenager didn't seem as though she was going to give it to them.



The contest's host, Ralph Cooper, hissed from the wings, "Do something!" He shook his head in **frustration**. He felt that his Amateur Night at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, a neighborhood in New York City, was going downhill quickly, thanks to this girl.

Then Ella leaned over to Benny Carter, whose famous band was accompanying the talent show contestants on that cold night in 1934.

"Will you please play 'Judy'?" she requested.

"Sure, kid. I don't see how you're going to dance to a tune like that, but whatever you say."

Taking center stage again, Ella cleared her throat as the music started. Still nervous, her voice cracked on the very first note. The audience huffed a collective moan and began booing and yelling for her to get off the stage. Ella's heart was beating so fast that she thought it might explode.



Benny Carter plays his sax.



Seeing her panic, the band stopped the music and waited. Ella looked at Benny gratefully, took a deep breath, and nodded. The music started over. Ella closed her eyes and stopped hearing the boos, focusing only on the sound of her mother's favorite song. She was back in her kitchen at home. Her mother was alive again. Ella was dancing around the kitchen while her mom sang.

When Ella opened her eyes after the last note floated away, the audience was still. Ella thought she'd disappointed them. Panic rose up her throat. She began to turn and trudge off the stage when one person started to applaud, and then another, and then another. Suddenly, thunderous applause erupted throughout the Apollo Theater. Ella stared blankly at Benny.

“You killed ‘em, kid! They want more! Hear that? What are you going to give as an encore?”

Before she could answer, he turned away from her and launched his band into “The Object of My Affection.” Without missing a beat, and with a grin that nearly split her face, Ella began to sing again.



Ella Fitzgerald only a few years after the night at the Apollo Theater



Ella's vocal talent brought her much recognition.

### First Lady of Song

Madonna. Britney. Shakira. Beyoncé. Like many others, these stars don't need a last name to be recognized. Such **headliners** are often multiple Grammy Award winners and regulars on TV talk shows. They make appearances in movies, record album after album, and are sought out by fellow celebrities who want to be like them and steal some of their glory. It's easy to forget the **predecessor** of them all, a woman who accomplished all of these achievements and more. Winner of 13 Grammy Awards, dominating the music magazine polls as top female vocalist for nearly 40 years, the First Lady of Song is Ms. Ella Fitzgerald.

## The First Lady's Early Years

Ella Jane Fitzgerald was born on April 25, 1917, in Newport News, Virginia. Her parents, William and Temperance ("Tempie"), parted ways soon after her birth. Ella and her mother moved to Yonkers, New York, and eventually lived with Tempie's new boyfriend, Joe Da Silva. Joe chauffeured part-time, and Tempie worked at a laundromat and catered on the side. They had a child, Frances, in 1923. Ella and Frances remained close throughout their lives.



Young Ella Fitzgerald

Ella decided by the third grade that she wanted to become a **professional** dancer, and she often entertained people by dancing on street corners. However, Ella also loved singing. She made friends at school by giving realistic **impersonations** of great singers. Louis Armstrong and Connee Boswell were two of her favorites.



The legendary Savoy Ballroom was the "it" place to be for dancing until 1958, when it closed its doors.



When she got a little older, Ella and her friend Charles often snuck off to the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, where they spun the latest dance steps until they had them mastered. By age fifteen, Ella and Charles were performing their routines in clubs all around Yonkers. Ella was a paid dancer!

But then tragedy struck. Ella's life changed dramatically in 1932 when her mother, Tempie, died from a heart attack. A few months later, Joe also suffered a heart attack and died, leaving Ella and Frances to move in with their aunt in Harlem.



During this time, Ella's grades dropped. She missed a great deal of school and spent time on the streets with people who didn't always obey the law. Eventually, Ella was caught skipping school by truancy officers—people whose job it was to make sure kids were attending school. Ella was sent to live at the Riverdale Children's Association, which had been an orphanage but was made into a **reform school**. Ella rebelled against the rigid rules of the reform school, and it is suspected she was beaten and abused by her teachers. She ran away from the school in the fall of 1934.

