

APOLLO

EDUCATION

**APOLLO THEATER
WALK OF FAME
LEGEND**

ELLA FITZGERALD



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Born in Newport News, Virginia on April 25, 1917, Ella Jane Fitzgerald moved with her family to Yonkers, New York in 1921. Interested in music from an early age, Ella enjoyed singing in church and with her friends at school. However, dancing was her true passion.

After her mother passed away unexpectedly when Ella was 14, she moved in with her aunt on 145th Street in New York City. Ella made what money she could by dancing on the sidewalks of “Black Broadway,” a stretch of ten city blocks in Harlem where street entertainers performed for tips.

In the fall of 1934, Ella auditioned for the Apollo’s talent contest, Amateur Night. The Apollo had been open for less than a year. Ella passed her audition dancing, but then learned a popular dance duo named the Edwards Sisters would be the feature act on the same night she was to perform. Worried that she would not be as good as the Edwards Sisters, Ella decided to sing instead.

On November 21, 1934, Amateur Night host Ralph Cooper introduced the first contestant of the evening: “*Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome, Miss Ella Fitzgerald.*” Ella sang one of her favorite songs, “[*The Object of My Affection*](#)”. Shortly into her performance, her voice cracked and she lost her place in the music. She was so nervous; she forgot the words to the song! The audience started to get restless. Cooper walked on stage, stopped the orchestra, joined Ella at the microphone, and said, “*This young lady’s got a gift she’d like to share with us*

WORDS TO KNOW

Scat Singing

Ella loved to sing melodies and improvise solos without using words. She used what are called “nonsense syllables,” musical sounds one can make with their mouth. See Ella scat:

[One note Samba 1969](#)

Pretend that you are a jazz big band instrument. Can you make music with your mouth, without using words?

Jazz Big Band

Popular during the swing era of the 1920s and 30s, jazz big bands commonly featured five saxophones, four trombones, four trumpets, and a rhythm section including acoustic bass, piano, and drums. Ella not only sang in big bands, she was also a bandleader and musical arranger.

Have you ever been in a band, sung in a choir, or just played music for fun with friends? If so, keep it up. Like Ella, you might just be on to something BIG!



DO NOW!

Guess Who?

Can you guess from the following list of entertainers, who has performed in Amateur Night at the Apollo? For an extra challenge, can you guess who has gone on to win Amateur Night?

Dave Chappelle	Jimi Hendrix	Michael Jackson
Billie Holiday	D'Angelo	Ella Fitzgerald
Ne-Yo	Stevie Wonder	Wilson Pickett
The Isley Brothers	Sarah Vaughan	Lauryn Hill
Gladys Knight & the Pips	James Brown	Luther Vandross

Name That Tune

"A-Tisket A-Tasket" isn't the only example of Ella performing children's songs. Check out the following video of [Ella with her friend Bing Crosby](#). Try to catch as many familiar songs as you can!

Scatting Nursery Rhymes

Practice your scat skills to another children's song Ella loved to sing. See if you can keep up with Ella's scatting on her swinging take of "[Old McDonald!](#)"

tonight. She's just having a little trouble getting it out of its wrapper. Let's give her a second chance."

This time when she sang, she left no doubt that she had a gift to share. Her voice came across the loudspeakers silky and smooth. Her sweet tone melted over the orchestra's accompaniment. When she finished, the theater erupted in applause. Ella Fitzgerald became the first female performer to win Amateur Night at the Apollo, and one of the first winners in the now over 80 year history of the contest.

Following her performance at the Apollo, drummer and bandleader [Chick Webb](#) hired her to sing in his orchestra. Ella's first recordings were made with Webb in 1935. By 1938, the two had recorded what would become a million selling hit, Ella's most well-known song "[A-Tisket A-Tasket](#)." Following Webb's sudden death in 1939, Ella took over Webb's role as bandleader, and the band was renamed Ella Fitzgerald and Her Famous Orchestra. Word of Ella's talent spread through the jazz community. Soon she was singing with the most popular big bands of the day including the orchestras of [Duke Ellington](#), [Louis Armstrong](#), and [Count Basie](#).

Ella's popularity grew as radio, film, and television broadcast her music to fans around the world. People felt uplifted by the joy and playfulness she expressed when performing. Ella became recognized for her scat singing, a vocal style in which singers use their voices to sound like jazz big band instruments, such as trumpets, trombones, and saxophones.

By the 1970s, Ella's health started to decline and she performed only occasionally in the 1980s and 90s. June 15, 1996, Ella Fitzgerald, the "First Lady of Song," passed away.

Having recorded over 200 albums, selling more than 40 million records, and working with the greatest performers of the 20th century, she now rests among the stars shining down upon the Apollo, a guiding light for future stars to follow.

Ella Fitzgerald was inducted into the Apollo Walk of Fame in 2006.

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DID YOU KNOW?

Amateur Night

Ralph Cooper first started “Amateur Hour” in 1933 at Harlem’s Lafayette Theater. When Cooper accepted a job at the Apollo in 1934, he brought his talent show with him, and changed the name of the contest to “Amateur Night.”

A-Tisket A-Tasket

In 1938 when Ella was 21 years old, she used the words of an old English nursery rhyme to a folk melody she had sung as a child. This record ended up selling over a million records by 1950. “A-Tisket A-Tasket” will forever reflect the joy and playfulness Ella brought to her performance.

The Big Screen

Ella made her screen debut in the 1942 film, “Ride ‘Em Cowboy,” featuring the popular comedy duo Abbott and Costello. Ella’s “A-Tisket A-Tasket” was featured in the film. In the 1970’s Ella reached a new generation of viewers, when she starred in a series of television commercials advertising Memorex cassette tapes. You decide: “Is it Ella, or is it Memorex?”

HOST YOUR OWN AMATEUR NIGHT

70 years before American Idol, The Voice, or Dancing with the Stars, there was Amateur Night at the Apollo. Grab your friends and produce your own Amateur Night featuring everyone’s special talent. You can sing, dance, act, play an instrument, tell jokes, anything goes! Remember, the word “amateur” means you do something for the love of it. So as long as everyone is having fun and doing what they love, on with the show!

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Photo Credits

Portrait of Ella Fitzgerald, Dizzy Gillespie, Ray Brown, Milt (Milton) Jackson, and Timmie Rosenkrantz, Downbeat, New York, N.Y., ca. Sept. 1947. William P. Gottlieb/Ira and Leonore S. Gershwin Fund Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress; Ella in 1940. Gilles Petard/Redferns/Getty Images; Ella in 1968. Courtesy the Fraser MacPherson estate c/o Guy MacPherson (Ella Fitzgerald) [CC BY 2.0 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons

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