

## MASTERPIECE

# *The Enduring Art of Ella Fitzgerald's Most Ambitious Album*

'Ella Fitzgerald Sings the George and Ira Gershwin Song Books,' which was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame at the end of January, remains a matchless treasure.

By John Edward Hasse

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Nothing did more to crystallize the idea of the Great American Songbook than a series of recordings Fitzgerald made between 1956 and 1964. By showcasing eight different songwriters and songwriting teams, these albums esteemed each writer's output as a body of work, canonized many of the songs, and raised respect for the repertory.

The most celebrated of these albums, *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the George and Ira Gershwin Song Books*, unprecedented in scope, offers 59 tracks, more than three hours, broadly exploring one of America's foremost song catalogs. It was recorded between January and August 1959 and issued originally in a lavish six-disc set. And with the Grammy's this week, it's worth reconsidering one of the singular recordings of the 20th century, which itself was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame at the end of January.

The album resulted from a kind of collaboration among four living figures and one deceased, playing five different roles. George Gershwin, who died prematurely in 1937, composed the music, rich with jazzy, bluesy, Jewish and classical influences. His brother Ira matched George's melodies with witty, memorable words that reveled in American vernacular speech. For the album, Ira wrote some new lyrics.

The other three collaborators were each at their creative peak. Nonpareil among singers, Fitzgerald possessed a warm, lovely voice, flawless clarity and diction, perfect pitch control, buoyant phrasing, elastic rhythms, impressive vocal dexterity, wide pitch range, and a stellar gift for improvising. Unlike Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland and Nancy Wilson, Fitzgerald was no dramatist; she didn't animate the songs as much as she



essentialized them. Her emotionally transparent performances enabled the lyrics to sparkle and shine with crystalline clarity.

The idea for the album sprang from Norman Granz, a feisty, prodigious producer, who founded Verve Records in 1956. He previously had recorded jazz pianist Oscar Peterson interpreting such writers as Irving Berlin. Now, turning his attention to Fitzgerald, whom he also managed, he sought to broaden her audience beyond jazz. Their first songbook album, a Cole Porter tribute, put Granz's new record label on the map and raised Fitzgerald's public profile. Her magnificent Gershwin *Song Books* became the fifth in the series.

A final collaborator was needed to accomplish Granz's vision: a stellar arranger-orchestrator-conductor. Granz was elated to pull in Nelson Riddle, who had risen to fame arranging for Sinatra and Nat "King" Cole. Fitzgerald called him "a singer's arranger": He not only reordered songs' structures, set tempos, and conducted the orchestra, but also added inventive contrast and translucent color to Fitzgerald's lines. Lush and romantic here, snappy and swinging there, always staying out of Fitzgerald's way. Some jazz critics find these arrangements schmaltzy, but, to my ears, they brilliantly serve Granz's purposes in expanding Fitzgerald's appeal and masterfully framing her singing.

After a year of planning, Fitzgerald, Granz and Riddle's big-band-with-strings gathered at Capitol Records' sonically stunning Hollywood studio. To his eternal credit, Granz insisted that most of the arrangements—for instance, of *A Foggy Day* and *Nice Work If You Can Get It*—include not just the familiar chorus or refrain of each song, but also the far less familiar introductory verse that sets it up. It's like including a novel's prologue that establishes the tone, mood and story—and serves as a lasting reminder that songs from this era have two parts, a fact overlooked by many pop and jazz artists.

Granz shrewdly balanced the Gershwins' better-known songs such as '*S Wonderful* with such unusual pieces as *Sam and Delilah* to draw in curious listeners. (Granz covered selections from *Porgy and Bess* in a prior Ella Fitzgerald-Louis Armstrong album.)

Save for some scatting on *I Got Rhythm*, this is not Fitzgerald the virtuosic improviser. Instead, here she embellishes melodies while lovingly honoring the writers' words and music. Highlights include her elegantly yearning *Embraceable You*, her near-definitive *The Man I Love*, and her understated, tender *But Not for Me*, which earned a 1960 Grammy Award for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance. *How Long Has This Been Going On?* is a resplendent interpretation, Riddle's underscoring exquisitely enhancing the story that Fitzgerald ruefully relates. Often performed as a slalom-race, *Oh, Lady Be Good*, surprises with its heartbeat-like 72 pulses-per-minute. Likewise, the slow tempos on *Fascinating Rhythm* and *I Got Rhythm* make these familiar songs fresh.

For those who knew Fitzgerald only as a jazz singer, her sublime and supremely accessible way with show tunes was an exciting discovery. Ira Gershwin, who lived until 1983, was himself impressed, famously remarking, “I never knew how good our songs were until I heard Ella Fitzgerald sing them.”

Verve Records has reissued the music as a deluxe six-disc vinyl set with a hardcover book. The recordings are also available from digital retailers and streaming services. Fitzgerald’s most ambitious album and one of her crowning achievements, this songbook is a matchless treasure.

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