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Life Lessons with Ella

An Interview with Ray Brown Jr., Son of Ella Fitzgerald and Ray Brown Sr.

By Carmen Woodruff



Ella Fitzgerald, with Dizzy Gillespie and Ray Brown Sr.
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April marks Jazz Appreciation Month, a time to cherish and celebrate the greats as well as those who keep the multifaceted genre fresh and evolving. Ray Brown, Jr. encompasses many waves of the spectrum as an accomplished drummer and versatile singer in his own right. He's toured the globe, headlined Las Vegas, released albums and studied under the tutelage of numerous celebrity instructors. Amidst lessons on theory, performance techniques and improvisation, he heralds his mother, [Ella Fitzgerald](#), as his favorite teacher, not only on music but also on life.

In this interview, he shares some of his fondest memories, reflecting on his day-to-day experiences with the First Lady of Song.

Carmen Woodruff: What was music like for you in the household with Ella Fitzgerald as your mother?

Ray Brown Jr.: Looking back, there was always some type of music being generated.

I had been a music fan from early on. My particular tastes varied from what might be expected in our home. When we moved to Beverly Hills, my mother had this killer stereo system installed. The speakers were in the living room, but the turntable and amplifiers were in a closet, which made getting in there to play records a challenge. I had a funky turntable, which had a speaker in the front of the box. It had a volume control and another knob that if you turned it one way you'd get bass and turn it the other way and you get treble. It had an arm so you could stack albums and when one finished the next one would drop and start to play.

Was music everywhere? Did you ever hear her singing in the shower?

The house I grew up in had the previously mentioned stereo in the den; I had my stereo in my room and downstairs in the living room was a lovely baby grand piano. I had an upright (piano) next to my room on the second floor and also a set of drums in my room, which was played more often than the neighbors and family liked.

My mom's room was downstairs and at the back of the house. So she could have been singing in the shower, but I never would have known. My mom had this dog. We'd take him for a walk together some evenings, and she'd sing a little bit.

Did you accompany your mother on tour? What were some of the lessons about musicianship and touring that you learned on the road?

During the summers, I would go with my mom. She'd start off doing one-nighters across the states ending up in Washington D.C. for a week or two at the [Carter Barron Amphitheater](#). Then I'd spend the rest of the summer with my dad (bassist Ray Brown, Sr.). I learned a great deal about caring for the art. It wasn't stated, "You have to care for the art," but there were

always rehearsals. I remember being with my dad; the trio had finished a couple of sets and I was waiting for my dad to come up so we could play Monopoly. But many nights, the trio would rehearse for a while after they did their gig. I have a unique discipline, which varies; although it has taken a while, I have a deep love and respect for the art and its power on our lives. My application is to delve as deeply into a song until I *get it*: the meaning, the feeling, the being able to make some type of personal association, so I'm just not singing *lyrics* but telling an important story that must be told precisely.

What types of guests would visit your home and your mother's performances? And what did they teach you about life?

There were tons of people who came through: musicians, actors. My mom had a wall with all sorts of photographs of *famous* people. She was a quiet person and she worked extremely hard. Everyone that we appreciate she hung out with. [Duke](#), Basie, [Nat King Cole](#), Pearl Bailey—the list would read like a who's who and I would be leaving more people off than I can remember trying to compile a list of who stopped by. The greatest thing all of these wonderful musicians taught me about life was humility. They were artists who were exact in their art, but they had a sense of reality that kept them grounded. At least, that's how they were when I was around.

Who are some of your favorite artists and how did you develop your own style?

My favorites had been singer songwriters during the 1960s through the 1980s. I had been a singing drummer for most of my life. I wrote a few songs, but my focus was my drumming, then my singing. So I had the musical crushes on all the drummers back then. When I stopped playing drums and started focusing on singing, my hero list expanded. There are different people that I listen to for different reasons. Some singers I listen to make scat playful; some make it expressive. Some vocalists can break your heart; some make you laugh out loud. I try to learn and utilize the proper emotions for the songs I sing.

What is one of the biggest life lessons you learned from your mother?

Never give up.

What were some of the values she instilled in you musically and personally that you still exercise and follow to this very day?

Not to be so critical of others, but continue to be critical of yourself and those close to you who affect your life.

What do you wish she would've told you that you had to learn the hard way?

I was a teenage boy; everything had to be learned the hard way!

How did she teach you right from wrong?

By living an honest life and setting the best example she could for me. And both of my parents reminding me constantly of a pattern of life that would not make me feel entitled *just because*.

How did she prepare for big shows and projects? What was her secret to improvisation?

There was always sheet music and recordings around the house. She'd work with the piano player; they'd get keys, work the arrangements and things like that. Then the trio might come over and they'd rehearse. Her secret to improvising: great ears and a great gift from God.

Where can our readers find you performing and what are some of your current projects?

I have spent the last few years with the bulk of my time on cruise ships. I work clubs and small festivals when I can. I've been on my way to the studio for another CD. My schedule has been erratic, and my producer has had some health challenges that have made our schedules incompatible. But soon, I'll get it done.

What tips would you give to aspiring performers?

Know who you are, what you really want and why. Today, especially, be business smart. Do what you love and love what you do. Learn the balance between never being satisfied and when to say to yourself, *that's pretty damn good!*

Thank you for your insightful questions, and the opportunity to give a little insight into my family.

[NOTE: *Ray Brown Jr.'s music can be purchased on iTunes, cdbaby.com and Amazon.com.*]

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