

## IF THIS HALL COULD TALK:

### ELLA FITZGERALD'S GLASSES

RECORDING OF "STELLA BY STARLIGHT", PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Rob Hudson:** what are the things that really tell the story of the hall? A block of wood, a pair of glasses. There's something about those things that resonates more with me than some really glamorous object.

**Jessica Vosk:** *Welcome to If This Hall Could Talk, a podcast from Carnegie Hall. I am your host, Jessica Vosk and in this series we'll look at the legendary and sometimes quirky history of the hall. From momentous occasions to the eclectic array of world-renowned artists that have taken to the Hall's stages, in each episode, we'll explore unique items from our archives collection and travel back in time to relive incredible moments that have shaped the culture we live in today.*

*In this episode, Ella Fitzgerald's glasses.*

**Gino Francesconi:** ... I used to look at Ella's glasses, and George Wein, or Norman Granz,

**Jessica Vosk:** *Ella's promoters...*

**Gino Francesconi:** would go out to the crowd before she would start and say, "Please, no flash photography. Her eyes are weak." It'd never stop them, as she would walk out, and of course, there would be flash, flash.

**Jessica Vosk:** *The legacy of Ella Fitzgerald cannot be underestimated. Widely known as the "Queen of Jazz" and "The First Lady of Song", Ella was an impeccable singer: Her diction was unparalleled, her work ethic was remarkable and she was a bandleader at a time when women did not lead bands. And she was full of firsts, first black woman to sing at the Super Bowl HalfTime show, first black woman to headline the Copacabana nightclub and, she was the first black woman to win multiple grammy awards (she won 14 over her lifetime, two of which were at the very first Grammys).*

*In this episode, we will take a look, and listen to Ella's music, and see how the ordinary can be extraordinary. In today's Instagram world, some performers feel the need to look glamorous and flawless, but Ella never did that. She never made those around her feel she was anything more special, even though she was. And her glasses are a keen metaphor of that. By just being who she was, she changed the face of jazz singing forever.*

RECORDING OF THE SONG "HOW HIGH THE MOON," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Jessica Vosk:** *Singer Samara Joy.*

**Samara Joy:** I love Ella Fitzgerald because she is—she seems—she's like a constant—like a well of ideas and of musicality and of creativity. Anytime that I listen to her, I'm like, I never could have imagined hearing this song this way, and yet, every single time, every single time I'm like, "Whoa." And even when she scats; when she scats, too, there's just such a power, there's such a punch. And so maybe that's what I love, too; I love the range, the fact that she can take the sweetest ballad and she can really put the emotion into it, but at the same time you give her [snaps] any tempo, any tempo, and she can hang with any musician, even cut some musicians when she scats, and when she sings. So I think that's what I love the most. I love her feel, her beat when she sings, and I love that I can constantly go to her and go to her recordings, especially like the live recordings, for inspiration, I always think of a new way to do something whenever I listen to her.

RECORDING OF THE SONG "SINGLE-O," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

Gino: It was always amazing to me to see how almost shy she was, how quiet she was, and she would get up on the stairs, and then whoever it was, whether it was John, or Norman, or George Wein, would say, "And now, the First Lady of Song," and she'd go out and knock them dead. It was just overwhelming to watch that.

RECORDING OF THE SONG "GIVE ME THE SIMPLE LIFE," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Jessica Vosk:** *She was a keen improviser, a mother and, possibly above all, a performer. Between 1947 and 1991,*

**Rob Hudson:** Ella performed 45 times at Carnegie Hall...

**Jessica Vosk:** *...and throughout her career, she always remained Ella. Ella Fitzgerald was a woman of no airs and an extraordinary singer. As her estate manager Fran Rosman says,*

RECORDING OF THE SONG "A-TISKET, A-TASKET," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Fran Rosman:** Ella...A magnificent woman with the best voice you ever heard. [laughs]

