

## Becoming Ella Fitzgerald's Biographer

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*Becoming Ella Fitzgerald: The Jazz Singer Who Transformed American Song.* by Judith Tick. New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2023. 592pp. \$40.00

Judith Tick with Darren Mueller

**DARREN MUELLER (DM):** First of all, thank you for your book, which I really enjoyed. What a wonderful way to get into Ella's life, into the many stories about her, and into the complicated figure that is Ella Fitzgerald. Perhaps complicated isn't the right word...

**JUDITH TICK (JT):** I love the word complicated when it comes to Ella Fitzgerald because the dominant narrative is so determined to simplify her in some ways as a natural who came into the business swinging, which indeed she did. But she remains someone whose artistic identity has not been recognized in the complex, nuanced way it truly deserves.

**DM:** Let's begin there. One of the motivating factors of your biography is to tell a story about Ella that was multilayered and spoke to many kinds of issues. That is not a singular story.

**JT:** One pivotal moment for me was discovering Oscar Peterson's memoir about Ella Fitzgerald. I stumbled onto it because I was compiling the anthology *Music in the USA: A Documentary Companion* (Oxford University Press, 2008), an anthology of primary sources to use in the undergraduate classroom. As my friend, Ruth Perry, a literary scholar, said to me, "if you are not taught, you are forgotten." That applies to ideas as well as people. Oscar Peterson's memoir surprised me: he wrote about his beloved friend as an artist of tremendous agency who commanded the stage and commanded the musicians behind her. She

could, with a flick of her handkerchief, indicate a change of key or a new direction for her song. She was so powerful. The other quality that Oscar emphasized was her competitiveness. She loved matching wits with the instrumentalists around her. Oscar Peterson's fulsome portrait of Ella Fitzgerald changed my entrée into the biography because I realized I had such a limited understanding of who she was.

**DM:** There are other biographies of Fitzgerald, of course. What do you think you brought to this project that perhaps these other biographers didn't?

**JT:** I wrote my book during the ongoing revolution of knowledge enabled by the internet. I benefitted hugely from the digitization of new sources, and especially from the digitization of Black newspapers. I was aware that I was a white woman writing about a Black woman and had a very different life experience, never mind the chronology differences. I think that the prospect of being able to enter into her world through Black newspapers, however limited that was, enabled me to write about the first part of her life very differently from earlier biographies. I found early interviews she gave to feature writers from the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Baltimore Afro-American*, to take two important newspapers. I listed many interviews in a separate section of my bibliography.

Now regional newspapers are digitized as well as newspapers in other countries. I think this is going to change the way we think about jazz and popular music in general. The historical narrative of jazz reception history has been dominated by New York writers, primarily because *The New York Times* has been digitized for so long. We can add the printed authority of *The New Yorker*. New York critics see themselves at the center of jazz and their voices are strong and powerful.

**DM:** Whitney Balliett and John S. Wilson come to mind.

**JT:** Yes, John S. Wilson was a public intellectual even in a broader way than Whitney Balliett because Wilson was syndicated, and we haven't really looked sufficiently at other jazz critics who were syndicated at the time or were accepted as cultural critics—I'm thinking of Ralph Gleason, sometimes Nat Hentoff, and particularly Leonard Feather. We haven't really looked at the way jazz was represented through the big news outlets like AP and UPI, which had very strong cultural footholds at that time. In addition, I also became aware of the importance of American television in defining Fitzgerald for the American public. I profited from the timely arrival of new tapes from television programs

of Fitzgerald's live recitals which were telecast abroad. Many have been uploaded on YouTube by listeners who wanted to share their memories. My finding the whole program of a recital in Berlin, 1968 was another turning point for me. Then of course there are the fabulous albums that Verve put out as retrospectives. So, I had global clues which suggested new directions challenging the conventional jazz narrative about her.

I also ironically benefitted from access to surviving friends and associates after the passing of Ella Fitzgerald and her manager Norman Granz. Together in their lifetimes they protected and guarded her privacy and access to her personal life. They both frustrated early biographers who were thwarted when potential informants seemed to be constrained by propriety and bonds of friendship. Or so it seemed to me. And then time passed.

