

IN PERFORMANCE

# Ella Fitzgerald stands alone, even at short-handed birthday tribute

By **HOWARD REICH**  
 Tribune critic

Ella Fitzgerald commanded the most spectacular technique of any female jazz singer of the 20th century, which poses a problem if you're staging a concert-length tribute to her.

So few vocalists are equipped to address Fitzgerald's achievements — or build on them — that an evening-length homage can seem rather dull alongside the thrilling work Fitzgerald left behind. The problem becomes

even more pronounced when the proceedings very nearly open with video footage of the great Ella herself, the diva's still-astounding vocal pyrotechnics and gorgeously gauzy vocal tone rendering most of the live singers yet to come rather mundane by comparison.

This was part of the trouble with Saturday night's ambitious but flawed concert, "Through Ella's Eyes: A 95th Birthday Celebration," with Orbert Davis leading his immense Chicago Jazz Philharmonic at the Auditorium.

Ironically, Davis' splendid orchestra never sounded better, nor more beautifully balanced.

It captured — and expanded upon — the sometimes lush, sometimes glittering instrumental colors of the "Songbook" albums Fitzgerald famously recorded in the 1950s and '60s, no small feat.

But while each of the four vocalists Davis chose for the occasion had her strengths, and each offered a moment or two of

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NUCCIO DINUZZO/TRIBUNE PHOTO

A highlight of the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic's four-vocalist tribute Saturday was Dee Alexander's performance of the song "Butterfly."

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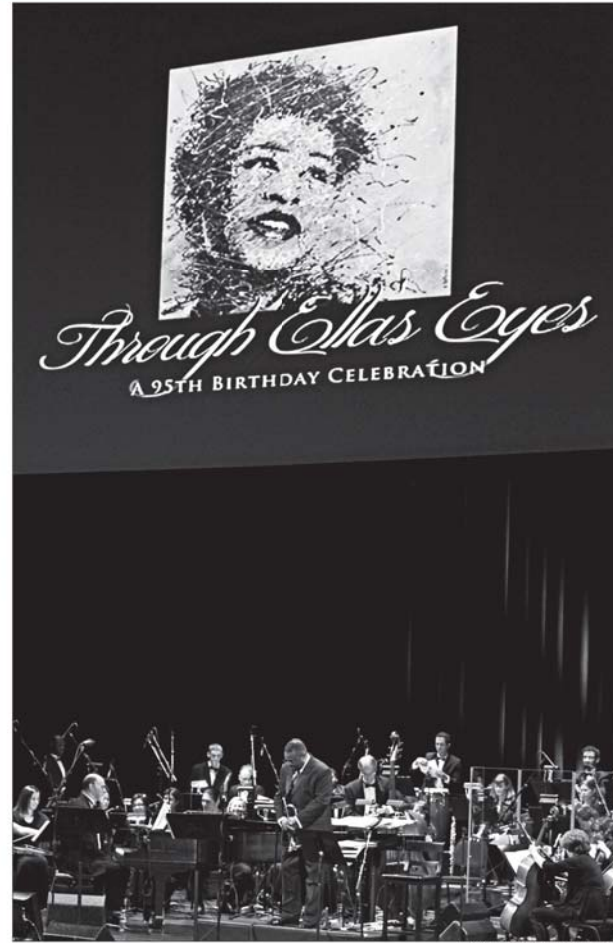
Joan Collaso performed "Blue Skies," among other songs Saturday.



Jackie Allen, left, is shown with philharmonic leader Orbert Davis.



Bobbi Wilsyn's performance included "Why Don't You Do Right."



NUCCIO DINUZZO/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Davis, center, and the Chicago Jazz Philharmonic performed a birthday tribute to Ella Fitzgerald on Saturday.

## High-minded Fitzgerald tribute falls short

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real insight, only one broke free of the general torpor of the evening. In essence, the grand orchestra, as well as Fitzgerald's legacy, far outshone the concert's singers, the event proceeding from one pleasant but underwhelming vocal performance to the next, and the next, and the next.

The only portion of the show that took flight, and therefore paid fitting homage to Fitzgerald, occurred toward the end, when Dee Alexander unleashed her "Butterfly." Here, at last, after nearly two hours of dutiful-but-bland resuscitations of Fitzgerald's repertoire, one singer broke free of convention and predictability. Snarling and hissing some phrases, bounding to her highest register before dipping fearlessly down low, inventing sounds and

vocal effects no one this planet could imitate, Alexander captured the spirit of Fitzgerald's work, but utterly on Alexander's terms.

This is exactly what made a Fitzgerald performance or recording so widely treasured: its freedom, its audacity, its technical acuity, its unflinching ability to surprise.

Alexander also brought that kind of creativity — though to a lesser degree — to her voluptuous reading of "Nice Work If You Can Get It," her poetic duet with Davis on fluegelhorn in "Embraceable You" and her airborne top-voice phrases in "Caravan."

In short, Alexander was the only singer to dominate the orchestra, just as Fitzgerald always did — rather than the other way around.

Joan Collaso produced lovely,

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soulful singing in "Blue Skies," but elsewhere she often couldn't be heard above the band. Bobbi Wilsyn brought characteristically sultry vocals to "Why Don't You Do Right," but an overly long, undermiked, poorly staged sequence for four bassists in "Slap That Bass" sucked the energy out of her set. Jackie Allen conveyed wonder and mystery in "Detour Ahead," but her mostly dreary tempos and smallish voice slowed the already flagging momentum of the evening. ("Come Fly With Me" never sounded more earthbound.)

More to the point, why would a

salute to Fitzgerald — who, above all, was revered around the globe for her incendiary, up-tempo scat singing — feature so much medium-tempo and ballad work and so little high-flying scat? This would be akin to honoring Frank Sinatra while largely avoiding aggressive swing rhythm. To what purpose?

There were other misfires, as well.

Yes, it was ingenious to include the aforementioned video footage in the mini-documentary "Through Ella's Eyes." And though it was a bit of a stunt for Davis' orchestra to accompany

Fitzgerald's vocals, it largely worked (though Fitzgerald's track needed more volume). But the video as a whole, while presenting historic black-and-white photos of Fitzgerald, told no discernible story.

Finally, an inexcusable electronic buzz persisted throughout the concert, robbing these artists of an essential and sacred commodity: silence before a piece begins and during its pauses.

Perhaps next time around, Davis and the inimitable Chicago Jazz Philharmonic, which draws a larger audience each time it performs, ought to focus on what it does best: orchestral music. Either that or engage a single vocalist who can hold her own alongside such formidable forces.

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