

# Ella



Book by Jeffrey Hatcher  
Conceived by Rob Ruggiero and Dyke Garrison  
Based on an original play by Dyke Garrison  
Musical Arrangements by Danny Holgate  
Directed by Rob Ruggiero

**MARCH 31-APRIL 19, 2009**

## Table of Contents

The Wells Theatre.....	3
Biography of Ella Fitzgerald & History of Jazz.....	4
Words to Know.....	8
Reflection on Performance.....	9
Be a Theatre Critic.....	10

## Thank you to our Sponsors

**The Chesapeake Fine Arts Commission  
Hampton Arts Commission  
Norfolk Commission on the Arts and  
Humanities  
Portsmouth Arts Commission  
Suffolk Fine Arts Commission  
Virginia Beach Arts and Humanities  
Commission  
Virginia Commission for the Arts  
The Williamsburg Area Arts Commission  
York County Arts Commission**

**Arlene & Randy Wright  
Capital Group Companies—The Home of  
American Funds  
Dominion Virginia Power  
Ford Motor Company  
Irene Leach Memorial Foundation  
Northrop Grumman Newport News  
Old Point National Bank  
Verizon Foundation  
Virginia Auto Rentals  
Wachovia Foundation  
Zel Technologies**

### **SOL Compatibility**

#### **History and Social Science**

USII.3, USII.7, CE.2, CE.3, CE.7, WG.3, WG.11, VUS.13

#### **English**

LEP 1.5, LEP 2.4, LEP 4.4, 9.5, 11.3, 12.2, 12.6

#### **Fine Arts**

M.5, M.7, M.9, M.13, M.14, M.15, TI.2, TI.7, TI.12, TI.13, TII.15, TII.16

# The Virginia Stage Company



**The Wells Theatre, Norfolk, Virginia  
Home of Virginia Stage Company**

Virginia Stage Company is the region's only fully professional resident theater company, serving an audience of more than 90,000 yearly. Founded in 1968, VSC's mission is to enrich, educate and entertain the region by creating and producing theatrical art of the highest quality and worthy of national prominence. As a non-profit cultural institution, VSC is an artistically driven theater rather than a commercial venture. Contributions from government agencies, corporations, foundations and individuals enable VSC to keep ticket prices affordable for all citizens of the Hampton Roads community while sustaining the highest artistic integrity. Virginia Stage Company's Education Department provides student matinee performances of mainstage productions as well as in-school touring productions to over 40,000 Hampton Roads students annually. VSC also participates as a Partner in Education with several schools by providing services such as performances, drama classes, production training and workshops to Title One schools. Virginia Stage Company also provides a variety of services and programs to our community, including American Sign Language performances and infrared hearing devices for patrons with hearing difficulties.

Virginia Stage Company has achieved a national reputation as one of the country's foremost regional theaters, attracting leading theater artists to the Wells Theatre stage. The Tony Award-winning musical, *The Secret Garden*, began its life at VSC. Our award-winning directors, designers and actors work in other leading theaters across the country as well as on Broadway, off-Broadway and in film and television. VSC also employs professional artisans, technicians and administrators who conceive, design, rehearse and build each production specifically for our audience in Norfolk. These theater professionals come to Hampton Roads from all over the country, and become vital members of our community while working at VSC.

In the years since its founding, Virginia Stage Company has made significant contributions to the quality of life in Hampton Roads: presenting more than 125 plays through more than 2,500 performances; revitalizing and renovating the historic Wells Theatre not only for VSC's use but for the benefit of many other cultural organizations; providing educational programs for students of all ages; and preserving the legacy of live theater for future generations.