**Jessica Vosk:** *In this episode of If This Hall Could Talk, we take Ella's iconic glasses as a jumping off point to better understand the woman she was. But, what do the glasses look like? Let me tell you: They are plastic frame glasses with large circular lenses and they were thick! Boy were they thick, like she was looking through magnifying glasses. These were not sleek and fancy glasses, they were ordinary and normal looking, just like Ella herself, until that is, she stepped on the stage.*

*Ella has been a role model for generations of female jazz vocalists who wouldn't be where they are without her. Take, for instance, the singer Samara Joy.*

**Samara Joy:** "Listen, Ella is a bad lady, whether she, you know, knew it or not." [laughs] And she probably did know it. But Ella's a bad lady. And—bad in the sense that she's absolutely incredible. [laughs] Who is Ella? Ella Fitzgerald is—the consummate singer. She has it all.

**Jessica Vosk:** *Samara comes from a musical family and grew up listening to gospel music and later jazz. The greats like Sarah Vaughan and Billie Holiday always caught her ear. But with Ella, there was something else. Samara could see parts of herself in her. Ella was down to earth and humble enough for us all to feel connected to her. And that's one of the things that made Ella, Ella. One of her most well known songs, A-Tisket A-Tasket, is from a nursery rhyme!*

**Samara Joy:** She just loved to sing. So I guess that, I—that's part of what I see, is you know, being kind of shy and soft spoken, but on stage, I like—I love it.

Gino: Gosh, there were those moments, where you're standing by the stage door, taking the house lights down, and the energy starts to begin inside the house with the audience in anticipation.

**Jessica Vosk:** *Gino Francesconi founded the archives at Carnegie Hall and spent nearly two decades working backstage.*

**Gino Francesconi:** It didn't happen all the time, but you could actually feel that this was going to be a magical moment even before any music started. And with her, there was always that sensation, "Tonight's going to be special." And it was remarkable. I had the advantage of sitting on those backstage stairs many times for a number of events, and I used to reflect, thinking, "I'm sitting not 15 feet away from this artist."

RECORDING OF THE SONG "HOW HIGH THE MOON," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Samara Joy:** Somebody told me, you know, in her later years, she went on stage and she performed and she just—I mean, she absolutely killed "How High The Moon" and then she came off and was like, "Was that all right?" And it was like, how—how is this legendary, you know, singer asking—asking other musicians, "Was that okay?" You know?

**Rob Hudson:** But you think about that, especially for somebody who was so shy and would say things like, "I don't want to talk, I might say something wrong. I'm better when I sing it,"

**Samara Joy:** I like when she sings "Give Me The Simple Life." Yeah. That's what I like.

RECORDING OF THE SONG "GIVE ME THE SIMPLE LIFE," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Samara Joy:** [singing] I don't believe in frettin' or grievin', why mess around with strife?" [end singing] Uhh—[begin singing] I never was cut out to step and strut out; give me the simple life [end singing] There. Something like that. [laughs].

RECORDING OF THE SONG "I'M GLAD THERE IS YOU," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Jessica Vosk:** *So who was Ella? What were the experiences that shaped her? Her early years were actually quite happy but once she hit her teens, it became tumultuous. "She didn't have it easy." Carnegie Hall Archivist Rob Hudson.*

**Rob Hudson:** Her mom was killed in a car accident when she was, I think, 15. And there were questions that maybe the stepfather abused her. And then, she's at that tough age, she ends up in a reform school. She's, like, working for—I don't know what she was doing. Running stuff for the numbers racket, yeah.

**Jessica Vosk:** *Once an excellent student, Ella found herself not pursuing an education, having escaped a highly abusive reform school in upstate New York, and living hand to mouth, at best.*

**Fran Rosman:** It was a very tough time. She didn't care to talk about it. But then her friends kind of dared her to sign up for Apollo's Amateur Night.

RECORDING OF THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF "LIVE FROM THE APOLLO THEATER."

