

Ella Fitzgerald Biography Mini-Unit



A Mini-Unit Study by [Look! We're Learning!](#)

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Ella Fitzgerald Biography

Ella Fitzgerald was an American jazz singer who became famous during the 1930s and 1940s. She was born on April 25, 1917, in Newport News, Virginia to William and Temperance Fitzgerald. Shortly after Ella turned three, her mother and father separated and the family moved to Yonkers, New York. When Ella was six, her mother had another little girl named Frances.

As a child, Ella loved to sing and, like many jazz and soul musicians, she gained most of her early musical experience at church. When Ella got older, she developed a love for dancing and frequented many of the famous Harlem jazz clubs of the 1920s, including the Savoy Ballroom and the Cotton Club.

Ella's life was changed forever at the age of 15 when her mother died. A couple of years after her mother's death, Ella was sent to the New York State Training School for Girls, a reform school where she endured serious abuse at the hands of staff members. Eventually, Ella ran away from the home. Since she had no place to live, she often slept on the street or stayed with friends when she could.

Things began to turn around for Ella when she auditioned during "Amateur Night" at the landmark Apollo Theatre in 1934. She originally wanted to dance

for her performance, but when she discovered that her competition was a locally famous dancing duo, she decided to sing instead. Even though Ella had to perform wearing old men's clothes and boots, she won!

Later, Ella performed at another amateur night contest at the Harlem Opera House and won again. After



the contest, the opera house booked her for a week of performances. However, Ella didn't receive any pay for her work that week, because the bandleader didn't feel she was dressed appropriately for the job. In fact, Ella had a hard time landing any work because she still didn't have a place to live.

In March 1935, famous bandleader Chick Webb was searching for a new female vocalist to accompany his band. The band's male vocalist, Charles Linton, got Ella's name from one of the chorus girls. When Ella auditioned, she got the job on the spot! A few months later, Ella recorded her first hits with the band, including the songs "Love and Kisses" and "Are You Here to Stay?"



Eventually, Ella became the star of Chick Webb's orchestra and she recorded several hits as the band toured across the U.S. When Webb died in 1939, the name of the act was changed to Ella Fitzgerald and Her Famous Orchestra. The next year, Ella joined the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP). At the age of 23, she was one of

the youngest members ever.

During the 1940s, Ella continued making hit songs for record companies such as Decca Records. In addition, she began performing on the radio regularly. In 1941, Ella married Benjamin Kornegay, but the couple divorced shortly thereafter.

Soon, Hollywood took notice of Ella's talent and she began recording songs for motion pictures, including the Abbott and Costello movie "Ride 'Em Cowboy". Her first love, though, was performing, and she continued recording tracks and touring extensively. It was during one of her recording sessions for the song

“Flying Home” that she popularized a jazz singing technique – scat.

In 1947, Ella connected with fellow jazz performer Dizzy Gillespie, and the two became good friends, even going on tour together that year. However, Ella’s popularity on records did not translate to major network radio shows. Because Ella was African-American, some of the network executives did not think that she looked good enough to do the

promotional pictures for a show.



In 1948, Ella married fellow musician Ray Brown, who played the bass. Later that year, she traveled abroad to the United Kingdom, performing in Glasgow, Scotland and London, England. The trip served as Ella and Ray’s honeymoon. The couple

also adopted Ella’s nephew, naming him Ray, Junior, but the marriage did not last, and they divorced in 1953.

Ella's talent did not shield her from a crippling fear of performing. Fellow musicians often saw Ella suffer from nervous tics and anxiety before her shows. This anxiety carried over into Ella's personal life, and she remained quiet and withdrawn in public.

In 1957, Ella moved from New York to Los Angeles, where she became the first African-American artist to headline a show at the Copacabana. She also became close to jazz great Duke Ellington, and performed with him repeatedly over the next few years. Ella also appeared on television in 1959, performing as a special guest on the program "Swing into Spring", featuring bandleader Benny Goodman.