**DM:** It seems like there is a clear tension here. You have these dominant media figures that have so much gravity and influence. Access to the archives of Black newspapers complicates those narratives and disrupts that influence because these sources give access to audiences that were listening in a different kind of way.

**JT:** I think jazz criticism has neglected theater or stage life as one source of jazz's popularity in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For example, Ella grew up professionally in Harlem in the 1930s, coming of age in Chick Webb's great band. The Harlem Renaissance is conceived of primarily as a literary movement of the 1920s, but there was an extraordinary explosion of theatrical talent in the 1930s in Black theaters across the country which nurtured early jazz. These theatrical sites brought together total packages of entertainment—there was music, there was dancing, there was art. And I think that world, which is represented both by Louis Armstrong and Cab Calloway, was Ella Fitzgerald's world as well. Think of the Apollo and the Harlem Opera House and the Howard and the Earl. Those venues and others like them kept vaudeville traditions alive. Fitzgerald was influenced by that exciting milieu. Sometimes, listening to her banter with audiences over time, she reminded me of Jackie "Moms" Mabley.

**DM:** Your book really outlines the way in which Ella worked in so many different venues—ballrooms, theaters, jazz clubs.

**JT:** Fitzgerald also performed in arenas in Germany and France that were large enough to hold an audience which equaled those of sporting events. She was

singing to maybe 20,000 or 30,000 people at a time. The figures are astonishing. And she was communicating. Is there any wonder that Ella Fitzgerald's son, Ray Brown, Jr., said to me, "My mother was all about the audience," and then he also said, "nobody toured like my mother." And you could, if I pair those statements, you could see why occasionally you felt like this mother who came home maybe twelve weeks a year wasn't the mother for him as much as she was the mother for the music that she sang. But you can also understand why Fitzgerald made such a point of having an eclectic and diverse repertoire because reaching out to those audiences was her mission. Initially it was a lifesaving experience, and then it became a purpose and a way to succeed. And then a mission.

**DM:** Let's talk a bit about your approach. The introduction includes a passage about writing from a feminist perspective, as both a musicologist and as someone who has written about other women composers and modernists in that way. Is this a feminist biography?

**JT:** This is partly a feminist biography. But this is an intersectional biography that takes race and gender and class very seriously. So, it's a biography that pairs "Jim Crow" a familiar term with a much more esoteric term, "Jane Crow." "Jane Crow" is a rough term which has been around for a while outside of music, I think. It emerged in the late 1940s or so, and it went right through the '40s and '50s to empower its major advocate, the formidable civil rights lawyer Pauli Murray through the early years of NOW (The National Organization of Women). And the legal precedents in court cases of Pauli Murray became one of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's ideological bulwarks of understanding. I come from a family of lawyers and that chain of influence impressed me.

**DM:** The intersection of race and gender is a theme throughout the book, from beginning to end. These issues are not something in the background.

**JT:** I think that's true, and it is present in jazz history and jazz criticism. I think one of the things that really made this book take so long was the absence of a significant scholarly history of vocal jazz. Jazz vocalists have occupied the margins of jazz history, excluded or minimized in the earliest textbooks in the 1970s. It's a common theme even in the music business where singers were in a different union. The musicians' union was exclusively instrumental, and singers were in a different entertainment category. They were variety artists, so it's not as if the jazz critics had to invent this separation. It was built into the industry, and it persisted in ways we still don't understand fully. The former absence of a

vocal jazz scholarly base—redeemed for me through Will Friedwald’s brilliant scholarship on jazz pop—made my job harder as a biographer.

I was also really interested in issues around female identity—what we mean by the term feminism, what we mean by women’s liberation, what we mean by womanist. All of the wonderful language that we have inherited over the years now from Second Wave cultural feminism and from the renaissance of scholarship by Black women writers, informed my book.

