



## The Brancatelli File By Joe Brancatelli

[HOME](#)
[E-MAIL JOE](#)
[PRINT](#)
[SEND LINK](#)
[2017 COLUMNS](#)
[JOE'S ARCHIVES](#)
[SEARCH](#)

### Yes, This Cool Thing Really Happened on a Plane

April 27, 2017 -- Tuesday marked the [centennial of Ella Fitzgerald's birth](#) and it is ironic that the First Lady of Song's (literal) highest achievement--a pair of live, in-flight concerts--is ignored because we are prisoners of an industry now so warped that it that thinks nothing of [beating us](#) out of our seats or [abandoning us for days](#) after a little rain.

The obscurity of Ella's 1983 live shows on Continental Airlines is doubly ironic when you consider that a video of Kenny G [blowing his sax for a few minutes](#) on a Delta Air Lines flight last weekend went viral and is feted as remarkable. Yet one of the greatest popular vocalists who ever lived fronted a trio in the bulkhead of a widebody flight one winter day and sang and swung and scatted from O'Hare to LAX and almost no one knows about it a generation later.

That's insane. It's a crime against American culture in general and the American songbook in specific.



How can this amazing live event be almost totally forgotten in an era when we've convinced ourselves that airlines were once kinder and gentler and more creative companies? Save for a famous painting--not even created contemporaneously--and a story in *Jet* magazine--[fortuitously captured](#) by Google books--Ella's in-flight shows have somehow been lost in time.

"It was exciting and the whole place was just gone," remembers Clarence Waldron, the famed former *Jet* music writer who was only at the magazine about 18 months when he was sent to O'Hare Airport to cover the flight to Denver.

"I can't believe that she gave me an interview," he told me this week. "I'd never flown first class before and there I was sitting next to Ella Fitzgerald."

I should back up and give you a little background and context to explain how Ella and her trio serenaded some incredibly lucky business travelers and Continental executives on a DC-10 flying the Chicago/O'Hare-Denver/Stapleton-LAX route on January 12, 1983.

In the 1970s, Los Angeles-based Continental was a major operator of the then new and exotic Boeing 747 and McDonnell Douglas DC-10 "jumbo" jets. It was a carrier already known for fine meals, top-notch service--and the more-than-slightly-sexist catchphrase "[We really move our tail for you!](#)" Other airlines outfitted their first generation of widebody jets with lounges, too, but Continental went a little further. Its first class lounges were huge and its coach spaces were dubbed "pubs." Continental built advertising campaigns around the coach pubs. Here's one [typical TV ad](#). Here's [another](#) and a [third variant](#). Continental even teased other carriers with a famous campaign dubbed "[Sorry Bub, No Pub!](#)"

But Continental was financially weak, in-flight pubs and lounges fell out of favor and Continental became the only carrier ever to fall in a hostile takeover, reverse-merged in October, 1982, into Frank Lorenzo's Texas International. However, a new batch of pub-equipped DC-10s was arriving in early 1983 and Lorenzo's new management needed a fast and flashy promotion for the revived in-flight lounge concept.

"We only had about four weeks' notice," recalls Bruce Hicks, who ran the airline's communications at the time. He told me this week that Continental's advertising chief, Jim O'Donnell, suggested live entertainment for the kick-off flight. Hicks hit on Ella and Continental's advertising agency cut the deal for her to perform. An employee at an outside PR agency had the idea to hire [LeRoy Neiman](#) to paint the event as part of a "pub series" of bar scenes he was already creating.

The ensuing weeks were jammed with late nights and endless details, Hicks recalls. An existing ORD-DEN-LAX flight was blocked from sale for the event although travelers already booked kept their seats and reservations.

On the day of the flight, Neiman made some preliminary pencil sketches at O'Hare and disembarked without ever watching Ella sing. He completed the painting using photographs and television news footage. Neiman, Hicks recalls, was not easy to work with.

Ella, on the other hand, "was so wonderful, a joy," Hicks says. Waldron agrees. "She should have been resting before her set, but she let me sit right next to her. She answered all my questions and let me get my story," he recalls.

In those days, Ella's traveling trio consisted of Paul Smith on keyboards, Keter Betts on bass and Bobby Durham on drums. I couldn't confirm that Durham was drummer on the Continental gig, but Smith and Betts were on the flights.

The concert on the Chicago-Stapleton leg lasted about 35 minutes, Waldron remembers. As passengers and Continental brass crowded into the pub area, Ella did her set and Waldron especially recalls her classic rendition of "Old McDonald," the corny tune that she turned into a jazz tour de force. "She did all this music and all the animal noises, too," he says. "It was unbelievable." (I found no audio or video of the Continental show, but here's Ella and the trio doing "Old McDonald" [during a Tokyo concert](#) several months later.)

