

Ella Fitzgerald (1917–1996) was an American jazz singer widely regarded as one of the greatest vocalists in the history of recorded music. She became famous for her extraordinary vocal range, precise pitch control, and mastery of scat singing, a vocal improvisation technique in which singers use nonsense syllables instead of words to imitate musical instruments. Over the course of her career she recorded more than two hundred albums and helped shape the role of the human voice within jazz.

Ella Jane Fitzgerald was born on April 25, 1917, in Newport News, Virginia, a shipbuilding and naval city located on the southeastern coast of the United States. Soon after her birth, her family moved to Yonkers, New York, which is located just north of New York City. Her childhood took place during the early twentieth century, a period when jazz music was spreading rapidly across the United States. Jazz had developed in African American communities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, combining elements of blues, ragtime, and African musical traditions.

Fitzgerald experienced significant hardship during her early life. After the death of her mother in 1932, she faced financial instability and spent time living in difficult circumstances. Her life changed dramatically in 1934, when she entered an amateur talent competition held at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, New York. The Apollo Theater was an important performance venue known for showcasing African American performers during a time when segregation limited opportunities in many other theaters.

At the competition Fitzgerald originally intended to dance, but she changed her plan and sang instead. Her performance impressed both the audience and judges, and she won the contest. This victory introduced her to professional musicians and helped begin her career as a singer.

Soon after this performance Fitzgerald joined the orchestra led by Chick Webb, a prominent jazz drummer and bandleader who performed regularly at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. A bandleader is the musician responsible for directing an ensemble and organizing performances. The Savoy Ballroom was one of the most famous dance halls of the era and played a major role in the development of swing music.

Swing was a style of jazz that became popular in the 1930s and 1940s. It was characterized by strong rhythmic patterns designed for dancing and was typically performed by large ensembles known as big bands. These bands included sections of brass instruments such as trumpets and trombones, woodwind instruments like saxophones, and rhythm instruments including piano, bass, and drums.

Fitzgerald gained national recognition while performing with Chick Webb's orchestra. One of the band's biggest hits was the song "A-Tisket, A-Tasket," recorded in 1938. The song was based on a traditional children's rhyme and became a major commercial success. The recording sold over one million copies and established Fitzgerald as a rising star in the jazz world.

After Chick Webb died in 1939, Fitzgerald took over leadership of the band for a period of time. Although it was unusual at the time for a woman to lead a major jazz orchestra, she continued performing with the group before eventually focusing on her solo career.

During the 1940s and 1950s Fitzgerald's singing style evolved significantly. She became especially known for scat singing, a form of improvisation where the voice is used similarly to a musical instrument. Instead of singing lyrics, the performer creates rhythmic and melodic patterns using syllables such as "ba," "doo," or "sha." This technique allows singers to improvise melodies in the same way that jazz instrumentalists improvise during solos.

Improvisation is a fundamental feature of jazz music. It refers to creating new musical ideas spontaneously during performance rather than strictly following written compositions. Fitzgerald's scat singing demonstrated remarkable control over rhythm, pitch, and phrasing, allowing her voice to interact with instrumentalists in a highly creative way.

Another major achievement in Fitzgerald's career came through a series of recordings known as the Songbook albums, produced during the 1950s and 1960s. These albums focused on the works of major American composers and lyricists who wrote songs for Broadway musicals, films, and popular music during the early twentieth century. These composers included figures such as George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, and Rodgers and Hart.

A songbook in this context refers to a collection of songs written by a particular composer or songwriting team. Fitzgerald recorded entire albums dedicated to each composer's work. These recordings helped preserve many important songs from the Great American Songbook, which is a term used to describe influential popular songs written primarily between the 1920s and 1950s.

The Songbook recordings demonstrated Fitzgerald's ability to interpret lyrics clearly while maintaining precise musical phrasing. Her voice had an unusually wide vocal range, meaning the span of musical notes she could sing from lowest to highest. She also possessed exceptional intonation, which refers to the accuracy of pitch when singing notes.

Throughout her career Fitzgerald collaborated with many leading jazz musicians. One of her most famous partnerships was with the trumpeter and singer Louis Armstrong. Their recordings together, including albums such as *Ella and Louis*, combined Armstrong's gravelly vocal style with Fitzgerald's smooth tone and precise phrasing.

Fitzgerald also worked with important jazz arrangers and bandleaders. An arranger is a musician who organizes and adapts musical compositions for specific instruments and ensembles. Her recordings with arranger Nelson Riddle and conductor Count Basie are considered among the finest vocal jazz performances ever recorded.

During the 1960s and 1970s Fitzgerald toured extensively around the world, performing in concert halls, theaters, and jazz festivals. She became one of the most internationally recognized jazz singers, performing in Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

Over the course of her career Fitzgerald received numerous awards recognizing her musical achievements. She won 13 Grammy Awards, which are among the highest honors in the recording industry. She also received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from the United States government in recognition of her contributions to American music and culture.

Fitzgerald continued performing into the later decades of her life, although health problems eventually reduced her ability to tour. She died on June 15, 1996, in Beverly Hills, California at the age of 79.

Ella Fitzgerald's importance in music history comes from the combination of technical mastery and musical creativity she brought to jazz singing. Her precise pitch, wide vocal range, and ability to improvise through scat singing expanded the possibilities of the human voice as a jazz instrument. Her recordings helped preserve many of the most influential songs of the twentieth century while also demonstrating the expressive power of vocal improvisation within jazz.