As a teenager, Ella lived on the streets. She struggled to make a living by earning tips from singing and dancing in an area of Harlem known as "Black Broadway." Here, all kinds of street entertainment were performed.



Street performers are still common in the streets of New York.

Talent **auditions** were gaining popularity in Harlem nightclubs at that time. After submitting her name for several contests, Ella was chosen to perform at the Apollo Theater's Amateur Night. The prize was twenty-five dollars. That night, November 21, 1934, seventeen-year-old Ella Fitzgerald found that her true calling in life was not dancing but singing. The audience loved her, and she loved them.

*"It isn't where you came from, but  
where you're going that counts."*

*—Ella Fitzgerald*

Although she won the Apollo's Amateur Night, some thought Ella would never make it as a singer. This was likely because of her appearance. Not considered pretty like other female singers, Ella was tall for her age and somewhat overweight. She dressed in men's clothing and work boots, and having spent several months homeless on the street, she wasn't very clean.



A poster for one of Ella's performances with the Chick Webb Orchestra

### The Lady's Big Break

The first time Chick Webb—an up-and-coming bandleader—was introduced to Ella, he told the man who introduced them, “You’re not putting *that* on my bandstand!” When that man, Charles Linton, a member of Webb’s band, threatened to quit if the bandleader refused to hear Ella sing, Webb relented. He said that Ella could sing with the band during its two-week **gig** at the Savoy Ballroom. If the audience didn’t like her, she’d be kicked out of the band with no pay.



### Do You Know?

At age 21, Ella got her first big hit with the Chick Webb Orchestra. The playful tune she sung used words from an 1800s nursery rhyme, “A-Tisket, A-Tasket.”

Ella sings with Chick Webb.

Of course, the audience loved Ella. Chick Webb and his band grew to adore her, too. They called her “Sis” and purchased a room for her to stay in at the Braddock Hotel. Some of her bandmates took on the daunting task of teaching Ella the best way to comb her hair and what types of dresses were appropriate to wear on stage. Once she learned, Ella became one of the best-dressed singers on tour, and she fell in love with shopping for new clothes.

The Chick Webb Orchestra and Ella began to record songs together on the Decca music label. Some of their songs shot to the tops of the music charts. They toured around the country, and Ella eventually took over the band after Chick Webb’s death in 1939. When the band broke up three years later, Ella continued touring all over the world.



## The Lady on Tour

It was difficult for black musicians like Ella to travel from city to city because many times they encountered **racism**. For example, Ella was forced to relinquish her seat on an airplane to some white patrons. This caused the cancellation of one of her **engagements** in Sydney, Australia. She was unable to get a flight to Australia for three days.

It wasn't the first time, either. Several years before, Ella had been traveling by train. After standing on her feet for hours in the colored section of an overcrowded train car, Ella finally spotted a seat in the whites-only section and sat down. She was promptly scolded by the conductor and ordered to leave the section.



This type of racist behavior didn't faze Ella. She enjoyed sharing her music with everyone. She had—and still has—fans of every race, age, and background. Ella rose above the adversity and bigotry in the same way that she rose above the difficulties of her youth.



Ella could do amazing things with her extraordinary voice.

## The Lady Makes Her Mark

In time, Ella became one of the world's most popular **jazz** vocalists. She even helped perfect a new form of jazz singing known as "**scat**." Using only her voice, Ella imitated various orchestra instruments. She combined this skill with **improvised** phonetic sounds, like "bo-dube-be" and "rebop."

Unlike other scat singers, Ella was able to keep her voice perfectly in tune as it fluctuated up and down the musical scales. She had a rare musical ability called "relative pitch." This is the ability to recognize the precise relationship of every note to any note played and to sing it perfectly in tune every time. Relative pitch is far more useful than just having "perfect pitch," which is the ability to identify and sing a single note upon hearing it.

