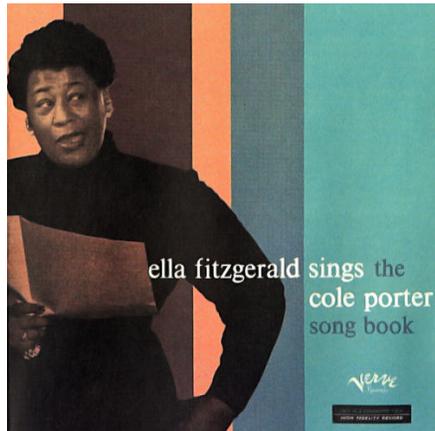


“Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole Porter Song Book”— Ella Fitzgerald (1956)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album



Original label



Cole Porter

Ella Fitzgerald was born in 1917 in Newport News, Virginia. By the time she died, at age 79, in 1996, she was universally acclaimed and uniformly acknowledged as America’s First Lady of Song. From her first recordings in 1935, Fitzgerald (who always acknowledged Connee Boswell of the Boswell Sisters as her greatest musical influence) showed the qualities that would make her number one in many people’s eyes. Her voice was clear as a bell with stunning control and diction and a flexibility and naturalness that, in years to come, would allow her to successfully take on just about any genre of music. During her career, she sang jazz, blues, show tunes, pop standards, even scat songs.

Typical of the time, Fitzgerald began her career with big bands. After being discovered by singer Charles Linton, she joined the Chick Webb Orchestra and was their “girl singer” beginning in 1935. Her first major hit was done with Chick; it was the semi-novelty tune “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” that she recorded in 1938. After Webb’s death in 1939, Fitzgerald led his band until she departed for a solo career in 1942.

By the time she came to record her “Cole Porter Songbook” in 1956 (the beginning of her very successful “Song Book” series), Fitzgerald was already being recognized as one of the foremost interpreters of modern composers. Few expected though that, with this collection, she was only just now starting the most important and prolific period of her career.

As with Fitzgerald, by 1956, Cole Porter was already recognized as one of America’s foremost songwriters. He broke through in 1919 with the song “Old-Fashioned Garden” for the Broadway revue “Hitchy-Koo.” Since then he had authored such classics as “You’re the Top,” “Let’s Do It,” “You Do Something to Me,” “Love for Sale,” “Night and Day,” “I Get a Kick Out of You” and dozens of other popular tunes.

Though Porter’s melodies were insanely hum-able, it was his lyrics, often tricky and playful, that made him a singer’s delight. In retrospect, it is not surprising that Fitzgerald would choose him as the first subject of her salutary “Song Book.”

Fitzgerald’s first “Song Book” would also be the first recording she made for the freshly-formed Verve Records. Previously, the singer had enjoyed a long, fruitful relationship with Decca. It was for that label, for the previous two decades, that Fitzgerald recorded some of her most famous material including “All I Need is You,” “Flying Home,” and “Oh, Lady Be Good.”

Verve was created by Norman Granz, a jazz impresario and, by this time, he was also serving as Fitzgerald's manager. It was supposedly Granz who first suggested that Fitzgerald expand her repertoire by taking on the music of signature composers.

For her salute to Cole Porter, Verve and Ella would put out a two disc recording containing 32 songs. They ranged from Porter's "It's De-Lovely" to "Too Darn Hot" to "I Get a Kick Out of You," "Begin the Beguine," "Anything Goes," "You're the Top," "Let's Do It," "I Love Paris," "Night and Day," "In the Still of the Night," "Don't Fence Me In" and "Miss Otis Regrets."

For the recordings, Fitzgerald's backing orchestra was conducted by Buddy Bregman. Then working as the head of A&R for Verve, Bregman had previously conducted for such talents as Dinah Shore, Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra. He would follow Fitzgerald to her next "Song Book" project, this one taking on the work of Rodgers and Hart. It was also released in 1956.

In the liner notes to the "Porter" album package, author Don Freeman says that the meeting of Fitzgerald and Porter on vinyl was a divine destiny:

In the "Cole Porter Song Book" the songs and their moods are many and varied, but Miss Fitzgerald changes with each. Where the moments of pure lyric beauty are sought—such as in "What Is This Thing Called Love?"—Ella is there with lyric beauty that is markedly compelling. There's the lowdown gustiness of "Too Darn Hot" and the airy exuberance of "You're the Top"; the sardonic, mordant lampoon that is "Miss Otis Regrets" and the saucy impudence of "Let's Do It" and there's "Love for Sale" with a hard-shelled yet misty poignance. Miss Fitzgerald, in short, tackles each song as it comes along, using the shiny-surfaced limber voice on the one and then the sweet-husky one for the second—and at all times giving full import to the words of Cole Porter.

What began for Fitzgerald with Porter in '56 would continue on, interspersed with other recordings, for almost a decade. Later, there would be Fitzgerald's treatment of the "Song Books" of Duke Ellington in 1956; the aforementioned Rodgers & Hart in 1956; Irving Berlin in 1958; Gershwin in 1959; Harold Arlen in 1960; Jerome Kern in 1963; and Johnny Mercer in 1964. Cumulatively, they would represent Fitzgerald's creative peak. They proved to be popular with critics and listeners alike—and even with their songwriting subject. Ira Gershwin once famously said, "I never knew how good our songs were until I heard Ella Fitzgerald sing them."

But something else was also afoot in these records, at this time. As Frank Rich noted in the "New York Times" upon Fitzgerald's passing in 1996, "Here was a black woman popularizing urban songs often written by immigrant Jews to a national audience of predominantly white Christians."

Along with the cultural transcendence and transference taking place, the "Song Book" series was also the epitome of alchemy: a top-of-the-line singer making the most of some top-of-the-line material. Even today, after umpteenth renditions of these songs by almost every singer imaginable, many of Fitzgerald's versions remain the definitive recordings of them.

Over the years, specialty composer-focused records have enticed other artists. Some are sublime ("Judy Collins Sings Leonard Cohen: Democracy" from 2004), some are strange ("The Hank Williams Song Book" by Connie Stevens from 1962). Following in Fitzgerald's footsteps, the oeuvre of Cole Porter has often been a popular choice. Frank Sinatra took on an entire album of Porter songs in 1965 the same year that the sultry Julie London released "All Through the Night: Julie London Sings the Choicest Cole Porter." In 1982, Rosemary Clooney released her tribute to the debonair songsmith with her "Rosemary Clooney Sings the Music of Cole Porter."

In regard to Ella Fitzgerald and the legacy of the “Song Book” album, if she isn’t the only artist to have ever done them, she can at least take pride in the fact that she did them better than just about anyone else.

Cary O’Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books “June Cleaver Was a Feminist!” (2014) and “Women Pioneers in Television” (1997). He also served as assistant editor of “The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2009) and “The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio” (2010).