

Sixty years after signing her first record contract, Ethel Ennis still isn't singing the blues.

BY JOHN LEWIS

PHOTOGRAPAHY BY DEAN ALEXANDER

Hair and Makeup by Dean Krapf

Styling by Kim Chewning



Did you ever hear the one about Lady Day biting Miles Davis at Ethel Ennis's house? It's true. She bit him on the hand. And drew blood.

In the early-1960s, Ennis was living on Druid Hill Avenue, across from Union Baptist Church, and the famous trumpeter paid her a visit. A few years earlier, the two had shared a bill at New York's Village Vanguard, and Davis was a fan. At one point, he reached toward Ennis while they were talking, and Lady Day sunk her teeth into him.

Ennis explains that Lady Day was an English Cocker Spaniel, not a certain jazz singer with that nickname, and drops into one of her spot-on impressions, this time mimicking Davis's raspy voice. "That goddamn dog bit me," she says, before bursting into a laugh and clapping her hands. "Whew, he was not happy about that, and I did feel terrible at the time."

Sitting in the front room of the modest Mondawmin row home she's lived in since 1963, the 78-year-old Ennis exudes a playfulness that runs counter to any diva-esque attitude you might expect from the grand dame of Baltimore jazz. She's dressed comfortably, in a long white shirt, black slacks, and black slippers. In fact, the mere mention of the d-word is likely to be met with a sidelong glance and a droll reply that she was "raised better than that."

After 60 years in the music business—she signed her first recording contract in March 1951—Ennis retains a sense of good-humored modesty that would make her grandmother proud. She's toured the world, appeared numerous times on national TV, hobnobbed with a who's who of jazz greats (along with Miles, there was Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Cab Calloway, and Benny Goodman), and never let it go to her head. After performing at the 1973 Presidential Inauguration, she came home and cleaned the refrigerator.

Sitting across the room, her husband, Earl Arnett—a writer and former reporter for *The Sun*—chuckles at that last tidbit.

"Ethel performed for millions of people that day," he says, "and came home as if nothing happened. That's the way she's always been; she does everything her way."

And she usually does it with Arnett by her side. Married for 43 years, Ethel and Earl are the sort of couple that finish each other's sentences, trade inside jokes, and communicate on a variety of levels—sometimes wordlessly with just a glance or half-smile. A mixed-race couple, they were wed in Aspen in 1967, when such unions were still illegal in Maryland. The state's miscegenation laws were changed later that year.

No conversation about Ennis's life and legacy would be complete without Arnett in the room to jog her memory and fill in details to stories, of which there are many.

Ennis dislikes interviews—that sort of blatant self-promotion goes against her sense of modesty—so a visitor brings some old 78 records to discuss instead. After all, she can't resist great music.

Online
Exclusive!
SLIDESHOW:
MORE PHOTOS
OF OUR TOWN'S
STUNNING

### ENNIS SPOTS A COPY OF Bessie Smith's "I'm Wild

About that Thing" and flips it over—"You've Got to Give Me Some" is on the other side. "I'd love to hear that," she says, with a mischievous half-smile. "That title is so funny."

Ennis has been known to sing Smith's "Empty Bed Blues" at shows, but she usually shies from that sort of material. "I could never perform blues unless it was tongue in cheek," she explains. "The blues were always [sings in a deep voice], 'Ohhh, I woke up this morning, and I'm feeling so bad.' My grandmother always told me that sort of music was demeaning."

Ennis grew up in Sandtown-Winchester. Her mother, Bell, played piano at Ames United Methodist Church, and her father, Andrew Sr., worked long hours at his barber shop in Harlem Park. Her younger brother, Andrew Jr., played the clarinet and saxophone and went on to join Ray Charles's band. But it was her grandmother, Honey, who exerted the greatest influence on her.

"My grandmother taught me to be a lady," says Ennis, "and she expected me to always act like one. She also wanted me to sing



/LE CHAIR AT ARHA

things that would uplift the spirit and not dwell in sorrow."