You know, I remember hearing Toni Morrison, [while] giving a lecture at Northeastern University, talk about the need to separate yourself and your thinking from convention and dominant narratives. She had written so brilliantly about the role of music in her character’s lives. I recall her expressing the opinion that she knew she had to tell different stories and should. I “knew” this, but then I experienced and felt the power of a great writer say it in her way. I wanted Ella to tell her own story. I wanted to make it possible for other people to try to understand Ella Fitzgerald through her music and her words in particular, the way she improvised the repertoire, the way she commanded the stage. The whole range of her artistic expression. I wanted to try to present that world through her eyes as best, admittedly limited, ways I could.

**DM:** One of the things I really appreciate about your book are all the great quotations from Ella. She spoke so clearly about her artistry. You gather these comments and place them alongside other accounts from musicians about her on the bandstand or her in the recording studio or some of the other ways that she took agency over her performance. To me this puts pressure on so many of the dominant narratives in jazz history, especially as it relates to vocalists. As you know, the history of instrumental jazz is often what’s given primacy. In what way do you hope that this biography can challenge some of those dominant narratives?

**JT:** Well, the dominant narratives really follow the style change through the contributions of genius or outstanding artists. They make those artists stand for eras. The model [for these narratives] was the classic *A History of Western Music* by Donald J. Grout published in 1960. Building canons and cherishing greatness is very important, but it is limited and inhibiting if misused. Canons sometimes fumble through the questions they ask; for example, they’re limited in their attitude towards popularity. So, when I was studying Western art music, I never really knew that how influential Romantic composers such as Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky were in the 20th century. I knew about Webern because I was taught about Webern. I was taught Berg and Schoenberg. These are of course

great figures, but I didn't know there was this huge influence of Romantic style and taste which shaped the public "ear" and dominated the public imagination much more than modernism, and more than the avant-garde. That tension should be part of the narrative so that we can understand the implications of greatness and not misuse it as a tool to exclude.

**DM:** This brings up the many artificial binaries that your book asks us to reconsider, including the jazz vocal versus jazz instrumentalist debate that we've already talked about. But you also consider the pop versus jazz debate, which was a huge thing for jazz critics but maybe not for someone like Ella Fitzgerald and her lived experience.

**JT:** Yes, not her lived experience and not the artistic world she inhabited where she knew she could do both and more. Adding to the canon is Ella's understanding of what jazz vocalism could be. Let me try to give one example. Let's take her attitude towards bop. When Ella announces she is "going Dizzy" in 1946, I think, there were some vocalists who were interested in bop, but none of her stature and none who would say so publicly that she thought that bop musicians had so much to give jazz and by implication, singers. She created works for herself which essentially let her be a jazz orchestra, improvising on one instrument after another, quoting licks from instrumental players, doing impersonations, doing theatrical expansiveness through her vocal jazz that gave her personality full range. Well, the whole issue of vocal jazz which didn't just end with Ella but went into scattling of great artists all across the spectrum of jazz and she had a huge influence of what pop music became through jazz pop in the '50s and '60s and beyond. And today we have continuity of tradition and innovation from vocalists reclaiming their past.

**DM:** Let's go back to this idea of "if you are not taught, then you are forgotten." What are some things that should be taught about Ella Fitzgerald?

**JT:** The pedagogy around Ella Fitzgerald is complicated. A course described as "Ella Fitzgerald and Her World" would be my first wish! Instead, let me keep it simple and assume that the setting is a jazz survey and Ms. Fitzgerald can occupy [just] one moment on the frontline of the syllabus. I would pick the mid-to-late 1940s, beginning with 1946, the year Ella Fitzgerald announced she was "Going Dizzy" —as in Dizzy Gillespie. By aligning herself with bop, Ella developed her innovative art, bop scattling, especially through her one-woman vocal jam sessions.



The piece or “case study” if you will? “Lady Be Good,” in its many manifestations, from live recordings and the Decca release in 1947, right up right up through a television broadcast on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1957). These could be amplified through online documents using her own words and reviews as listed in my biography through coverage in the jazz magazines and the Black press.

