

Chance Debut at Apollo Theater Leads to Storied Career

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Seventy-five years ago this month, Ella Fitzgerald's name was pulled in a weekly drawing at the Apollo Theater, winning her a chance to perform on "amateur night." The 17-year-old showed up at the Harlem, New York, theater on November 21, 1934, prepared to dance, her passion at the time. She panicked, however, when she realized she would compete with the Edwards Sisters, whom she later called the "dancingest sisters around." So she sang instead, bringing down the house and winning the \$25 first prize.

According to published accounts of her life, Fitzgerald was born on April 25, 1917, in Newport News, Virginia, but spent much of her young life in Yonkers, New York, with her mother, Tempie; her younger half-sister, Frances; and Tempie's boyfriend, Joseph DaSilva, a Portuguese immigrant. At school, Fitzgerald was a shy but excellent student and well liked. She loved dancing with friends and singing at church, and she listened to live music, records, and the radio, imitating her favorite stars. She said she wanted to be a professional dancer.

After Tempie died suddenly in 1932, Fitzgerald moved to her aunt's home in Harlem. She was unhappy and often skipped school, ending up at a correctional institute for girls in Albany, New York. She ran away and returned to the city, surviving on the streets for a time before the Apollo competition.

Fitzgerald later called her victory at the Apollo a "turning point" in her life, writes Geoffrey Mark Fidelman in *First Lady of Song: Ella Fitzgerald for the Record*. Afterward, her rise was swift. She won an amateur night competition at the Harlem Opera House in 1935, which came with a week's engagement and \$50. And then the popular Chick Webb Orchestra hired her as its featured vocalist. She had her first big hit, "A Tisket, A Tasket," in 1938, when she was 21. The song is also the first of many



Ella Fitzgerald sings in New York City, circa 1947, as jazz musician Dizzy Gillespie (right) listens.

entries under Fitzgerald's name in the Copyright Office's records.

Dubbed "The First Lady of Song," Fitzgerald recorded thousands of songs over her career and performed all over the world. She won 13 Grammy Awards, a Kennedy Center Award, the National Medal of the Arts, and numerous honorary doctorates. She collaborated with other legendary artists such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Frank Sinatra and appeared on television and even in a few movies. Her final concert at Carnegie Hall in 1991 was her 26th show there. "She was, quite simply, one of the most celebrated jazz musicians of all time," writes Stuart Nicholson in *Ella Fitzgerald: The Complete Biography*.

After Fitzgerald died on June 15, 1996, the Ella Fitzgerald Collection was donated to the Library of Congress. It contains photographs, videotapes, more than 10,000 pages of scores, and individual musician parts for more than 1,000 ensemble and symphony orchestra arrangements. ©