

To some, Ella Fitzgerald had a hard life from the moment she was born. To others, Ella had it made. Ella Fitzgerald was born April 25th 1917 in Virginia. Soon afterwards, her parents separated and Ella followed her mother to Yonkers, New York. Ella was barely a teenager when her mother died. While still coping with this tragedy, Ella found herself failing school and having frequent run-ins with the police. She was also abused by her caretakers while in the custody of a reform school.

At age 15 Ella ran away from school along with the horrible memories of that time. Somehow she managed to support herself through the Great Depression, a feat that is most commendable. Ella found her refuge in attending the Apollo theatre, famous for its amateur competitions. At 17, she entered the competition and wooed the crowd with her incredible vocals.

In the crowd that night were notable jazz artists of the time including Benny Carter and Bessie Coleman, who conducted the Chick Webb orchestra. Ella began working and touring with the orchestra from 1935 and eventually took over as band leader in 1939. Although Ella had obtained this status so early in her career, her enthusiasm to learn and form business relationships never ceased. Ella was a professional and was very good at what she did – not only because of her rare talent but for her mature attitude at such a young age.

Many black female jazz vocalists of Ella's era found themselves caught up in the industry. Many of these artists became driven by money, sex and drugs and died at a young age, like the late Billie Holiday. Ella remained different from this crowd and as a result her public and fellow musicians respected her. Her popularity only continued to increase as she sang around the world.

Ella's voice had a sweetness to it that was rarely accompanied by such a wide range as hers. Her style has been described as effortless, natural, flexible, ageless and accessible. Many call her "The First Lady of Song". She started as a swing singer, moved to bebop, perfected scat and jazz and could sing modern or classic songs. Artists whose songs she stylized included Louis Armstrong, Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer, Irving Berlin, Duke Ellington and the Gershwins.

Throughout her life she collaborated on more than 250 albums, sold more than 40 million of those albums and won 13 Grammy awards. Her influence soon spread throughout the musical circuit and her singing style was much imitated in the 1950s and 1960s. Ella's trademark of "scat" singing (a technique in which the singer improvises as an instrument would and uses nonsense syllables) was taken up by many male and female jazz vocalists. Sarah Vaughn, Billie Holiday and the modern day Joss Stone all show signs of Ella's influence. Ella is also credited with inspiring the great Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and Mel Tormé to some extent.

Although Ella's influence through style is great, perhaps her greatest achievement can be noticed in her career as a whole. Ella Fitzgerald was an influential woman with many followers around the world, of all races, religions and nationalities. In many

ways she opened the way for other black musicians in the jazz scene. It was often difficult for black musicians to secure a gig at a well – known club simply because of racial prejudice. Ella looks back on one such instance in this quote:

“I owe Marilyn Monroe a real debt. It was because of her that I played the Mocambo, a very popular night club in the ‘50s. She personally called the owner of the Mocambo, and told him she wanted me booked immediately, and if he would do it, she would take a front table every night.”

Actress Marilyn Monroe was a devoted Fitzgerald fan and used her popularity to counter this racist practice at one particular concert. Ella also appeared on many television chat shows during the 1960s and 1970s. These included the Nat “King” Cole Show, the Tonight Show and the Ed Sullivan show.

Ella’s health unfortunately started to decline in the 1980s. She became severely ill with diabetes and had both legs amputated below the knee before her death in 1996. Ella remains immortal through song and is still seen as one of the greatest jazz vocalists of all time. By performing at predominantly white clubs Ella opened up new possibilities for aspiring black jazz musicians in the big cities. Ella’s fans are as diverse as her vocal stylings – both black and white fell in love with the songster. Ella Fitzgerald revolutionized the way jazz ballads were sung with her sensitivity and naturalness and also had a powerful influence over the industry itself.