# Ella Fitzgerald: A Biography

Ella Jane Fitzgerald was born in Newport News, Virginia in 1917. Growing up in Yonkers, New York with her mother, stepfather, and half sister Frances, Ella had dreams of becoming a dancer, but it seems music was her destiny. In 1934, Ella found herself competing in an amateur night at The Apollo Theater making a last minute decision to sing instead of dance. Ella captivated the first audience of many with her voice and she took home the first prize award of \$25. From that day on, People around the world stood in line to hear her. Ella was only 18 when she made her first recording, and 71 years old at her last in 1988. During her career Ella sang everything from jazz to opera to nursery rhymes, became one of the first female singers to lead her own band and traveled around the world to find devoted audiences everywhere, all willing to listen to the same song if Ella was singing it. On June 15, 1996, Ella died at the age of 78, after suffering continued health problems caused by diabetes. During her 78 years she spent close to 60 of them singing. She was the recipient of 13 Grammy awards, honorary degrees in music from Dartmouth, Talladega, Harvard, and Yale, as well as the NAACP Lifetime Achievement Award in 1988. Ella Fitzgerald is truly an American Legend.

## A History of Jazz

Jazz is an original American musical art form - some critics argue the only true American musical art form. Originating in the early 1900s in the South, most notably New Orleans, Louisiana, jazz has consistently and continually influenced our musical landscape. From Dixieland, big band style swing, bebop, afro-cuban jazz to later jazz- rock fusion, “jazz” remains elusive in definition. While some jazz enthusiasts have argued for a more narrow definition, jazz musicians themselves are often reluctant to define the music they play. Duke Ellington summed it up by saying, “It’s all music.”



While a clear definition of “jazz” is difficult to find, there are reoccurring common themes and notions. Jazz is usually defined as deriving from folk and church songs of the early 20th century. As a music form it features improvisation, group interaction, call and response, developing an individual voice (or sound) and high value on collaboration. A skilled performer will interpret a tune, altering melodies, harmonies or time signature to express his individuality. Gary Giddins, jazz critic, says that “it’s the ultimate in rugged individualism. It’s going out there on that stage and saying: It doesn’t matter how anybody else did it. This is the way I’m going to do it.”

The origination of jazz is often attributed to Jelly Roll Morton. He claimed in 1938 that “it is evidently known beyond contradiction that New Orleans is the cradle of jazz, and I, myself, happened to be its creator in the year 1902.” And although this statement has no hard evidence, Jelly Roll was among the first to play, compose and write “jazz” down. “Jazz music,” he said “is a style, not compositions. Any kind of music may be played in jazz, if one has the knowledge.”

The form continues to evolve—from Jelly Roll Morton to Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Dizzy Gillespie, Charley Parker and finally Billie Holiday and Miles Davis. These greats shaped American music history. It is with good reason they are remembered as Jazz Royalty, kings, queens, princes, dukes and the First Lady of Song Herself: Ella Fitzgerald.

## Ella: First Lady of Song

Actress and singer Doris Day once said, “The one radio voice that I listened to above others belonged to Ella Fitzgerald. There was a quality to her voice that fascinated me, and I’d sing along with her, trying to catch the subtle ways she shaded her voice, the casual yet clean way she sang the words.”

Ella Fitzgerald’s voice was famous for its clarity, range and flawless sound. It was a perfect instrument and the reason she is known as the First Lady of song. The perfection of her voice was first evident when she entered the jazz scene. Following the lead of fellow performer Dizzy Gillespie, she popularized the use of scat in a way no other jazz musician

had before. The New York Times once described Ella's 1945 scat record "Flying Home" as "one of the most influential vocal jazz records of the decade... Where other singers, most notably Louis Armstrong, had tried similar improvisation, no one before Miss Fitzgerald employed the technique with such dazzling inventiveness." When talking about her scat abilities Ella said, "I just tried to do [with my voice] what I heard the horns in the band doing."

By 1950, Ella's reputation as a leading jazz vocalist was solid, but manager Norman Granz had a new challenge for her. He was confident that her voice would appeal to many outside the realm of jazz and convinced Ella to reach out to new audiences by singing popular, well-known music by composers like Cole Porter, the Gershwin Brothers and Duke Ellington. In 1956, the album Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole Porter Songbook was released. It was the first of eight different songbooks Ella would go on to release and it became her most critically acclaimed, as well as commercially successful, work. Her attempt to cross-over was a monumental success. People fell in love with her voice and began to listen to new styles of music just to hear her sing. The musicians, composers and singers she worked with had the greatest respect for Ella and her vocal abilities. Broadway composer Ira Gershwin of the Gershwin Brothers once said, "I didn't realize our songs were so good until Ella sang them." Ella loved to sing and people loved to hear her. It is no wonder her career spanned half a century and why she is still known as the First Lady of Song.

