"The lady really was a tramp," an article on Ella Fitzgerald by Stuart Nicholson in the Observer Review, 21 July 1996. This article, chronicling Ella Fitzgerald's return to Los Angeles, was annotated by Kitaj in anticipation of his own return to Los Angeles and included notes such as, "Huge TV!" "Baseball!" "Like old Degas Draw draw draw."

'Terry Dicks throws his mud and his spite and is indifferent to the emotional effect it can have'

Brian Masters lays into 'people in pubs and the House of Commons', on page 5

By Stuart Nicholson

The lady really was a tramp

Ella Fitzgerald with saxophonist Stan Getz in 1958. Photograph by Terry Cavey

Ella Fitzgerald once lived on the streets. Then she became the queen of jazz. But she spent her dying years alone but for her staff, again in sad dishevelment

Twice a week, a brown Rolls-Royce emerged from the driveway of 908 North Whittier Drive, in Beverly Hills, California. Those who caught a glimpse of its passenger, a small, hunched figure sitting behind the chauffeur, saw an older woman who wore no make-up, looked slightly dishevelled – sometimes with the label of her loose jacket sticking up in the air – and wearing a wig that had seen better days. The woman looked neither to the left or the right but stared into middle distance from behind her thick glasses, not bothering to acknowledge the well-wishers who occasionally gathered outside her large, $2 million, pink-washed mansion.

These were Ella Fitzgerald's last regular journeys into the outside world: to the Cedars Sinai Hospital for dialysis. Since being forced to give up singing in the summer of 1993, when a big concert in her honour at Hollywood Bowl had to be cancelled, she had found it hard to come to terms with the fact that her career was over. Occasionally, she would have the brown Rolls-Royce driven to the ocean where she would sit quietly for hours; otherwise she watched soap operas and baseball on her huge TV, sitting in her wheelchair in the room where she once rehearsed with her musicians.

As Ella became weaker, she began to spend more time in bed. Eventually, doctors were forced to sedate her so she just lay motionless, hardly aware of what was going on around her. For much of this time, Ella was effectively alone. The constant round of concerts and intercontinental one-night stands had caught up with her, both physically and socially. Those moments in her long career when she could have chosen to retire among family and friends had been passed over to keep performing. It meant only a handful of people – Peggy Lee was one – were close enough to stop by and see her. Most of these began to drift away when Ella's office appeared to discourage their visits.

Ever since the Sixties, when she began to enjoy international acclaim, Ella Fitzgerald had gradually become a more and more isolated figure. Her agents, Sallé Productions (Sallé is 'Ellas' backwards) worked hard to keep an adoring public and an inquisitive press at bay. But the efforts to shield her served only to increase her isolation. Those charged with arranging her private and public life appeared to be denying even friends the opportunity to keep in touch with her. 'It's always "Ella can't come to the phone right now", or "Ella's sleeping for the moment",' said one old friend who did not wish to be identified. By 1995, even Keter Betts, her close friend and accompanist, began to experience problems getting through to her. 'When I last saw her, they wheeled her into the den and we remembered the old times,' he said. 'I called a few months ago but was told she couldn't come to the phone.'

To the very end, Sallé Productions kept up a bizarre charade of insisting that Ella was 'fine' and refusing to acknowledge the gradual deterioration of her condition. Even her stepson, Ray Jr, never publicly acknowledged his adoptive mother's concert days were at an end. It was not until April, 1994, in response to persistent enquiries from Associated Press, that Mary Jane Outwater, Ella's long-serving personal assistant and head of Sallé Productions, finally confirmed that both Ella's legs had been amputated in mid-1993. When pressed as to why this information had not been disclosed at the time, she just said: 'It's been done a long time ago and, of course, she's fine and at home. She really is in good spirits.'

The predilection for secrecy bordered on an obsession and was something I experienced first hand while in New York researching Ella's biography in 1992. I had made a number of appointments to see several of Ella's former accompanists from the early days of her career and one with Phoebe Jacobs, a close friend of Ella's dating back to the Fifties. When Mary Jane Outwater heard about my research, she cancelled all but two of the meetings. Phoebe Jacobs's message was typical of the excuses offered: 'Ella's office would rather I didn't talk with you.' Earlier, Sallé Productions had refused all my requests for an interview, claiming: 'Ella's own autobiography is in the works.' No autobiography ever appeared. This cat and mouse game continued with Ella's friends on the West Coast and in the end it was a race to get to people before Sallé did.