**Jessica Vosk:** *Still popular to this day, Amateur Night at the Apollo is no small thing but Ella wasn't thinking much of it. She was there to have fun. She was 17 at the time, homeless and living in Harlem. The plan was to dance but after being intimidated by some dancers, she wasn't going to perform. What's remarkable is that if she hadn't been dared to sing that night, her life could have taken a very different turn.*

**Fran Rosman:** So according to lore, the stage manager said, "You've got to get out there. Is there anything else you can do?" And Ella replied, "Well, I can sing a little." [laughs] He shoved her out there, she sang a Connee Boswell song, and brought down the house. [laughs]

RECORDING OF THE SONG "BASIN STREET BLUES," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Jessica Vosk:** *The contest launched her career. A few months later, she was singing with Chick Webb's band and people couldn't get enough of her. She started recording albums and touring around the country. But that did not mean her troubles were over.*

**Rob Hudson:** She had it tough and some rough experiences, and certainly on the road.

I try and imagine is doing all that as an African-American musician in the South. I was just reading a story, too, about when they were invited to a performance in Australia. They had first-class tickets for the plane in Hawaii, they were on the plane, and for whatever reason, they made them get off the plane. They could not fly to Australia. They were, like, three days late, and it created all these problems in Australia. Of course, the airline claimed it wasn't racially motivated, but apparently, later, they got a big settlement for it. For all of that, and then for her to still be just this sweet person who just—like I say, it's just pure joy when you listen to her sing. There's no other way to describe it. It's what it is.

**Gino Francesconi:** Her press agent, Phoebe Jacobs, who I knew for a number of years, told me a story. When they were in the South, and they checked into a hotel, and they realized Phoebe Jacobs and Ella Fitzgerald are going to share a room, white and Black. And this was a no-no. And Phoebe Jacobs said at one point we realized, "We have to get out of the room," and they jumped out the window. Can you imagine?

RECORDING OF THE SONG "ROCK IT FOR ME," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Jessica Vosk:** *You're listening to If This Hall Could Talk. I'm Jessica Vosk. We'll return to the show in just a moment. Stay with us.*

**Jessica Vosk:** *Welcome back. We're talking about the first lady of song, Ella Fitzgerald - and what her coke bottle eyeglasses can tell us about her life as a musician, and a person.*

**Jessica Vosk:** *It was clear that Ella's sound was so special and her rise was stratospheric. By the age of 30, she was on the Carnegie Hall stage.*

RECORDING OF THE SONG "FLYIN' HOME," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Jessica Vosk:** *Considering her humble youth, that she was performing at Carnegie Hall, the most famous concert hall on the planet, was a miracle in itself. She made her debut there on September 29, 1947, alongside Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker.*

**Gino Francesconi:** We had a policy at Carnegie Hall for classical artists, anybody who wanted to come back after the concert could do so without being on a list. First, you'd let back the family, the managers, then VIPs, and then let back the crowd. Sometimes those backstage events took as long as the concert time took. But for rock concerts, jazz, and pop shows, it was always VIP lists.

And so, one night, I made a mistake, and I don't know why I made the mistake, but I said to her, "Would you like the crowd to come back after the concert?" And she said, "Oh, yes, you better let them back. Some day, they may not want to come." And I

thought, "What?" [Laugh] But to me, that summed her up in a really humble way, and then to go out and knock them dead...

RECORDING OF THE SONG "BLUES IN THE NIGHT," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Fran Rosman:** I mean, she had a really rough growing-up time, so she was not secure, even though she was selling out Carnegie Hall, and selling out the Hollywood Bowl, and selling out the biggest rooms in Las Vegas. She—she came alive when she sang. [laughs] If she's not singing, she's kind of stiff and uncomfortable. So, the concert stage was where she loved to be.

**Kathleen Sabogal:** She said she was never nervous going on stage,

**Jessica Vosk:** *this is Kathleen Sabogal, director of Carnegie Hall's Rose Archives and Museum*

**Kathleen Sabogal:** ...but off stage, that's when she would be a little more nervous around people or anything. But on stage, totally fine.