There was a surprise waiting for Ella when the flight landed in Denver. Throngs of passengers and fans were at Stapleton Airport hoping for a glimpse of the jazz icon and, maybe, a song. Or as Waldron wrote at the time, "If she was loved in Chicago, she was simply adored in Denver."

Hicks told me this week that there was no plan for Ella to get off the flight in Denver. "It wasn't in the contract or anything. We assumed she'd want to rest because she had to sing again on the Denver-LAX segment."

But that was not how Ella rolled. She lived to tour and perform and when she heard about the crowds waiting for her at the gate in Stapleton, she disembarked. "I need to go to my fans," Hicks remembers her saying. "The next thing I know, Paul Smith and [Keter Betts] are out there, too. Paul starts playing and Ella starts singing. She must have done 20 or 25 minutes at the gate."

Highlight of the impromptu Stapleton set? According to Waldron's contemporaneous account, it was Ella's take on Rodgers and Hart's "The Lady is a Tramp." (Here's Ella and Paul Smith's quartet [doing the number](#) during a legendary 1960 concert in Berlin.)

On the Denver-Los Angeles flight, Ella did her third show of the day, complete with another of her evergreens, "Mack the Knife." (Here's a snippet of Ella and the trio [on the tune](#) during a 1983 concert in Montreal.) And when the flight was on final approach into LAX, no one could stop her.

"Paul's keyboard is in the overhead, the bass is stashed in one lav and the drum kit is in the other," Hicks recalls. "The music has stopped, but she won't stop scatting. I'm holding on to her and trying to direct her to her seat, but she just keeps going."



The story--and the music--doesn't stop there. After Neiman finished his painting, Hicks arranged for its unveiling in April at a travel-trade event at Chasen's restaurant in Los Angeles. Neiman was contractually required to be present, but he begged off. Ella was invited, but not expected. Just in case, though, Hicks hired Paul Smith to provide the entertainment.

"Of course she came," Hicks recalls. "So Paul starts playing and he says, 'Come on, Ella. Give us a little song.' She did, for at least a half-hour. Unplanned, unpromised--but that is who Ella was. Then she proceeded to autograph prints of the painting for

every person there!"

Now general manager of [The Alliant Group/Houston](#), a crisis-management firm, Hicks admits he doesn't remember as much of the music as he should.

"I was so concerned with the details that I didn't get to really enjoy the performances. But the Ella flights are some of my greatest memories. She was a lovely woman, all about the music and the audiences."

## More About Ella ...

Ella's grace and talent didn't always matter to the airlines. In 1954, Ella was stranded in Honolulu by Pan Am. She and her party were booked through to Sydney--as usual, Ella was on tour--but [Pan Am offloaded them in favor of a party of \(white\) favorites](#). Ella sued. Pan Am's defense? How dare a passenger--and a black woman at that--use the courts to protect their rights. Pan Am insisted Fitzgerald's only recourse was a complaint to the Civil Aeronautics Board, the federal agency that then regulated U.S. airlines. A lower court ruled for Pan Am, but Ella won on appeal. The suit was settled out of court in 1956. For her trouble, the bumping and the ugly racism, Ella received \$73.67.

Aren't as familiar with Ella's music as you should be? She recorded almost as prolifically as she toured. Her [songbooks](#) are an acclaimed series of nine albums covering music created by some of America's greatest songwriters. Meanwhile, *Twelve Nights in Hollywood* is an astonishing posthumous [box set](#) recorded during a 1961 engagement at a Los Angeles nightclub. It captures Ella at her best in her absolute prime on the road. Then there is the bedrock for any Ella fan: her three albums with Louis Armstrong and the Oscar Peterson Quartet. Start with [Ella and Louis](#), the initial 1956 sessions. It's been called the "pinnacle of popular singing" and that may be an understatement. Finally, check out this [Tokyo concert](#) in October, 1983. It's fair to say Ella would have sung many of these tunes, using these arrangements, during her in-flight Continental gigs and the Stapleton Airport stop. There's a big band behind her, but Smith, Betts and Durham are with her.

---

*This column is Copyright © 2017 by [Joe Brancatelli](#). JoeSentMe.com is Copyright © 2017 by Joe Brancatelli. All rights reserved. All of the opinions and material in this column are the sole property and responsibility of Joe Brancatelli. This material may not be reproduced in any form without his express written permission.*