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New Ella Fitzgerald Doc 'Just One of Those Things' Elucidates the Magic of the 'First Lady of Song'



Images courtesy of Getty Images

Born in Virginia in 1917, Ella Fitzgerald's was a "Cinderella" story of fantastical proportions. To be sure, she stepped onto the stage for Amateur Night at Harlem's [Apollo Theater](#) in 1934, having last minute decided to sing instead of dancing...then took first prize, and never looked back.

Not that anything was ever that easy back in those days, as the completely absorbing new documentary *Just One of Those Things* incisively bears out. It opens by recalling how her family was part of the "Great Migration," African Americans who were escaping the blatant racism of the South, for better opportunity in New York, especially Harlem—which was a just short public transportation ride from where they had settled in Yonkers. (The film then exuberantly bursts into a clip of her belting out a truly rousing version of "Take the A Train.")

Music critic and author Will Friedland is interviewed in the doc enthusing that the songs of that era not only helped to define the 20th Century, but, "became the American equivalent of classical music. Where the Europeans had Bach and Beethoven, we had Jerome Kern and Cole Porter and Duke Ellington." And no one brought that music to life better than Ella.



"She became a star so soon after she debuted at the Apollo, that there seemed to be no story of struggle," the doc's producer [Reggie Nadelson](#) tells us. "But in fact, she had a terrible time. Her beloved mother died when she was 13. She ran away from a horrifying reform school for girls in Upstate New York. And she lived homeless in the Harlem streets. [But] she simply turned the misery, through her singing, into joy."

But beyond the music, Ella also fearlessly charted new territory for women of color at a time when racism and sexism were very much a matter of fact. And she used her position to passionately advocate for Civil Rights (something particularly important to recognize now, when racial tensions are again tearing the country apart.) Beyond her thirteen Grammys, she also received an NAACP Equal Justice Award, and an American Black Achievement Award.

Smokey Robinson, Tony Bennett, Norma Miller, and the late Andre Previn are all engaged to share their obviously (and deservedly) flattering thoughts on Ella, while a conversation with her son Ray Brown Jr. is particularly illuminating.



Yet still, it's the live clips that truly delight. From a charmingly endearing performance of “A-Tisket, A-Tasket” — where you’ll be hard pressed not to fall immediately in love with her—to an absolutely jaw-dropping version of “Crazy Rhythm,” there’s little doubt why she came to be known as the “First Lady of Song.”

“We were trying to capture her musical genius and its variety,” Nadelson explains. “Her performances defined the music of Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Harold Arlen and Duke Ellington. But we also wanted to find out about the woman. Ella was famously private, and we were eager to see what we could [discover] about her life, which spanned most of the 20th century.”

And what does she hope audiences will take away from *Just One of Those Things*?

“That you really have to give everything to an audience. Perhaps it's also worth adding that there is no way you can *become* a genius like Ella. She was born with something, some spark, a God-given gift, if you like. As Ellington put it, ‘It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.’ And if you don’t know what that means, then you’ll never have it.”

Just One of Those Things opens digitally on June 26, and tickets can be purchased [here](#).

