

ELLA FITZGERALD

ELLA FITZGERALD: The Tale of a Vocal Virtuosa

by Andrea Davis Pinkney, illustrated by Brian Pinkney
(Hyperion)

Themes: Families, Friendship, Multiculturalism, Music

Grade Level: K--5

Running Time: 18 minutes

SUMMARY

This program tells the life-story of Ella Fitzgerald from the viewpoint of Scat Cat Monroe, an imaginary feline. The program is divided into four segments. The first segment, "Hoofin' in Harlem," tells about Ella's childhood and her first success, at a contest at the Harlem Theater. Segments 2 to 4, "Jammin' at Yale," "Stompin' at the Savoy," and "Carnegie Hall Scat," deal with her rise to fame, first in the world of jazz and then into the mainstream of American music. The narrator's jazzy speech patterns reflect Ella's music, while the illustrations, with the color palette of Art Deco, communicate the emotions of everyday life during the 1930s, 40s, and 50s.

OBJECTIVES

- Children will watch and hear an imaginative biography of Ella Fitzgerald.
- Children will learn to appreciate jazz.

BEFORE VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Introduce both the title and the subtitle of the program, making sure children define the words vocal

and virtuosa. Ask them also to define jazz and to share what they know about this form of music. Explain that Ella Fitzgerald was one of the greatest jazz musicians in history and that this program tells her life story. Explain also that the story will be told from an unusual point of view—an imaginary character named Scat Cat Monroe. Ask them to listen carefully for the feeling of the words as well as the words themselves, and to be ready to tell how Scat Cat Monroe got his name.

AFTER VIEWING ACTIVITIES

Go back over the story to make sure children grasped the main details of Ella Fitzgerald's life. Because the story is so imaginatively told, it might be helpful to use a more straightforward, who-what-where-when-why approach in reviewing these details. Ask children especially to recall the obstacles Ella had to overcome, how her audiences and music changed over the years, and the people who most influenced her life. Make special note of the specific song titles mentioned in the program. With most children, you will want to play the program more than once.

The program is, of course, an excellent introduction to Ella Fitzgerald's music and to jazz. Use details from the program as starting points. Play recordings from various stages of Ella's career. Her early hit, "A Tisket, A Tasket" is especially effective with children, since it demonstrates how jazz can be made out of "hopscoth chatter and jump rope jive." Remind children of Scat Cat's name and play examples of scat singing by Ella and other musicians.

Jitterbug dancing, spirituals, blues and bebop are all mentioned in the text and illustrated by music, words, and pictures.

The program's art is drawn in scratchboard, a technique children especially enjoy. Show children how to cover pieces of illustration board with black ink or black crayons, scratch out designs in white, and then add paint over the scratched-out areas. The process is messy, but it gives children experience with a variety of media and special art effects.

Connect the story to American history by discussing the Harlem Renaissance and the resulting surge of creativity among African American artists, musicians, and writers. This is an especially fruitful topic to research online.

Encourage children to interview older people in their families and ask them to recall their experiences with jazz, Ella Fitzgerald's music, jitterbug dancing, and other details mentioned in the program. As children from multicultural backgrounds share their families' memories of Ella, children will appreciate her worldwide fame and musical importance.

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DUKE ELLINGTON, by Andrea Davis Pinkney, illustrated by Brian Pinkney
JAZZTIME, by Maxine Fisher, narrated by Ruby Dee

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