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A Mastery in Swing Time That Endures for All Time

Ella Fitzgerald, whose approach to singing matured as she did.

By Stephen Holden
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There was a time in American music when Ella Fitzgerald seemed to be an eternal constant, an irresistible force and immovable object rolled into one mighty voice. At once girlish, wise and all-forgiving, Fitzgerald's singing transcended age, race, sex and genre.

It couldn't last forever, of course. This serene, ever-cheerful jazz monument, who appeared to channel music from a benign realm somewhere beyond the solar system, was neither eternal nor unchanging. As many wonderful vintage television clips reveal in "We Love Ella! A Tribute to the First Lady of Song," a PBS "Great Performances" concert taped recently in Los Angeles and being broadcast this evening, Fitzgerald, who would have turned 90 on April 25 (she died in 1996), was subject to the same laws of nature as the rest of us.

The clips jump around in time, from her frisky days as a bebop scat singer under the spell of Dizzy Gillespie, to the mid-1970s. By then that previously perfect sound came with a wobble. Once a big happy-go-lucky gal, she had metamorphosed into a bespectacled pop-jazz librarian gamely soldiering through the American songbook. Here are glimpses of Fitzgerald at different periods with Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Lester Young.

As happens with many singers over time, her loss of vocal security coincided with a deepening sense of connection with song lyrics. As is also the case with many jazz singers, the one thing that held steady was her supreme rhythmic command. Even when the notes didn't arrive in perfect order, the pulse remained steady.

The rest of the two-hour show is an all-star concert tribute that is more graceful and intelligent than most such events, which typically shoehorn as many marquee names as can be scooped up into unwieldy assemblages of musicians spewing hyperbolic inanities. This is not the case here. Fitzgerald's history, related by Natalie Cole and Quincy Jones, is glossed with affection and knowledge.

The arrangements played by the University of Southern California's Thornton Symphony and its Jazz Orchestra keep a sensible balance between swing, jazz and pop. Many of Fitzgerald's signature songs are here: "A-Tisket A-Tasket," sung by Ms. Cole; "Oh, Lady, Be Good!" (played by James Moody and a hot jazz ensemble); "How High the Moon" (Patti Austin and the a cappella sextet Take 6); "Reaching for the Moon" (Lizz Wright); "Midnight Sun" (Ms. Cole); and "Mr. Paganini" (Ms. Austin and Ms. Cole).

A 90th-birthday Ella Fitzgerald commemorative stamp was recently issued. And there are two new tribute albums: the forthcoming "Ella Fitzgerald: Love Letters From Ella" (Concord Jazz), in which vin-

tage Fitzgerald performances are served up with overdubbed orchestrations by the London Symphony Orchestra, and "We All Love Ella: Celebrating the First Lady of Song" (Verve), an all-star tribute album from which Ms. Cole, Ms. Wright, Ledisi and Mr. Wonder also appear on the television special. (K. D. Lang's extraordinary "Angel Eyes" on the Verve album is something to hear, with razor blades at hand, if you're in that sort of mood.)

In fact, none of the singers in the special can touch the prime Fitzgerald of the late 1940s, 1950s and early 1960s, in stylistic range, intonation or stamina. Some (Wynonna belting a bump-and-grind "Ain't Misbehavin' ") miss by a mile. Ms. Cole's playful "A-Tisket, A-Tasket" comes the closest to capturing the spirit, although her light, cottony voice lacks Fitzgerald's fiber. Stevie Wonder ("Too Close for Comfort") has Fitzgerald's drive but not her intonation. Ms. Austin's decent "How High the Moon" sounds tentative compared with Fitzgerald's. Ms. Wright has Fitzgerald's timbre, pitch and musical poise, but not her foundation in swing.

Yet as all most of these singers demonstrate, the tradition goes on as best it can.

And the best is not bad. Soul, gospel, world music, rock and country may have impinged on (and even diluted) traditional pop-jazz, but they haven't destroyed it, nor are they about to. And a few singers, like Dianne Reeves (on the Verve tribute album, but not the television special) and Ms. Lang, have it in them to go the distance.

A talent of Fitzgerald's dimensions doesn't come along every day. For today's age of instant gratification, Fitzgerald had a message. She taught patience. Deeply embedded in her singing, it was a quality she embodied and an essential ingredient of the aura of timelessness that surrounded her.

WE LOVE ELLA!

A Tribute to the First Lady of Song

Tonight on most PBS stations (check local listings).

David Horn, executive producer and series executive producer; Phil Ramone and Gregg Field, concert producers; Bill O'Donnell, director of program development. Produced by Thirteen/WNET New York, Verve, Concord Music Group and University of Southern California Athletic Department.