Ennis went to Douglass High School, was captivated by rhythm and blues—especially "race records" by singers such as Nellie Lutcher and Camille Howard—and played piano in a local group, Riley's Octet. Though she was just 15 when she joined the band, her mother was surprisingly supportive, figuring that youngsters rehearsing music weren't out running the streets and getting in trouble. Honey called such music "common," but Ennis wasn't dissuaded. It was, after all, uplifting.

"And the guys were protective and never took advantage of me," recalls Ennis. "I liked being part of the gang."

One night at Randallstown's Oddfellows Hall, an audience member offered her a tip if she'd sing "In the Dark," but, at that point, she'd never sung in public—she was still just the piano player. But the five-dollar tip was too big to resist, and her angelic, full-throated singing brought the house down. The crowd demanded encores, and, from then on, she was a vocalist.

After graduating high school in 1950, Ennis went to business school during the day and continued performing at night, either as a solo act or with bassist Montell Poulson. She sang between acts at strip clubs on The Block and at a truckers' bar on Pulaski Highway. She and Poulson played mostly ballads, jazz tunes, and R&B at Phil's Lounge, The Zanzibar, and Pennsylvania Avenue's Club Casino.

One night, a New Yorker named George Fox dropped by Club Casino for a drink and was floored by what he heard. Fox owned a club at Pennsylvania and Fulton called The Red Fox, and he saw Ennis as the type of singer who could headline the Persian Room at The Plaza.

Fox made sure Ennis had a steady gig at The Red Fox for the next nine years. She never returned to business school.

But she always remembered her grandmother's advice: "Don't go against your grain for gain."

A BILLIE HOLIDAY RECORD CATCHES Ennis's eye—"Gloomy Sunday." On the label, under the title, it's described as "the famous Hungarian suicide song." One of Holiday's signature tunes, its pinched melancholia and fatalistic lyrics ("Gloomy is Sunday, with shadows I spend it all/My heart and I have decided to end it all") dovetailed perfectly with her tragic persona and decadent lifestyle. Holiday cast a long shadow for female vocalists trying to break into





### "Billie Holiday told me she really enjoyed my voice.

the business—especially if that vocalist was from Baltimore.

"For me, it's all about personal happiness, and I didn't want to live that kind of life," she says. "Earl, what did that manager once tell me?"

"She had a manager in New York," says Arnett, "who told her, 'You can either be happy, or you can have a career in show business. They don't go together."

"I've found that's a fairly common attitude," adds Ennis.

"That's why a lot of show people are fairly miserable in their personal lives," points out Arnett. "But that's not to say Ethel hasn't had some sorrow, too. Her first husband was abusive, and you would think the blues would come out of that, like with Billie Holiday."

"Uh-uh," says Ennis, shaking her head. "Noooo. I wrote a song about that period of my life. It went, 'Loving you made me a better woman"—she pauses—"for another man." She giggles and points toward Arnett, who beams back at her.

Ennis met attorney Jacques Leeds between sets one night at The Red Fox. They married in 1957 after dating for two years and would have seemed, to outside eyes, like the ultimate power couple. Ennis had scored a record deal, cut three acclaimed discs (Lullabys for Losers, Change of Scenery, and Have You Forgotten?), and had started getting national attention and bookings around the country. Leeds became city solicitor and was named Assistant State's Attorney General in 1960.

## She said she could tell I didn't fake it."

But Ennis says there were problems: Leeds was jealous of her success, drank too much, and was unfaithful. "One night, I came home from work," she recalls, "and there was Jacques and a girlfriend in bed, drunk as skunks."

She shakes her head, but, in typical fashion, can't resist injecting some levity: "I wouldn't have minded so much if she was on his side of the bed, but she was on my side."

That reminds her of a time the phone rang in the middle of the night, and she and Leeds were sound asleep. Ennis picked up the receiver, and the voice on the other end said it was Billie Holiday calling.

She immediately handed the phone to Leeds. "This is some-

body playing," she told him. "Can you deal with it?"

