

# ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER

## *Ella* (2008)

Ailey Company Premiere - 2016

*Choreography:* Robert Battle

*Restaging:* Marlena Wolfe

*Music:* Ella Fitzgerald

*Costumes:* Jon Taylor

*Lighting:* Burke Wilmore



AAADT's Jacquelin Harris and Megan Jakel in Robert Battle's *Ella*. Photo by Christopher Duggan

Originally created as a solo, this high-energy comical dance was reinvented as a duet by the Ailey company for its December 2016 opening night gala benefit, "An Evening of Ailey and Jazz" – in anticipation of the centennial celebration of the birth of legendary singer Ella Fitzgerald.

Using a live concert recording of Fitzgerald performing the song "Airmail Special," *Ella* matches the iconic singer's virtuosic scatting with lightning-fast, articulated movement in an irresistible tour-de-force performance.

### **Robert Battle**

Robert Battle became artistic director of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in July 2011 after being selected by Judith Jamison, making him only the third person to head the Company since it was founded in 1958. A frequent choreographer and artist-in-residence at Ailey since 1999, he has set many of his works on Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and Ailey II, and at The Ailey School.

The Company's current repertory includes his ballets *The Hunt*, *In/Side*, and *Awakening*, his first work since becoming Artistic Director. In addition to expanding the Ailey repertory with works by artists as diverse as Kyle Abraham, Aszure Barton, Ronald K. Brown, Garth Fagan, Bill T. Jones, Jiří Kylián, Wayne McGregor, Robert Moses, Ohad Naharin, and Paul Taylor, he also instituted the New Directions Choreography Lab to help develop the next generation of choreographers. He is also committed to using the arts as a vehicle for change and education, as exhibited by the introduction of *No Longer Silent* into the Ailey repertory, as well as the 2014 commission of Matthew Rushing's *ODETTA*, a world premiere tribute to Odetta Holmes, "the voice of the Civil Rights Movement." In 2016 he commissioned MacArthur "Genius" Kyle Abraham's *Untitled America*, which explores the lasting impact of incarceration in the prison system on individuals and families across generations. Mr. Battle attended Miami's New World School of the Arts and The Juilliard School. He danced with the Parsons Dance Company from 1994 to 2001, setting choreography on that company, before founding Battleworks Dance Company in 2001. Battleworks performed at venues including The Joyce Theater, Dance Theater Workshop, American Dance Festival, and Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. Mr. Battle was honored as one of the "Masters of African-American Choreography" by the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in 2005, and he received the prestigious Statue Award from the Princess Grace Foundation-USA in 2007. In 2014, he received an honorary doctorate from The University of the Arts. Most recently, Mr. Battle was named a 2015 Visiting Fellow for The Art of Change, an initiative by the Ford Foundation. *Ella* is the 10<sup>th</sup> work by Mr. Battle to enter the Ailey repertory.



Robert Battle.  
Photo by Andrew Eccles.

## **Ella Fitzgerald**

Born on April 25, 1917 in Newport News, Virginia, singer Ella Fitzgerald was the product of a common-law marriage between William Fitzgerald and Temperance "Tempie" Williams Fitzgerald. By 1934, harboring dreams of becoming an entertainer, she entered and won an amateur contest at Harlem's Apollo Theater. That unexpected performance at the Apollo set Fitzgerald's career in motion. Fitzgerald recorded "Love and Kisses" with drummer Chick Webb in 1935 and found herself playing regularly at one of Harlem's hottest clubs, the Savoy. Fitzgerald also put out her first No. 1 hit, 1938's "A-Tisket, A-Tasket," which she co-wrote. Later that year Ella recorded her second hit, "I Found My Yellow Basket."

In addition to her work with Webb, Fitzgerald performed and recorded with the Benny Goodman Orchestra. She had her own side project known as Ella Fitzgerald and Her Savoy Eight. In 1946 she started working with Norman Granz, the founder of Verve Records, and Jazz at the Philharmonic, a series of concerts and live records featuring most of the genre's great performers. Around this time, Fitzgerald went on tour with Dizzy Gillespie and his band. She started changing her singing style, incorporating scat singing during her performances.

In 1956, Fitzgerald released *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Cole Porter Song Book*. At the very first Grammy Awards in 1958, Fitzgerald picked up her first two Grammys—and made history as the first African-American woman to win the award—for best individual jazz performance and best female vocal performance for the two songbook projects *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Duke Ellington Song Book* and *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Irving Berlin Song Book*, respectively. (She worked directly with Ellington on the former album.) A truly collaborative soul, Fitzgerald produced great recordings with such artists as Louis Armstrong and Count Basie, and performed several times with Frank Sinatra. In 1960, Fitzgerald broke into the pop charts with her rendition of "Mack the Knife." She was still going strong well into the '70s, playing concerts across the globe, including a two-week engagement in New York City in 1974 with Sinatra and Basie. She made her last recording in 1989 and her last public performance in 1991 at New York's Carnegie Hall. Ella Fitzgerald died on June 15, 1996, at her home in Beverly Hills.

In all, Fitzgerald recorded more than 200 albums and some 2,000 songs in her lifetime. Her total record sales exceeded 40 million. Her many accolades included 13 Grammy Awards, the NAACP Image Award for Lifetime Achievement and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Since her passing, Fitzgerald has been honored and remembered in many ways. The United States Postal Service honored the late singer with an Ella Fitzgerald commemorative stamp celebrating the 90th anniversary of her birth. That same year, the tribute album *We All Love Ella: Celebrating the First Lady of Song* was released, featuring such artists as Gladys Knight, Etta James and Queen performing some of Fitzgerald's classics. The centennial of Ella Fitzgerald's birth in 2017 is being marked with an "Ella at 100" celebration.



Ella Fitzgerald.  
Photo by Michael Ochs