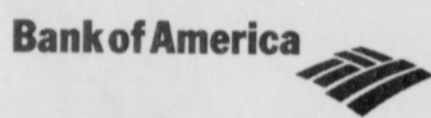


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# COURAGEOUS

AFRICAN AMERICANS



by Ron Weber

## The First Lady of Song

**Young black teen rises to elegant singer**

An awkward and shy young girl dressed in near rags and shoes that did not fit timidly walked out onto the stage. This dance at a New York City talent show would be her first public performance. Her giddy schoolmates who dared her into going on stage had no idea of what was about to happen. While watching her strange movements, the audience broke out in laughter. As he bony knees began to uncontrollably bang against one another the audience laughed even harder. Embarrassed beyond comprehension, the young girl turned to walk off the stage as quickly as possible. Her legs however were shaking so bad she could not move. Suddenly

talent contest, Ella won another first place. This one was at the Harlem Opera House and earned her a spot on CBS Radio with the Arthur Trace Radio Show.

Suddenly, her music career appeared to end even before getting started. At 17 her mother had to sign a contract allowing her to sing on the radio. But without warning her mom died and Ella was now considered an orphan by the state of New York. Although relatives tried to take her in, state investigators got wind of an abusive stepfather somewhere in the picture and insisted she would be better off in an orphanage.

Stuck in a state-run home for unwanted children with no hope for any musical career, Ella hoped and waited. Finally her desire to sing became too strong. She escaped the orphanage and entered another contest, this one at the Apollo Theater in New York. Again winning first place, she also was given \$50, a hefty sum for an orphaned teenager in the depression years.

While Ella Fitzgerald's life had been on a serious down turn, this night would turn things around for good. Unknown to Ella, in the audience that night was Bardu Ali, director of the Chick Webb Band. In a short time, Webb, who was amazed with her talent at such a young age, hired her. Still a teenager, the state intervened once again. Webb and his wife quickly adopted their new sensation, ending state control for once and all.

Ella's success never stopped growing throughout her long career. Along the way, her talent would be joined with Billy Holiday, Duke Ellington, Nat King Cole, The Ink Spots, Louis Armstrong and many others. She would win 12 Grammys and scores of enviable awards. With several "million sellers," the list of her songs and other accomplishments could fill a book. In fact they did. A local author, J. Wilfred Johnson, has published a complete list of all her works in, *Ella Fitzgerald; An Annotated Dichotomy*. From her first record, *Love and Kisses*, Fitzgerald's top sellers included, *A Tisket A Taskit*, *In To Each Life Some Rain Must Fall*, and *I'm Beginning to See the Light*. Johnson, who has spoken to Fitzgerald many times and visited her at her home in Beverly Hills, still resides in northwest Portland. The book took him more than 10 years and during this time he spoke to more than 100 people close to Fitzgerald. His work is available in book stores and the Multnomah Public Library.

Near the end of her life, the once scrawny, lonely orphan who overcame so many odds to become a legendary singer would show us again how to overcome adversity. Enduring cataract surgery, a triple heart by-pass, and the loss of both her legs to diabetes, she continued to entertain her beloved audiences well into the 1990s.

Ella Fitzgerald, the "First Lady of Song," left us in 1996. Although her body is gone, her music will remain with us for an eternity. Some say that her voice can still be heard on a star-lit night over New York City, accompanied by the angels above.



Ella Fitzgerald captivates audiences with her rich and soothing voice.

the idea hit her that she should sing instead of attempting to dance. Her voice was barely audible above the roaring laughter, but soon the crowd silenced and the auditorium was filled with music that silenced the mocking audience. They looked about to see where the beautiful voice singing "The Object of My Affection" was coming from. As her voice rose, filling the auditorium with such rarely heard beauty, they realized the voice was coming from the young teenager on the stage. When she finished, not a laugh was heard. Instead, rapturous applause filled the auditorium. The same audience that came to mock, gave 16-year-old Ella Fitzgerald three encores and a first place prize. A legend had been born. The year was 1934.

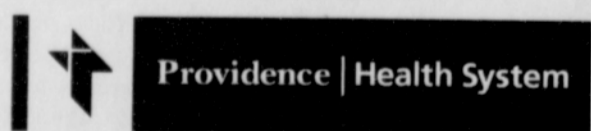
Born on April 15, 1918 in Newport News, Va., baby Ella soon lost her father to sudden medical problems. Ella's father had been a guitar musician and a singer. Now a widow, her mother who had a gorgeous soprano voice was forced to move in with relatives in Yonkers, N.Y. With her family always encouraging her musical talent, Ella took lessons and sang at every opportunity. Less than one year after winning her first amateur



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