But it actually was Holiday. As it turns out, the two singers had a mutual friend, a Baltimore hairdresser named Sherry who often visited Holiday in New York. "One night, Billie asked Sherry, 'Who's that new bitch down in Baltimore?'" says Ennis, impersonating Holiday's voice. "I think she heard cuts from *Lullabys for Losers* on the radio, and the announcer mentioned that I was from Baltimore. Anyway, my friend said, 'Oh, that's Ethel, my friend. Let's give her a call."

After establishing that it wasn't some prankster, Ennis got back on the phone and spoke to Holiday. "She told me she really enjoyed my voice," says Ennis. "She said she could tell that I didn't fake it, and, if I kept singing like that, I would be famous."

ENNIS FLIPS THROUGH MORE RECORDS, a half-smile creasing her face as she comes across names from her past: "Cab Calloway. I worked with him at The Apollo and saw him years later at the Playboy Club.

"Ella Fitzgerald. She was shy, like me. She performed at my junior high school, Booker T. Washington, when I was in the eighth grade, and I got her autograph."

"Ella used to tell people that Ethel was one of her favorite singers, and that would get back to us from time to time," interjects Arnett.

"Benny Goodman," continues Ennis, reading the name off the record label. "In 1958, my manager heard he was looking for a vocalist for a European tour, so I auditioned for him. I accompanied myself on piano and sang 'I'll Take Romance.' Benny Goodman sat in his chair, listened, and smiled, as if to say, 'Don't call me. I'll call you.' A few weeks later, he called, and I got the job. No one was more surprised than me." She continues flipping through the stack.

"Dizzy Gillespie. One time, we were on a plane heading to the same jazz festival, and he got on the microphone and went into this spiel about Ethel Ennis being on the plane. He was impressed that I sang the national anthem a cappella at the Presidential Inauguration, and he told the people on the plane about it."

"That invitation came out of nowhere," says Arnett. "We got a call from the Office of the Vice President."

"I asked, 'The Vice President of what?" recalls Ennis. "They said, 'The Vice President of the United States,' and I said, 'Take

this, Earl. It's another nut."

The memory causes them to burst out laughing. Then, Arnett says: "It turns out [Spiro] Agnew was a fan. We never knew him when he was governor, and I don't think he even knew Ethel was from Baltimore. But he had Ethel's records, and that led to her singing the national anthem at the Republican convention in Miami and then at the inauguration. We weren't Republicans, but Agnew was a sincere fan and wanted to showcase Ethel; so we said, 'Okay.' After all, people are people, and, when you think about it like that, it's not much different from being here in Mondawmin."

"That's right," says Ennis, who's spotted another familiar name on a record: "Duke Ellington. He was a man CONTINUED ON PAGE 198

#### **PURE ETHEL**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 123 of few words. I performed with him on  $\it The$   $\it Bell\ Telephone\ Hour$  in the mid-1960s."

Arnett cues up a *Bell Telephone* clip on the TV. Florence Henderson introduces Ennis: "She's a Baltimore girl, and the word is that she's well on her way to being the biggest jazz attraction in years. She has taste and style, and she sings just right."

The audience applauds, and Ennis enters, singing, "When you're smiling, just keep on smiling/cause the whole world smiles with you." She looks completely at ease and composed for someone performing live on national TV. "I don't think about it," says Ennis. "I just do it. I guess I don't get nervous because I'm not ambitious. I always felt like, 'I don't belong here, but here I am."

In the next clip, Ennis strolls through a lighted gazebo—a prototypical variety-show set piece—wearing a green sleeveless gown and humming melodically. As she exits the gazebo, the camera swings around to catch her entering a stage filled with musicians. A row of trombonists gives the tune a brassy punch, as she begins singing, "Love you madly, right or wrong/sounds like the lyric of a song."