As my research intensified, I discovered Ella's career was full of odd secrets, some almost hidden from view and some not. While there was plenty that had been written about Ella, there was plenty that was incorrect and, as I solved one mystery, there always seemed to be another to take its place. Throughout her life, Ella had always been uncomfortable about giving interviews – particularly if pressed to discuss her past in anything but the most general terms. On such occasions she always fell back on a standard we-were-poor-but-happy routine dreamt up by her press agent. It was repeated again and again until, over the years, fiction became accepted as fact. And if there were any missing details, writers filled them in the best jazz tradition – they improvised.

But the facts turned out to be far more interesting than the fiction. Why, for example, did Ella always give her year of birth as 1918 when it was 1917? Early on I confirmed from three independent sources – the State Registrar of Virginia, the 1920 US Census and a copy of her school records – that 1917 was the year she was born, and if it was on her school records then Ella herself would definitely know this. It may seem incredible, but the smiling Ella who attended her lavish 'fiftieth' and 'sixtieth' and 'seventieth' birthday parties knew they were really her fifty-first, sixty-first and seventy-first birthdays. Why did she perpetuate the myth? The answer may be a little bit of vanity. When she married 21-year-old Ray Brown in 1947 she gave her age as 29, rather than admitting she was 30.

Then there was the mystery of her early years. Why were Ella's recollections of her childhood restricted to superficial mentions of a mother who was always on hand with a soothing word of homespun philosophy to ease the growing pains of adolescence? What had she got to hide? The truth was revealed when I finally tracked down her childhood friends – the first time they had ever been interviewed.

'Norman Granz became Ella's manager as her second marriage ended in 1953. He recreated her past and installed a personal assistant. After that, he kept her friends at bay'

They all said that when her mother died, her stepfather, Joseph DaSilva was 'abusing' her. Whether this was sexually as well as physically we will never know, but it is surely significant that much of Ella's charity work was for the Ella Fitzgerald Care Center in the Lynwood section of Watts, Los Angeles. They specialise in helping sexually abused children.

The story of Ella's 'discovery' in 1935 also seemed to smack of the press agent's pen. Only when I traced Charles Linton, the male singer in the Chick Webb band, did he reveal that Ella was living rough on the streets when he found her, and that: 'She should have had a week's work in the Apollo Theatre, but she lived in such a way that it couldn't be given to her... how she was dressed and everything that goes with not being clean because she didn't have a place to live.' Ella's emergence was literally a rags-to-riches fairy tale that astounded even Billie Holiday, herself struggling for recognition in Harlem in 1935, who saw Ella seemingly come from nowhere to sing with one of the great big bands of the day.

Throughout her life, musicians and friends have always confirmed what a private person the real Ella Fitzgerald really was. Mel Tormé, a close friend for over 50 years, observed: 'I adored Ella. Every time we saw each other there was a lot of hugging and kissing and she came to see me several times and I went to see her a million times. But I didn't really know her very well... and, by the way, I'm not sure of anybody who did, except the people who worked for her. She was very, very insular and kept to herself.'

This intensely private nature threw a veil over her personal life, such as her affair with President Roosevelt's son while he was at Harvard and Ella was playing a residency at the nearby Levaggi's Restaurant with the Chick Webb band in 1938. Her reluctance to talk about herself has always thrown doubt on whether or not she actually did get married in the early Forties to Benny Kornegay. Since she refused to speak of it, many observers believed it never happened. In fact, it happened on 26 December, 1941 in St Louis, as I discovered when I secured a copy of the marriage certificate. Of her second marriage to bassist Ray Brown, there was no doubt. Yet the Ella enigma hovers over this as well. All the history books say it was in 1948. It was in 1947.

When her marriage to Brown ended in divorce in 1953, the only constant in her life was her manager Norman Granz, who took the role of what Mel Tormé and many others have called 'Ella's Svengali'.

Norman Granz was an immensely successful entrepreneur who produced the 'Jazz at the Philharmonic' concert series that toured the world with some of the greatest jazz musicians who ever lived. During the Fifties and early Sixties he recorded artists such as Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker, Lester Young, Oscar Peterson, Billie Holiday and Count Basie on his Verve record label, perhaps the most famous record company in jazz. But Ella was his great star. Whatever he said, she obeyed. Granz had an aversion to Stephen Sondheim and refused to let Ella record anything by him, so Ella never did. She never complained, and, in return, Granz was unstinting in his efforts to advance her career.

But why all the secrecy? Perhaps her long-time accompanist came closest to answering this when he said: 'I always thought of Ella as a lady that never quite grew up. There was a kind of naivety about her that was like a little girl. If she was unhappy, she'd pout like an eight-year-old.'

But if Ella was reluctant to deal with the

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