As her career continued into the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, Ella recorded with several other famous artists, including Frank Sinatra, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, and Nat King Cole. By the time Ella Fitzgerald died in 1996, she had sold over 40 million records and won 13 Grammy Awards. She was also honored by two presidents, receiving the National Medal of Arts and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.



Questions for Review:

1. In what city was Ella Fitzgerald born?

2. How did Ella's family change when she was six years old?

3. What two Harlem clubs did Ella frequent as a teenager?

4. Why did Ella run away from the reform school?

5. What happened when Ella performed at Amateur Night at the Apollo Theatre?

6. How did Ella get the job with Chick Webb's band?

7. What happened to Ella's job with the band after Chick Webb died?

8. For what Hollywood film did Ella record a song?

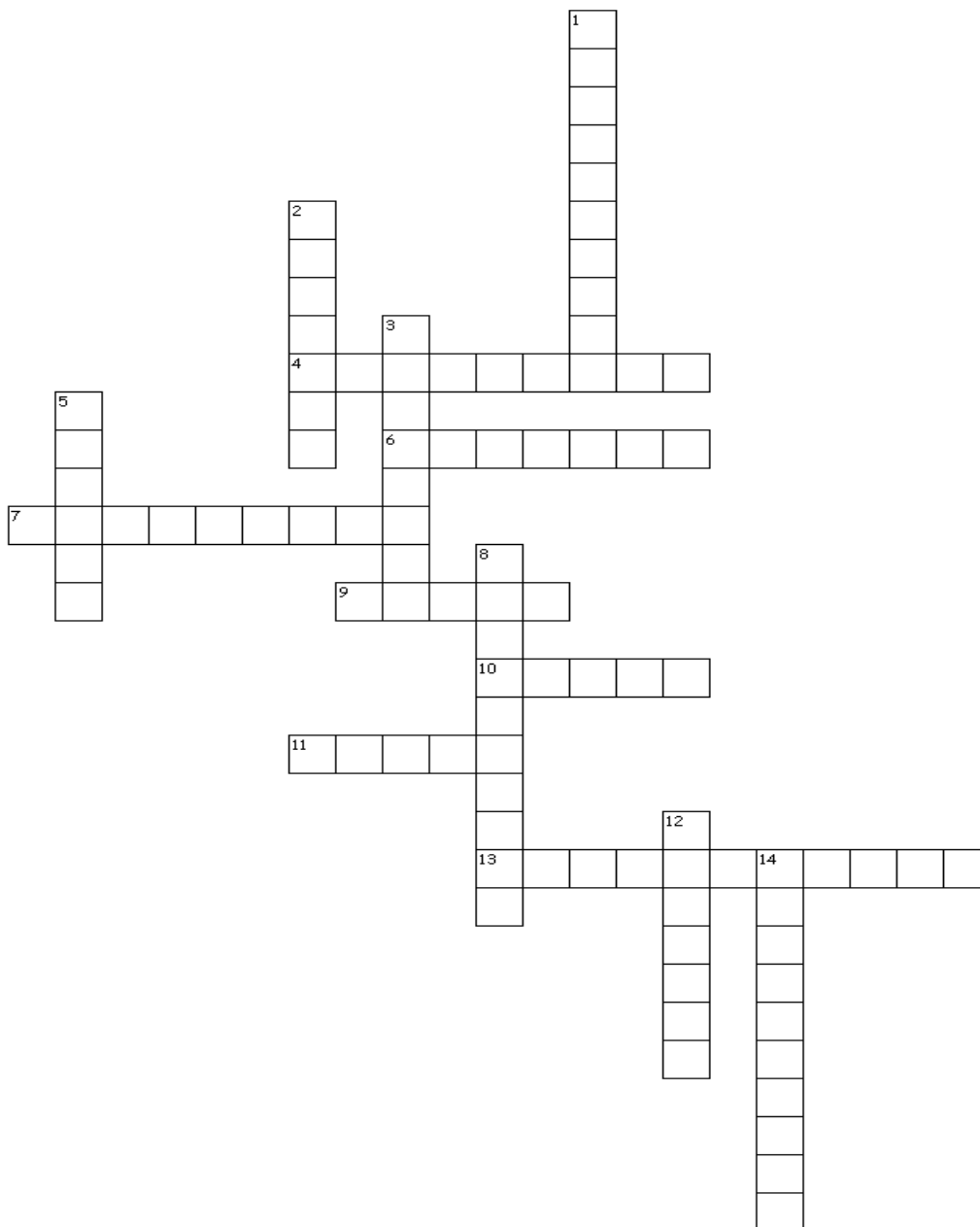
9. Why was it hard for Ella to appear on major network radio shows?

