

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

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by Geoffrey Mark (guest post)\*



*Miss Ella Regrets*

How can one recording project completely change the career and the life of a woman who had already been a star for more than 20 years? An African American woman, who had best-selling hits, a twenty-year track record with only one record label (Decca) and was already considered the greatest female jazz singer who ever lived--how can this be? The question is proper and necessary to music history. The answer is multi-layered and fascinating.

Ella Jane Fitzgerald beat odds that might have killed most people of any background. She survived racism, poverty, sexual abuse, torture, weight problems and a lack of appropriate schooling to become, before she was 20, one of the premier singers of the Big Band Era with the Chick Webb Band. As musical tastes changed, Ella developed with them, becoming a hit recording artist, concert and nightclub performer, and a jazz pioneer and visionary. By 1955, she was world-renowned and beloved.

But, she was not creatively satisfied. Decca Records (at that time) resisted her attempts to record in the studio what she was singing in the clubs. They saw her as a novelty; her best-selling recordings were songs like “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” and “Stone Cold Dead in De Market” or her scat wonders like “Lady Be Good” and “How High the Moon.” Her music had become dichotomous--that which Decca allowed her to record and all that she was doing in clubs to continuously grow and experiment as a jazz singer. Even her management was two-fold, as both Milt Gabler and Norman Granz were booking her in live venues, sometimes at cross-purposes.

It would be easy to give all credit for what happens next to Ella, or to Norman, or to arranger Buddy Bregman, or to brilliant jazz pianist Paul Smith. But as is usually the case in questions of a quantum leap in an artist’s career, there is no one person or situation responsible but a beautiful

confluence of persons and situations. Ella fought for better material, arrangers and musicians with Decca's management. Occasionally, she got them. More often, she did not. Ella did not see herself as a novelty; she saw herself as a singer and wanted to sing the very best songs available. She regretted the musical straight-jacket into which she was placed. Norman Granz wanted to be her full-time manager and also the producer of her studio recordings. He had already begun to record her live in concert, but Decca had exclusivity.

But the universe was moving around Ella, putting everything into necessary place. Decca was purchased by MCA, which also purchased Universal Studios. They were producing a mostly fictional biopic of the life of legendary clarinetist Benny Goodman, starring Steve Allen. Many of Goodman's side men were still alive and available, and Universal wanted them for the film and for the subsequent soundtrack album on Decca. Trouble was, they were all under exclusive contract to Norman Granz. Seizing control, Granz brokered the deal that delivered this catalogue of talent in exchange for the complete release of Ella Fitzgerald. Steve Allen was a friend of mine, but Decca was very stupid. The film was terrible, the album didn't sell and Decca lost out completely. Ella was not the only singer to defect. Bing Crosby, Mary Martin, The Andrews Sisters, Ethel Merman, Dinah Shore and others had already left (or were about to leave) for greener, more mature pastures. And better quality electronically, as Decca resisted the long-playing record, high fidelity, more sensitive microphones, audio tapes and stereo.

What Ella wanted was all of what Decca would not offer: more creative control, fuller orchestras, better arrangers, first-rate recording equipment and the ability to record what she herself would label "The Great American Songbook." Norman Granz started a new company just for her: Verve Records. Ella always insisted that the idea for doing a two-LP set of recordings saluting just one great composer and utilizing just one arranger to give the project a specific sound was Granz' idea. Actually, she had already done a much-smaller version with a salute to the songs of George Gershwin with just Ellis Larkin at the piano for Decca. This time, though, no expense was spared. And the composer would be Cole Porter.

Why Porter? Granz wanted the first adventure to be someone who was both composer and lyricist. That left out practically everyone except Porter and Irving Berlin. Porter's music was a favorite of both Ella's and Norman's. His melodies were already darlings of jazz musicians. More importantly, his sophisticated lyrics were more mature than anything Ella has been allowed to previously record.