**DISCUSS** *Ella Fitzgerald talked about being a shy person, but when she stepped onto a stage and started to sing, she came out of her shell. How would she have done in today's competitions? How do the "American Idol" winners stack up in comparison to Ella Fitzgerald's success?*

## Showtime at the Apollo



Throughout Ella Fitzgerald's life she was managed and mentored, but no two things shaped her life as The Apollo Theater, where she made her jazz debut and Norman Granz her final manager and lifelong friend. The Apollo Theater constructed in 1914 and known as Hurtig and Seamn's New Burlesque Theatre was originally a white-only audience venue. It would be 20 years later, in 1934, when Ralph Cooper decided to do a live version of his already popular radio show, "Amateur Nite Hour at the Apollo" ™ that the doors were opened to African-Americans.

Since then "Amateur Nite Hour at the Apollo" ™ has launched the careers of great African American musicians. It was on this stage that Ella Fitzgerald made her singing debut on November 21, 1934. She took first place that night and won a grand prize of \$25. The Apollo was not an easy concert house in which to perform, Ella has been quoted as saying, "It's that audience, man, you never know what they're gonna do 'til you get out there." Bobby Schiffman, the son of late Apollo owner Frances Schiffman, said "when performers hit the Apollo stage, no matter how celebrated they were, they were nervous... Every performer was, but it keyed them up. It spurred them on to do the best they possibly could. They did their best at the Apollo because they knew that if they sang it wrong or didn't give it their all, the audience would jump right at them."

In fact one of its infamous features was "the executioner"- a stage hand named Norman Miller, who would rush out with a broom or cap gun and chase the poor amateur right off the stage if the audience didn't approve of their talent. Percy E. Sutton, now owner of the Apollo Theater, said that when he first came to the Apollo in the 1940s he found it "a raucous, delightful place" where the audiences "were harsh."

It was into this arena that Ella made her debut, quickly followed by Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday two more of the greatest female jazz singers in history. Shortly after these three powerhouse singers made their Apollo debuts, the Theater became known as the place "**Where Stars are Born and Legends are Made**"™. This legendary venue still holds Amateur Night every Wednesday. It's winners earn a spot on the popular TV show "Showtime at the Apollo." ™

**Discuss** *The Apollo Theater launched the career of many great artists, in addition to Ella Fitzgerald. “The American Idol” of it’s day focused on talent first. What other talent based shows exist now? Why do you think America is so fascinated with these talent shows? This past season more than 30 million Americans turned on their TVs to watch “American Idol.”*

This Harlem institution, which launched the careers of icons such as Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson, James Brown and Lauryn Hill, continues to be the most popular arena for emerging and established African-American and Latino performers. Recent Apollo performers include Eve, Sean Combs, D’Angelo, Alicia Keys, Ludacris, Korn and Tony Bennett. For a full listing visit their website [www.apollotheater.org](http://www.apollotheater.org).

**Discuss** *The Apollo Theater opened during the height of the Harlem Renaissance – a period when America’s literature, music, theater and art worlds were being rocked by the African-American population in New York City. Can you imagine the electricity and verve coursing through those streets? Research artists, writers and performers who got their start in Harlem. What world events brought about such a ‘happening’ part of town? Are there similar areas of our nation today that are this kind of breeding ground for new artistic ideas?*



Another major influence in Ella’s life entered the picture in 1940. That was the year she met Norman Granz, a Los Angeles music producer and manager. Norman Granz was a key player in the jazz industry, most notably for establishing “Jazz at the Philharmonic” - a series of seated jam sessions where jazz musicians would improvise, battle and collaborate for an audience. Up until the JATP series most jazz music was heard and played to accompany dancing. It was Norman who initiated the idea that some music aficionados would pay to come, sit and listen to the music, as an art form. Ella joined Norman Granz on his JATP tours in the early 1940s, but it wasn’t until he negotiated her out of her contract with Decca Records in 1956 that Ella finally took Norman Granz on as her manager and trusted friend. It was under Norman’s advisement that Ella recorded her most distinguished works - a series of songbooks, consisting of some of the greatest songs of that time, Cole Porter, Duke Ellington and George & Ira Gershwin.

