

Detroit Free Press

ARTS

Detroit native, R&B legend Freda Payne sparkles as jazz diva Ella Fitzgerald in musical



[Duante Beddingfield](#) | June 21, 2024



R&B legend and Detroit native Freda Payne stars as jazz diva Ella Fitzgerald in "Ella, First Lady of Song" at Rochester's Meadow Brook Theatre, Sean Carter

If, like me, you never got a chance to see the great Ella Fitzgerald live, the next best opportunity awaits in Rochester at Meadow Brook Theatre.

Conceived by Maurice Hines and written and directed by Lee Summers, "Ella, First Lady of Song" takes audiences from the beloved singer's rough-and-tumble early years as an orphan on the streets of New York through the ballrooms, dressing rooms, recording studios, and international stages that became the backdrop of her six-decade career.

Summers' script is sometimes lacking in dramatic punch but has plenty of heart and good-natured laughs, as well as heart-tugging moments that feel genuinely affecting. The thing it does best is present Fitzgerald for perhaps the first time in media as a three-dimensional human. But it's the music and the cast that carry this project, and it's impossible without a lead actress who can approach the prowess of the mighty Fitzgerald, scat singing and all.

That mighty match arrives in the form of Detroit native and R&B legend Freda Payne, whose stunning replication of many of Ella's greatest hits must be witnessed to be believed. At age 81, the timeless Payne pulls off miracle after miracle as the revered songstress, belting with glee and ebulliently scatting through dozens of songs with, like Fitzgerald, a shockingly wide vocabulary of sounds and syllables.

The timbre of Payne's voice is so strikingly similar to Fitzgerald's that there are moments when, if you close your eyes, you'd swear you were hearing the real thing. In numbers like "Mr. Paganini" and "Oh, Lady Be Good," I closed my eyes and felt goosebumps form on my arms. But, perhaps best of all, she hits straight in the heart with a deeply emotional "My Buddy" – ironically, a song I don't believe Fitzgerald actually ever recorded.

Debra Walton makes a great first impression as spunky, scrappy young Ella, drawing pathos and big laughs in equal measure. It's an odd directing choice that she is later brought back to play Ella's sister for the majority of the show; she's good in both roles, but the abrupt switch and the realization that she's playing two different siblings in the same show is a bit much for suspension of disbelief.

Nicole Powell is excellent and frequently very funny in the role of Fitzgerald's steely, long-suffering cousin Georgiana, bringing something of a Black Allison Janney quality to the character. The small cast's sole male actor, Eric Coles, delivers a solid supporting performance, lending hustler's charm and stern conviction to Fitzgerald's manager and record label founder Norman Granz.

The music is provided by a fantastic onstage sextet of musicians who play beautifully and also jump into acting in small roles. Music director and pianist Dionne Hendricks, drummer Greg Bufford, bassist Gregory Jones, saxophonist Bobby Lavell, trumpeter Patrick Adams and trombonist Dennis Wilson (quite affable as an Apollo Theatre amateur night emcee) never slip in quality, providing Payne with a great foundation.

Kirk A. Domer's clever sliding set lovingly evokes TV variety shows of the 1960s without overdoing it, and Karen Kangas-Preston outfits Payne in a flurry of beautiful gowns. The whole thing is a very classy affair.

This weekend will be the last for the production, which closes June 23. If you enjoy a good musical, "Ella, First Lady of Song" is a good show to see. If you're a jazz lover, it's a happening you shouldn't miss.

Contact Free Press arts and culture reporter Duante Beddingfield at dbeddingfield@freepress.com.