Ennis smooths the air with her hands, and the camera pulls back to reveal Ellington, dressed resplendently in a deep blue suit, City Fair and the first Artscape, headlining Afram, singing with the BSO, playing guitar at Coppin, cooking at a March of Dimes fundraiser, and returning from a visit to Xiamen, Baltimore's sister city in China. She's especially proud of an animated character, Ethel Earphone, that she played in *Book, Look, and Listen*, a children's show that aired on Maryland Public Television in the mid-1970s. She never had any children of her own.

There are also photos taken backstage at Ethel's Place, the club Arnett and Ennis opened in 1984. Located across the street from the Meyerhoff, it brought a wide range of top shelf acts to town—from Wynton Marsalis and Clifford Jordan to Doc Watson and Yo-Yo Ma.

"The idea was for it to be a gathering place, a focal point, and not just another nightclub," says Arnett. "And it gave Ethel a place to perform with her peers, and she could do what she wanted. But it never quite gelled the way I imagined, and even though we did some live TV and radio broadcasts, it didn't catch on as a production facility, which I'd hoped it would."

As a result, Ethel's Place closed in 1988.

"As you're doing all those different things, you don't really think about it," says Ennis, "but it's important to be involved in the community—you do, until it's done. And I believe you can bloom

# "It's important to be involved.... I believe you can bloom where you're planted."

playing a grand piano. As she continues singing, Ennis walks toward Ellington, and the camera comes in close. He can't take his eyes off her, and she pauses at his side before circling behind and laying both hands on his shoulders. Ellington flashes a smile, as his fingers move purposefully and gracefully across the keys and his feet bounce beneath them.

He stands to conduct the band, and, Ennis, after a final "I love you so maaaadly," leans across the empty stool and winds down the song with a playful piano solo, eliciting a look of approval from Ellington.

It's the sort of show-stopping performance that presages superstardom. Ennis has had such moments over the years, but the superstardom never followed, which is fine with her. She's goodnatured about it, content that she opted for sanity and longevity.

"You know, Ethel may be the only singer still performing who has worked onstage with Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman, Cab Calloway, Lionel Hampton, Louis Armstrong, and Count Basie," Arnett points out. "That makes her somewhat historical."

Not missing a beat, Ennis quips, "And that's *hyster*ical."

THE NATION'S LOSS HAS BEEN Baltimore's gain. Although she continued to perform and record over the years—her 1998 CD, *If Women Ruled the World*, was especially noteworthy with gorgeous renditions of songs by the likes of Joni Mitchell and Bonnie Raitt—Ennis stuck close to home and contributed mightily to Baltimore's renaissance.

Looking through Ennis's photo albums, you get an idea how important she's been to this city. There are shots of her hobnobbing with Muhammad Ali at a fundraiser at Centerstage, rehearsing for a flood relief telethon after Hurricane Agnes, performing at the first

where you're planted, so there has always been a kinship between the city and myself."

So it's surprising to hear that Arnett and Ennis might move to the Southwest. Arnett has family in Arizona, and the couple visited the area three times in 2010 and seem quite taken with it. "But we haven't actually found the perfect place," says Ennis, "and I'd hate to have to move all this stuff that we've collected over the years. But we're thinking about it."

The timing might be right. Arnett just completed a long stint of community work, twice serving as president of the Greater Mondawmin Coordinating Council, and wants to write a memoir. He expects Ennis will be productive for years to come. "I believe Ethel will be one of those rare performers who will continue working into her 80s," he says, before mentioning that she'll be performing at Montpelier Arts Center in Laurel on March 11 and recording with pianist Larry Willis later in the year.

"We just need a little more space and a little more quiet to do the things we want to do before we depart the scene," says Arnett.

"We might be in the West," adds Ennis, "but we will definitely be together."

A final selection from the stack of records Ennis is holding seems appropriate—Sarah Vaughan's version of Kurt Weill's "September Song."

Ennis has long admired Vaughan as a vocalist, and it's easy to imagine her and Arnett singing along to the final verse:

Oh, the days dwindle down to a precious few September, November

And these few precious days I'll spend with you These precious days I'll spend with you 

• These precious days I'll spend with you •