**Rob Hudson:** And she always just exudes so much joy, just this pure joy, in her singing. It's amazing. Having started in the swing era, in the 30s, she was singing swing, she was with Chick Webb's band, led that band when Chick Webb died, she was barely out of her teens. Then, starts hanging out with Dizzy Gillespie and the bebop musicians, and then totally learns that sound. Of course, that kind of came to define her with her scat singing.

RECORDING OF THE SONG "TAKE THE A TRAIN," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Jessica Vosk:** *Samara Joy's 2021 album covers some of the most enduring Jazz standards of the last decades including some of Ella's signature songs. Samara is a reflection of how Ella's music will always influence the new generation.*

**Samara Joy:** ...I was just listening to her—there's this album called *The Greatest Jazz Concert in the World*, and it was recorded in the sixties but released in I believe 1975, and she sings this standard called "Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea."

RECORDING OF THE SONG "THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP BLUE SEA" PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Samara Joy:** And she starts scatting. And I was actually in the car, with this pianist, on the way back from a gig, and I showed him this song, and it was like, wow, it's perfect. Like it doesn't sound like there's any question of what note she's singing. And that can be hard, you know, being a—a scat singer. This is your instrument. I think those are the couple of musical things that I've noticed listening to her. It's like her tone, it's bright but it's still warm.

RECORDING OF THE SONG "ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Jessica Vosk:** *And that's one of the things that makes Ella so special. She was consistently and fundamentally elegant and reserved, not needing to be the center of attention and staying true to her moniker, Lady Ella.*

**Fran Rosman:** Ella was not a diva. People don't understand. When it was time to be at rehearsal, she was there, on time, and ready to go. She was never late. She didn't make big flashy entrances. She was a very, very hardworking woman.

**Gino Francesconi:** It's funny, I was just thinking also—I haven't thought about this for years—the artists that I've worked with backstage, more often than not, would give you a tip at the end of the night, whether it was there in the dressing room or when you were taking them down the stairs and putting them in the car.

And sometimes they'd make a show of it. It just dawned on me now that Ella, when I would shake her hand and say goodnight, she would do this, and inside was a bill that was wrapped up so tiny that it was—I almost dropped it the first time because I wasn't sure what was going on. But she wanted that to be between she and I. It was just a really subtle, subtle gesture. I just never forgot that either. I just remembered now. That tells you something about her as well.

**Jessica Vosk:** *And yet we can't underestimate just how influential and well established Ella was.*

RECORDING OF THE SONG "IN THE WEE SMALL HOURS," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Fran Rosman:** One day, I opened the drawer in her bedroom dresser, and there was a big brown envelope. I opened it up and I started to scream—I mean, really loudly—because it was an original Picasso pen-and-ink drawing of Ella. [laughs] I held in my hands—a Picasso. Yeah. Ella's manager Norman Granz, who was a nice kid from L.A., was very good friends with Picasso, so when Ella was performing in the South of France, Ella met him, and he drew this little sketch. [laughs] Then Norman went on to use it for a lot of posters and publicity materials. So that was 1996, going through Ella's house, room by room, shelf by shelf, cabinet by cabinet, and seeing what was there. It was a really good job. [laughs]

**Jessica Vosk:** *When Ella was performing, she became mainstream, bringing jazz singing to the masses. Some of you listeners may remember the original Memorex commercials.*

**Rob Hudson:** I had forgotten about this, but those of us who are old enough to remember recall the Memorex commercials from the 70s.

RECORDING OF A 1972 MEMOREX TAPE COMMERCIAL

Rob: "Is it live, or is it Memorex?" they came to Ella as the spokesperson because what they would do is, there was this story about an opera singer who could shatter a wine glass. And they said, "We're going to start with that," apparently, but they thought, "That's a little too highbrow. Let's get somebody who's recognized by more people," so they got Ella.