Hand in hand with Granz’s passion about his jam session series was his commitment to ending racial discrimination. He was one of the first producers to pay white and black artists the same salary, as well as to provide comparable travel accommodations. “Jazz is America’s own,” he said, “It is played and listened to by all peoples – in harmony, together. Pigmentation differences have no place... As in genuine democracy, only performance counts.” For every JATP performance Granz insisted that the audience be desegregated—which was not the cultural norm, and actually prohibited in Charleston, South Carolina. But Granz was firm. If concert halls refused to desegregate the audience, Granz canceled the performance.

Anywhere Granz’s people played, if airlines or hotels or restaurants dared try to discriminate against any of them, he did not hesitate to cancel. “He would just check everybody into the Hilton Hotel,” Stan Levy remembered. “We’d all show up in the lobby and (there’d be) a lot of , you know, throat-clearing, and he’d say, ‘This is our group. Let’s have our rooms.’ He was terrific. Norman really broke a lot of barriers. We just showed up: ‘Here we are.’”

Granz was so committed he took on the Houston judicial system in October of 1955, only weeks before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Right before their performance, three members of the Houston police department (in plainclothes) slipped backstage and arrested 5 members of Granz’s JATP team as well as Granz himself for illegal gambling in the dressing rooms. Ella remembers it vividly recounting, “They took us downtown, and then when we got down there, they had the nerve to ask for an autograph! That was quite an experience.” It took them \$50 and a little less than an hour to get out and back to their concert, but Granz wasn’t finished. He called a huge press conference recounting the tale and then spent over \$2,000 in court costs to get the \$50 back and their records swept clean.

Granz was beloved by his artists, especially Ella. Throughout his life he had three main goals: to fight racism, to give listeners a good product, and to earn money from good music. He died in 2001 successful on all accounts.

***DISCUSS*** *Norman Granz took a stand that impacted not only the lives of his artists, but every audience member they encountered. Is there something in your life that could be effected in the same way? What is the price of taking a stand? What is the reward?*

## Words to Know

**MARQUEE:** a roof-like projection over the entrance to a theatre, hotel or other building

**HOMELIEST:** most unattractive in appearance

**TUBERCULOSIS:** an infectious bacterial disease characterized by the growth of nodules in the tissues, especially in the lungs

**RACKETEERING:** engaging in dishonest and fraudulent business dealings

**SHILL:** to act or work as an accomplice of a gambler or swindler, acting like an enthusiastic customer to entice or encourage others

**TRANSATLANTIC:** spanning or crossing the Atlantic Ocean

**INDISPOSED:** slightly unwell

**APOLLO THEATRE:** one of the most famous clubs for popular music in the United States, and certainly the most famous club associated almost exclusively with African-American performers

**GINGER ROGERS:** Fred Astaire's most frequent dance partner, also an elegant and beautiful actress and singer, most popular in the 1930s

**LOUIS ARMSTRONG:** an innovative jazz trumpet performer who shaped what jazz is today, focusing specifically on improvised soloing

**JERRY LEWIS:** a famous comedian getting his start in the '40s

**SCAT:** improvised jazz singing in which the voice is used in imitation of an instrument

**SCATOLOGICAL:** though Ella thinks it has to do with scatting, this word actually means having an interest or preoccupation with excrement and excretion