10. What European cities did Ella tour in 1948?

11. Was it easy for Ella to perform in public? Why not?

12. What Presidential awards did Ella receive?

Ella Fitzgerald Crossword



Across

- 4. Bandleader Ella sang with
- 6. Scottish city Ella toured
- 7. Last name of Ella's friend Duke
- 9. Harlem ballroom Ella visited
- 10. Recording society Ella joined
- 11. Record label Ella worked with
- 13. City where Ella was born

Down

- 1. Ella's song featuring scat
- 2. Ella's little sister
- 3. State where Ella was born
- 5. Theatre where Ella auditioned
- 8. L.A. club Ella headlined
- 12. N.Y. city Ella lived in
- 14. First name of Ella's mom

Ella Fitzgerald Copywork

(From the song "Take the A Train")

You must take the A train
to go to Sugar Hill way
up in Harlem. If you
miss the A train, you'll
find you missed the
quickest way to Harlem.

Hurry, get on now, it's
coming. Listen to those
rails a-thrumming all
aboard. Get on the A
train. Soon you will be
on Sugar Hill in
Harlem.

Questions for Review Answer Key:

1. Newport News, Virginia
2. She had a new little sister when her mother gave birth to Frances.
3. The Cotton Club and the Savoy Ballroom
4. She was abused by the staff members at the school.
5. She won first place.
6. The band's lead male vocalist found out about Ella from one of the chorus girls.
7. She became the star and the band's name was changed to Ella Fitzgerald and Her Famous Orchestra.
8. The Abbott and Costello movie "Ride 'Em Cowboy"
9. Some networks did not want Ella to perform on their programs because she was African-American.
10. London, England and Glasgow, Scotland
11. No. Ella suffered from performance anxiety and she always got nervous before her shows.
12. She received the National Medal of Arts and the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Crossword Puzzle Answer Key:

ACROSS:

4. CHICKWEBB

6. GLASGOW

7. ELLINGTON

9. SAVOY

10. ASCAP

11. DECCA

13. NEWPORTNEWS

DOWN:

1. FLYINGHOME

2. FRANCES

3. VIRGINIA

5. APOLLO

8. COPACABANA

12. YONKERS

14. TEMPERANCE

Bibliography:

*A note to parents – The following books and websites were used in the research for this mini-unit study. However, some of the books listed below are **NOT** children’s books and they feature themes about racism, language, and music that children may not be equipped to handle. Parents are advised to read the books themselves and then choose how to share the information with their children.*

Nicholson, Stuart. Ella Fitzgerald: A Biography of the First Lady of Jazz ©1993 Charles Scribner’s Sons

Nicholson, Stuart. Ella Fitzgerald: The Complete Biography ©2004 Routledge

Stone, Tanya Lee. Up Close: Jazz Legend Ella Fitzgerald ©2008 Viking

Orgill, Roxane; Qualls, Sean. Ella Fitzgerald: Skit-Scat Raggedy Cat ©2010 Candlewick Press

Wikipedia: Ella Fitzgerald

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ella_Fitzgerald

EllaFitzgerald.com

<http://www.ellafitzgerald.com/>

PBS Jazz: Ella Fitzgerald

http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_fitzgerald_ella.htm