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Davis, ensemble pay tribute to Ella

Trumpeter hails Fitzgerald as dynamic leader



HOWARD REICH
Jazz Scene

Music lovers probably will argue for all time over whether Ella Fitzgerald or Billie Holiday was the greatest female jazz vocalist of the 20th century.

But whichever side of that debate you take, there's no question that Fitzgerald set a still-unmatched standard for scat singing and improvisational techniques of her own making. That she conquered the swing and bebop eras, while also crossing over into mass popularity via the "Songbook" albums she recorded for Norman Granz, attests to her exalted stature in American musical culture.

And then there was the ineffably expressive character of her voice, an instrument that could be soft and supple in ballads and positively incendiary in hard-charging bebop. In short, there was no musical form that Fitzgerald could not master.

Perhaps that's why Chicago trumpeter-bandleader Orbert Davis chose to enlist four singers for the Fitzgerald tribute concert he's leading Saturday night at the Auditorium Theatre with his Chicago Jazz Philharmonic. Even with the considerable firepower of vocalists Dee Alexander, Bobbi Wilsyn, Joan Collaso and Jackie Allen, the musicians at best can hope to hint at the splendor of Fitzgerald's work rather than equal it.

"Ella was so giving," says Davis, who immersed himself in Fitzgerald's music



Trumpeter Orbert Davis will lead an orchestra and four vocalists in a multimedia concert dedicated to singing legend Ella Fitzgerald at the Auditorium Theatre on Saturday.

and life story to prepare for this concert, which he's calling "Through Ella's Eyes."

"When Ella sings, she doesn't just sing a song — she leads the song in every way, from (its) harmonic implications, the structure of the groove, the improvisation, and then her delivery of melody and rhythm."

But the achievements of Fitzgerald, who died in 1996 at age 79, were hard won. Listen to recordings of the teenage Fitzgerald, and her high-pitched, engaging but still very immature instrument gives scant hint of the triumphs that were to come.

"Don't ask me how I learned all those things," Fitzgerald told me in a 1991 interview. "I just always tried to let it come out."

Indeed, the nascent singer who scored a national hit in 1938 with Chick Webb's band in "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" later went on the road with trumpet virtuoso Dizzy Gillespie and transformed herself into the greatest bebop vocalist then or since.

"After Chick, I used to go and jam with Dizzy, and that's how I learned my bop," Fitzgerald said in



Fitzgerald

'Through Ella's Eyes'

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Auditorium Theatre, 50 E. Congress Parkway

Tickets: \$30-\$69; 800-982-2787 or auditoriumtheatre.org

1991.

"Back then, they used to have places where you could just go and jam, you know? Although they'd be sort of seedy after-hours spots, it was still the place to be.

"So I used to follow Dizzy, travel a couple places with him, and I guess I was just thrilled

with what was going on (in Gillespie's band), and I tried to do it.

"I just tried to do what I heard the horns in the band doing."

Blessed with an uncanny ear and a phenomenally malleable voice, Fitzgerald proceeded to set the standard by which future female jazz vocalists would be judged.

Yet Fitzgerald was able to transform herself yet again, in the 1950s producing definitive versions of classic American songs by George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Duke Ellington, Harold Arlen and others in her "Songbook" albums.

"I always feel that Norman saved me," Fitzgerald said in our interview, "because a lot of the jazz clubs were closing at that time (the late 1950s), so he had the idea that maybe I could sing something besides just straight jazz songs.

"And, bless him, he had the idea for me to try to do the songbooks, and I guess people were surprised to hear that I could sing something besides just pure jazz.

"I thank Norman so very much, otherwise, where would Ella be?"

Still at the pinnacle of jazz singing, one imagines.

"Ella was different — she led the musicians."

— Orbert Davis

Now it falls to Davis and his colleagues to try to capture, in a single evening, the breadth of Fitzgerald's achievements.

Certainly Davis is thinking big. The concert will feature an 11-minute documentary titled "Through Ella's Eyes" and featuring images and video of Fitzgerald, says Davis. During the course of that film, Fitzgerald will begin singing with the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic.

"It took me literally 80 hours of transcribing," says Davis, to create the orchestral accompaniment. A "click track" will keep image and orchestra in sync, assuming everything goes according to plan.

Then the evening's guest vocalists will take turns addressing particular facets of Fitzgerald's seemingly bottomless oeuvre. But the idea, Davis hastens to add, is not to try to do what Ella did, which, of course, is impossible.

"Each of the singers brings so much of themselves to this and (shows) how Ella influenced them," says Davis.

In our era of overnight vocal sensations who disappear almost as quickly, perhaps an Ella Fitzgerald tribute — timed to salute this 95th anniversary year of her birth — will show what timeless singing is all about.

"We're in an 'American Idol' culture," says Davis, "and if a vocalist has one ounce of talent and can sing in tune, we try to make her a star — until the next one comes along. Then we forget the other one.

"Ella was different — she led the musicians."

And nearly 16 years after her death, still does.

Also worth hearing

Henry Johnson: The versatile Chicago guitarist appears under the auspices of the Jazz Institute of Chicago's JazzCity program, which brings leading musicians into the parks for free concerts. This time, Henry Johnson's Organ Blast will feature saxophonist Peter Roothaan, drummer Kwame Steve Cobb and organist Lloyd Wilson. 7 p.m. Friday at Loyola Park, 1230 W. Greenleaf Ave.; free; 312-427-1676 or jazzinchicago.org

Laurence Hobgood: The superb pianist — and former Chicagoan — leads a quartet staffed by saxophonist John Wojciechowski, bassist Matthew Rybicki and drummer Jared Schonig. 9 p.m. Friday and 8 p.m. Saturday at the Green Mill Jazz Club, 4802 N. Broadway; \$12; 773-878-5552 or greenmilljazz.com

Melvin Butler: Best known for his work with Brian Blade and the Fellowship Band, saxophonist Butler also happens to be a professor at the University of Chicago. This appearance, presented by the nonprofit Hyde Park Jazz Society, offers a rare opportunity for Chicago listeners to hear him leading a quartet of his own. 7:30 to 11:30 p.m. Sunday at Room 43, 1043 E. 43d St.; valet parking available; \$10; hydeparkjazzsociety.com

To read more from Howard Reich on jazz, go to chicagotribune.com/reich.

hreich@tribune.com
Twitter @howardreich