**IMPROVISE (OR IMPROV):** to create or perform spontaneously

**LINE-UP:** the people within a band or group who play in a given performance

**BRIDGE:** the middle section of a tune, usually contrasting the rest of the tune

**BALLAD:** a slow tune that typically has a fluid sound

**AXE:** one's instrument, including the voice

**DISSONANCE:** a tension or a clash resulting from the combination of two disharmonious or unsuitable elements

**PICK-UP:** a musical phrase beginning that comes before the first bar of a song

**HEAD:** the first and last chorus of a tune, in which the song or melody doesn't include improvisation

**RIFF:** a catchy repeated phrase that may be played behind a soloist or as part of a lead

**SWING:** a '30s style when the big band was dominant in jazz music

**BLOW:** a term for improvise, also indicating to simply play an instrument

**PROGRESSION:** a definite series of chords that form a passage with some harmonic unity or dramatic meaning

**SYNCOPIATION:** displacing the beats or accents in music or a rhythm so that strong beats become weak and vice versa

**DOUBLE TIME:** a tempo twice as fast as the original

**PLAYER:** a musician within a group

**VAMP:** a simple section, like a riff, but designed to repeat as often as necessary

**BLUES:** a melodic style that typically associates harmonies using certain "blues scales," riffs and grace notes; a musical style ancestral to jazz; a feeling that is said to inform all jazz music

**BEBOP:** a style of jazz developed by young players in the early '40s; bebop is usually a rapid pace, many-noted improvisation using long, irregular, syncopated phrasing

**“JUST DON'T GIVE UP TRYING  
TO DO WHAT YOU REALLY  
WANT TO DO.WHERE THERE  
IS LOVE AND INSPIRATION,  
I DON'T THINK YOU CAN GO  
WRONG.”**

**Ella Fitzgerald**

**Activity Sheet**  
**Reflection on the Performance**

Let's use all our senses to reflect on Virginia Stage Company's production of *Ella*.

**Visually:** *Costumes, the physicality of the actors.*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you think they affect you so strongly? \_\_\_\_\_

How did these elements help you understand the story? \_\_\_\_\_

**Aurally:** *sound effects, vocal quality, diction, acoustics.*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you think they affect you so strongly? \_\_\_\_\_

How did these elements help you understand the story? \_\_\_\_\_

**Texture:** *fabric of costumes, sound, performances.*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? \_\_\_\_\_

Why do you think they affect you so strongly? \_\_\_\_\_

How did these elements help you understand the story? \_\_\_\_\_

**Discussion:** How do these reflections help to reveal the following element of the play: the theme; the plot line; the main action; the time period?

## Writing Activity

# Be a Theater Critic

A very strong element in the success or failure of a new production is the Theater Critic. Use the following outline to write a review of the Virginia Stage Company's production of *Ella*.

### Paragraph 1: ABOUT THE PLAY

1. What was the title or the play?
2. Who wrote the play?
3. Which theater company produced it?
4. What was your overall reaction to the play?
5. Give a brief synopsis of the plot of the play.

### Paragraph 2:

1. What aspects of the production were similar to how you envisioned them? What aspects were different? What aspects would you like to have changed and why?
2. What scenes in the play did you find most/least interesting, entertaining, and enjoyable? What about these scenes made you like or dislike them so much?
3. Did the production move too slowly, quickly, or at the right speed?

### Paragraph 3: ABOUT THE CHARACTERS/ PERFORMERS

1. Did any characters touch you personally? Who was your favorite?
2. Were the character's motivations clear? In other words, could you understand what each character wanted?
3. Which actor do you think gave the best performance? What did this actor do that made you think s/he gave the best performance?
4. How did the way the actors use their bodies onstage enhance their performances?

### Paragraph 4: ABOUT THE SOUND

1. Did the music/sound add to the mood and atmosphere of the production or take away from it? How?

### Paragraph 5: ABOUT THE COSTUMES

1. Were the costumes appropriate for the mood and style of the production? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Did any of the costumes reflect a character's personality or wealth? What clues did the costumes give about the characters?

### Paragraph 6: CONCLUSION

1. Would you recommend this production to someone? If so, to whom? If not, why not?