Enter Buddy Bregman. Buddy, the nephew of composer Jule Styne, had just previous to the start of this project, arranged the music for two television versions of Porter musicals starring Ethel Merman ("Anything Goes" and "Panama Hattie"). Although it was later revealed that Styne had really done the arrangements for Merman, he was thought to be a young expert on the music. While Buddy was never really lauded as a first-rate arranger, what he lacked in innovation he provided in sophistication. It was he who taught Ella the meanings and references of the lyrics that were beyond her level of experience, making certain that Porter's intentions always came across in her singing. That some of the best moments were due to the genius piano stylings of Paul Smith (who would become Fitzgerald's musical director on and off for more than 25 years) does not diminish the project as a whole.

The immediate impact of “Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole Porter Songbook” cannot be overstated, either to her career or to the recording industry. All of a sudden, critics and the public saw Ella in a new and rarefied light. It was this set of recordings in 1956 (as well as the legendary live recording “Ella in Berlin” in 1960) that took Ella to musical superstardom, ensuring her as an icon in American and jazz musical history. No one before had recorded the work of one composer in such depth, covering decades of Porter’s work and various styles. Naturally, there was not room for everything he did, so favorites like “My Heart Belongs to Daddy” and “Blow, Gabriel, Blow” could not be included. But what was there was striking, chosen and sequenced by Norman Granz with some influence by Buddy Bregman. The album re-invigorated interest in Cole Porter and extended his career. Many people first heard his music as sung by Ella Fitzgerald. By having it all in one place, students of music and fans could see just how versatile Porter was as a composer and as a lyricist. And now just how versatile Ella Fitzgerald was a singer.

No longer pigeon-holed as “only” a jazz singer, people began to realize that Ella could successfully sing almost anything of quality, given the proper arrangements and musicians in support. Recording engineer Val Valentin gave Ella’s voice a warmth, an intimacy and a clarity not found on her Decca recordings. Norman very successfully marketed the album(s), both as individual records and as a two-record set. It was an enormous seller for an LP, at a time when people were mostly buying 45-rpm singles. It woke up the recording industry to the idea of the “theme” album: songs recorded all at the same time, arranged by the same person, and fitting some sort of theme that tied all of the songs together. The other legend who understood this concept was Frank Sinatra. Ella and Frank each inspired the other to do better and more mature concept albums, and the music world is better off for their efforts.

One could go through the songs recorded and give a critique, but that is unnecessary. Not only are the songs originally released on LP readily available on CD and via streaming platforms today, but many songs that Ella re-recorded with just a small group led by Paul Smith have been released by Verve at my suggestion. It is my opinion that the small-group sessions are better than Bregman’s big-band arrangements. Ella felt the same, and when she sang Cole Porter in her concerts, the arrangements were generally by Nelson Riddle or Marty Paich. But Bregman deserves a lot of credit for helping Ella to develop herself as a first-rate interpreter of lyrics and not just a jazz singer who used them as a platform to be-bop.

Ella Fitzgerald and Cole Porter did each other a huge favor. His repertoire provided the springboard that made Ella a legend, and her recordings not only raised the interest in Porter to new heights, but literally saved some of his songs from complete obliteration had she not recorded them, and recorded them so well. “Miss Fitz” would go on to do other “Songbook” salutes to Rodgers and Hart, Duke Ellington, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Jerome Kern, Johnny Mercer and Antonio Carlos Jobim, as well as second visits to both the Cole Porter and Ellington/Strayhorn catalogues.

I have used a lot of words here that might seem like hyperbole: legend, icon, superstar, rarefied and genius. They might be hyperbole, would I be using them in any other context. When describing Ella Fitzgerald, the words are true and the meanings clear. If there had been previously any doubt, “Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole Porter Songbook” proved that Ella was all

those words and more. Her special magic has informed every single singer who has come along since, in every possible style of music. The album set, and the woman, are singular. Do yourself a favor large and listen to all of it at your first opportunity.

*Geoffrey Mark's books are the bestselling "The Lucy Book" and "Ethel Merman: The Biggest Star on Broadway," as well as "The Family Affair Cookbook." His newest book is "Ella: A Biography of Legendary Ella Fitzgerald." Upcoming books include his memoir, "The Devil Was Born in Brooklyn," as well as "The New Lucy Book." Mark is also the producer of "Nigel: Come Back to Me," a CD with a 17-piece big band, and he directed "Spirit of the King," an Elvis show at the Spa Casino in Palm Springs.*

\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.