The new level of artistry she brought to scat singing earned Ella the respect of other big-name performers, including Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Nat King Cole, Louis Armstrong, and Mel Torme. Torme, in fact, dubbed her “The High Priestess of Song.” Some of Ella’s biggest fans included celebrities like Marilyn Monroe and Peggy Lee.



Ella records a song with Louis Armstrong.



In her career, Ella recorded over 200 albums.

Phoebe Jacobs, who worked for Peggy Lee and Ella, said that despite her fame, Ella remained a very grounded, casual person. Phoebe often told the story of when she and Ella were in New York City for a television interview, and Phoebe wanted to stop and get something to eat. She told Ella to go on ahead, but Ella was hungry, too.

Phoebe said she was just going to grab a hot dog from a street vendor. Ella said she'd come along. It was funny that such a huge star would be standing in the sidewalk in her fur coat, eating a hot dog. While they were eating, a man walked up to Ella and told her that she looked just like Ella Fitzgerald. Ella looked the man straight in the eyes and said that people told her that all the time before walking away, hot dog in hand.



A hot dog vendor in New York City.

A compassionate woman as well, Ella spent much of her time and money helping children whose lives presented them with many disadvantages. She helped open several day programs for children and participated in numerous fundraisers to benefit children. She and her second husband, Ray Brown, even adopted a child of their own, Ray Brown Jr. In later years, Ella was very devoted to her granddaughter, Alice.



Michael Heyman talks with Ella Fitzgerald's son, Ray Brown Jr. (right) on Friday, April 25, 1997.





Ella's long-time acquaintance, Phoebe Jacobs, remembered a private party where Ella was singing. She said that at one point, Ella asked if anyone had a request. A young man asked to hear some rap. The crowd laughed, and Ella snapped right back by telling the man that she's been rapping since before he was born. Ella started scatting on the spot and the audience loved it.



### The Curtains Close

Before she died in 1996 at the age of 79, Ella had sold over 40 million records and had performed at Carnegie Hall 26 times. She had appeared in movies and guest-starred on numerous television shows. She was the first black artist to headline at New York's world-famous Copacabana club. She had been presented with the National Medal of Arts by the president of the United States, and

awarded the French equivalent, the Commander of Arts and Letters Award. She held honorary doctorates in music from prestigious universities such as Yale, Princeton, and Dartmouth.

Ella Fitzgerald, a homeless orphan from Yonkers, proved that humans can overcome adversity. She achieved what few artists have ever done. She became a **legend** in her own time.

## Glossary

<b>auditions</b>	trial performances by actors, musicians, or dancers (p. 12)
<b>compassionate</b>	caring about and wanting to help people who are suffering (p. 20)
<b>engagements</b>	jobs that last for a short period of time in the entertainment business (p. 15)
<b>frustration</b>	feeling disappointed or distressed, particularly about being unable to change something (p. 5)
<b>gig</b>	a temporary performing job (p. 13)
<b>headliners</b>	performers who are the lead attraction in a show with multiple performers (p. 8)
<b>impersonations</b>	imitations of the voice, appearance, or actions of another to entertain (p. 9)
<b>improvised</b>	made up as one goes along (p. 16)
<b>jazz</b>	a style of music with a strong rhythm supporting improvisations (p. 16)
<b>legend</b>	a famous person who is well respected for a particular talent (p. 22)
<b>petrified</b>	scared; terrified (p. 4)

<b>predecessor</b>	someone who came before another person in the same position (p. 8)
<b>professional</b>	earning money for taking part in an activity (p. 9)
<b>racism</b>	the belief that some people are inferior to other people because of their race (p. 15)
<b>reform school</b>	an institution for young people designed to change unacceptable behavior (p. 11)
<b>scat</b>	a style of jazz singing that uses nonsense words and syllables to imitate the sound of an instrument (p. 16)

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