**DM:** One of the things that I hear you saying is that Ella’s life and music give us access to a lot of different kinds of stories. There is the jazz versus pop debate, and the place of vocal jazz in the history of American popular music. We also talked about the history of musical entertainment in relation to larger histories of race, gender, and class in the 1920s through the 1940s. Those issues then spin out into the Cold War era and beyond. The ground under popular music shifts dramatically and it seems that Ella actually gives us a way of understanding jazz in relationship to all of these other stories, in all of their messiness.

**JT:** Well, look at the jazz standards, most of the jazz standard canon really stops after the great musicals decline. Jazz musicians in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century knew they had a repertoire to learn but they had no intention of reproducing it faithfully. It was grist for their imaginative mills. They didn’t feel this fidelity to the melody necessarily, although more often than not, it’s so prominent in their thinking about how they interpret it, how they deal with the lyrics and the underlying message with it.

Let’s look at the songbook albums that Ella did with the Norman Granz beginning in 1956: Cole Porter, Rogers and Hart and then, shockingly, Duke Ellington, who was never really known as a Broadway songwriter. That choice was totally radical. After that there was Irving Berlin (honoring his centennial), George Gershwin, and then after that, two smaller albums of Johnny Mercer and Jerome Kern. But let’s start with Cole Porter. She heard from critics that she was not smart enough to sing this material—Black singers in general were not noted for that repertoire around this canon. Mostly it was Hollywood movie stars and Broadway stars, and then the covers were made by mostly white pop singers like Frank Sinatra, Dinah Shore, and Doris Day. So along comes Ella and Decca thinks she can’t do it. She’s not good enough. She’s not smart enough. She’s not white enough, and it will destroy her brand. There’s a reason that Broadway is called the Great White Way because Black artists and performers had such a hard time breaking the color barrier. Racism was alive and well, right through the civil rights movement and beyond. But Fitzgerald confronted that and she said, “I knew once I saw the audience, I knew I could do it” and she was

totally secure in it. And she found a way to do it that muted her own persona at the same time, stayed faithful to the original intent. Not just of the words, but of the whole package of music and words. Because as important as the lyrics are to Cole Porter and to Rodgers and Hart, we have to realize she sang this music all around the world to audiences that did not speak English and they got the message.

**DM:** With that in mind, I want to turn the conversation slightly to talk about what it means to write a history about someone with such a large, global presence and who was active for so many decades. How did you go about the craft of writing, of gathering all the information, sitting with it, and then be in the process of writing.

**JT:** I think I want to discuss this notion of what it means to be in “control of the material.” I was raised as a historical musicologist to believe you should have this. I don’t know what they the previous generations of musicologists would say if they looked at a database of 10,000 references in Black newspapers in ten years or 200,000 references across several decades. We are in a revolution that is bound by, on the one hand, the notion of intellectual property and, on the other, by the notion of open source and freedom. I wrote this biography in the middle of this revolution.

Here was one regret I had: I could never find a review of Ella Fitzgerald singing “Mack the Knife” in German. I couldn’t get access and I tried, but I didn’t have time. I couldn’t get to those libraries, and I couldn’t find someone to hire. I’m not blaming myself. This is just what happened. I’m sure there are reviews in German sources of this great event which put “Mack the Knife” on the map and put “How High the Moon” as a single out. I wish someone reading this interview would get those. Find them.

So, this book came about in a period when there was no way to get control of the material. No way. So, I had to write from what I could get control of. For example, the itineraries for her life stopped in 1948. And then I had access through the generous community of collectors and scholars like [former Institute of Jazz Studies archivist and Granz biographer] Tad Hershorn who gave me his notebooks about Norman Granz, and Jim Blackman who has personal archival material, and especially to Michel Macaire, a French collector devoted to Ella who has compiled his own itineraries of Ella Fitzgerald’s performances in Europe. He knows they’re incomplete. I know mine are incomplete. We accept with humility the period that we’re in.



**DM:** So, I have two other questions that I want to ask. First, what advice would you give to the aspiring biographer?

**JT:** I would quote Clark Terry: “Keep on keeping on.” And I guess I would also say something that Doris Kearns Goodwin told me—look for the people whom others think are unimportant.