**Jessica Vosk:** *There are so many stories that shine some light on her true character. The fact that she kept a Picasso in a desk drawer is one. And then there is the story of her glasses.*

RECORDING OF THE SONG "GET OUT OF TOWN," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Rob Hudson:** I don't mean this to sound disrespectful, but when you talk about Coke bottle-bottom glasses—the lenses are extremely thick, and you look through them, it's almost like holding up a magnifying glass.

**Fran Rosman:** She had, as you can imagine, a lot of pairs of eyeglasses. 0:08:04

**Kathleen Sabogal:** She always had those glasses, and it's always the same style glasses. It's, like, it became a signature look in the 70s and later. . I just think it's so tied to who she is. They're very simple, and it just reflects probably who she was. Not fancy, but very special.

**Rob Hudson:** It's these objects, these relatively simple things, that always manage to bring the history of Carnegie Hall alive in a way that other things do not. There's that kind of everyday ordinariness about it. It kind of makes it feel like, "Wow, this is Ella Fitzgerald, yet it's just this very simple object." It humanizes her, brings her down to earth I guess in a way that people can approach.

**Gino Francesconi:** For me, it represents her humanity, and her frailty, and the fact that she conquered that to be who she was....

RECORDING OF THE SONG "MIDNIGHT SUN," PERFORMED BY ELLA FITZGERALD.

**Fran Rosman:** When she first had to start wearing glasses, she was so upset. She thought it wouldn't go with her image and people wouldn't like the way she looked, and she wouldn't be popular. And she needed great, big, thick glasses. So often, she didn't want to wear them... and then they became like one of her signatures. The Annie Leibovitz photo with the cat's eye glasses, her big thick Coke bottle glasses. She had lost a lot of weight by then. Diabetes was tough. So that became her new look—thin Ella with big glasses. [laughs] There had to be 25 pair of glasses in her house.

**Rob Hudson:**...it's all these objects like that, very everyday things, that can become iconic.

**Kathleen Sabogal:** Objects just make you think about the person, so when you have it on display with the record album, and you see her wearing the glasses, it just comes alive in a special way that it can't be by just looking at a photo.

**Samara Joy:** I know as long as I'm alive, I'll always be indebted to artists like her, you know, for helping me to find my own voice, through her—through her confidence and through her creativity and her—the amazing sound, the sound of her voice. [laughs] Yeah, her—her name will never die. It's like when you—when—I mean, when you think of jazz and when you see—even when you see a picture of her, it's like, okay, yeah, that's the—that's the real deal right there. You can't forget about her.

**Jessica Vosk:** *Many thanks to Clive Gillinson and the dedicated staff of Carnegie hall, as well as guests Samara Joy and Fran Rossman. You've been listening to, if This Hall Could Talk, a podcast from Carnegie Hall where we take you on a journey through some of the most iconic pieces in our archives, the objects that set the foundation for what the hall is today.*

*For images of the artifacts and more information on Carnegie Hall's Rose Archives, please visit [carnegiehall.org/history](http://carnegiehall.org/history). If this Hall Could Talk is produced by Sound Made Public with Tanya Catanian. Philip Wood, Emma Vecchione, Sarah Conlisk, Alessandro Santoro, and Jeremiah Moore. Lead funding for the digital collections of the Carnegie Hall Susan W. Rose Archives has been generously provided by Carnegie Corporation of New York, Susan and Elihu Rose Foundation, and Mellon Foundation, with additional support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, The National Film Preservation Foundation and the Metropolitan New York Library Council. Our show is distributed by WQXR.*

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And if you happen to come across some special artifact from the history of Carnegie Hall, let us know. You can reach us at [ifthishallcouldtalk@carnegiehall.org](mailto:ifthishallcouldtalk@carnegiehall.org). We are always on the lookout. Thanks for listening, I'm Jessica Vosk.

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