

# This Day in History... April 25, 1917

## Birth of Ella Fitzgerald

Ella Jane Fitzgerald was born on April 25, 1917, in Newport News, Virginia. Her pure, ageless voice spanned three octaves, and she was known as the First Lady of Song, the Queen of Jazz, and Lady Ella.

When her parents separated, Fitzgerald and her mother moved to Yonkers, New York. There, Fitzgerald was something of a tomboy, and enjoyed playing in neighborhood baseball games, but also loved music and often took the subway to Harlem's Apollo Theater.

Her life took a downward turn when her mother died from a car accident. Unhappy, Fitzgerald began to skip school, and soon was in trouble with the law. Sent to a reform school, she was beaten, and found life there unbearable. At age 15, she escaped, but was alone and broke.

Her big break came on November 21, 1934, when her name was pulled in the weekly drawing at the Apollo, giving her the chance to compete in Amateur night. Fitzgerald went to the theater planning to dance, but her act followed the Edwards Sisters, described by Fitzgerald as the "dancingest sisters around." On stage, Fitzgerald was paralyzed, believing she couldn't compete. Her indecision brought boos from the crowd, and so Fitzgerald began to sing her mother's favorite song, "Judy" by Hoagy Carmichael. The crowd quickly quieted, and by the song's end were calling for an encore! She also sang "The Object of My Affection" and won first prize.



*Monroe was a big fan of Fitzgerald's and helped her get an important gig.*

made her famous and was one of the highest-selling records of the decade.

After Webb died in 1939, Fitzgerald took over as bandleader and the group was renamed Ella and Her Famous Orchestra. She recorded about 150 songs with the orchestra between 1935 and 1942. She also recorded with the Benny Goodman Orchestra and her own group, Ella Fitzgerald and Her Savoy Eight.

As a soloist, Fitzgerald joined Norman Granz's "Jazz at the Philharmonic" tour. She also worked with Louis Armstrong on several albums and produced her famous Song Book series during the 1950s and 1960s. Fitzgerald recorded eight song books, highlighting the works of Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, Rodgers and Hart, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Jerome Kern, and Johnny Mercer. The Song Book series was one of her most successful and critically acclaimed projects.

*Fitzgerald performed and recorded with Count Basie several times and their 1963 album Ella and Basie! is considered one of her greatest recordings.*

For half a century Fitzgerald entertained with sultry ballads and sweet soul-searching jazz. She performed with all the jazz greats, including Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Nat King Cole. In her lifetime, Fitzgerald recorded over 200 albums, won 14 Grammy awards, and sold over forty million albums. According to Fitzgerald, "The only thing better than singing is more singing." When asked about the difficult times in her life, she never complained, just said they made her success feel all the sweeter.

In 1991, Fitzgerald gave her 26th and final performance at Carnegie Hall. When she died on June 15, 1996, at her home in Beverly Hills, people all over the world mourned. In Hollywood, a wreath of white flowers was placed next to her star on the Walk of Fame, and the Hollywood Bowl put the words "Ella, we will miss you" on their marquee.

Among the honors she received were the National Medal of Arts and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.



*Fitzgerald was the 30th honoree of the Black Heritage Series.*



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In 1955, the owner of Hollywood's Mocambo nightclub refused to book Fitzgerald because she was black. Marilyn Monroe, who was big fan of Fitzgerald's, called the owner and said she would take a front table at his club if he hired the singer. Fitzgerald had her first performance there on March 15, 1955, and later recounted, "Marilyn was there, front table, every night... After that, I never had to play a small jazz club again."

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