**DM:** Does this mean looking for specific stories that...

**JT:** Look for the people that attended them, that knew them not necessarily as equal. When a performer like Ella goes on stage there’s a collaborative world behind her. And talking to those people could be refreshing. Or the industry people that they dealt with. You wrote a book that just came out about the record industry. You talked to a whole range of producers, A&R people, and you thought about the album as a collaborative experience. What do you think?

**DM:** I believe that all music making happens in collaboration, both on the stage and off. Musicians are interacting with the broader industry structures and are doing so in a collaborative way. I think that that’s an essential part of any jazz history. But it’s hard because of the many levels of interpretative work you have to do. The perspectives of industry folks are incredibly valuable, but you must understand them in relation to what the artists are saying and in relation to the music being made. It takes a lot of careful attention to understand exactly where everyone is coming from and how that relates to the larger historical issues that you are interested in. And then you have to find a way to communicate all of that! It’s hard work that takes time.

**JT:** In terms of advice, I guess I would also say one other thing: For figures like Ella Fitzgerald, the life story is in the music in some essential way. It is not necessarily in the letters or in the diaries that you don’t have about Ella. Or in the way she changed her wardrobe, although that’s an important part. Who she was, has been, and will be is told through the music.

**DM:** Yes. It’s always about what the music is saying, even if it’s telling us something in relation to the industry. That brings me to my last question. What is one thing that you want people to know about Ella Fitzgerald? If they had to just know one thing, what would it be?

**JT:** I think I would want them to know that Ella told the truth in her art. She told the truth as a singer because she was gifted with perfect pitch and a voice—which we haven't even mentioned—which centered every pitch right in the middle. You just heard this totally truthful pitch. A second thing to know was that Ella believed that the melody always had to be there. So, there was a fidelity to the song structure that kept the essential elements alive, whether melody or harmony. A third thing is that she thought about the audience. She thought about the process of entertaining, a collaboration between her and the person who was experiencing her art. This was mostly live. For the audience to have that dynamic it was not in the studio but live.

**DM:** I'm glad that you brought up Ella's sound. I was really struck by all the accounts of people who would be stopped in their tracks by hearing Ella. Her voice expanded what people thought was possible in terms of the vocal instrument for jazz.

**JT:** Yes, Ella Fitzgerald had one of the most remarkable voices of the century. We took that for granted, that everybody would know that, but it possessed an extraordinary purity and clarity and charisma that are almost undefinable. It is both comforting and sensual at the same time—sensuous. Not necessary sexually available, but sensuous. The descriptions of her voice from across the critical spectrum and from jazz musicians who heard her are fascinating. You don't get tired of her easily because if there's something, well, there's something ineffable about the humanity of it that draws us in.

## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Judith Tick is a Matthews Distinguished Professor Emerita from Northeastern University in Boston. A graduate of Smith College (1964), she received her Ph.D. from City University in New York in 1979. Her co-edited anthology with Jane Bowers, *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition 1150-1950* (1987), which is still in print, is considered a foundational pioneering text for the study of gender and women's history in music. In 2013, the Society for American Music established a fellowship in her name to support work in this field. Elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences as an "innovator in the field of music biography," she published a prize-winning biography of the

composer and folk song specialist, Ruth Crawford Seeger in 1997 as well as notable articles about the classical composers Charles Ives and Aaron Copland. Her feature “Ella Fitzgerald in Soulsville” appeared on National Public Radio in 2019.

Darren Mueller is Associate Professor of Musicology at the Eastman School of Music. His recent book, *At the Vanguard of Vinyl: A Cultural History of the Long-Playing Record in Jazz* (Duke University Press, 2024), explores how the jazz industry’s adoption of new recording and playback technology influenced the working conditions and artistic possibilities of musicians in the 1950s. His research on sound, media, and jazz culture has appeared in numerous academic journals including *Jazz Perspectives*, *Journal of the Society for American Music*, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, and *Jazz & Culture*. He is also co-editor of *Digital Sound Studies* (Duke University Press, 2018), an essay collection about sound and multimodal scholarship.