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🎵 | PLAYLIST: MOLLY RINGWALD



They Didn't Break Me

An actress turned singer reveres Ella Fitzgerald's real-time recovery during a 1960 concert

Singer-actress Molly Ringwald, 46, will appear at New York's Café Carlyle with her trio Oct. 7-18. She spoke to Marc Myers.

When Ella Fitzgerald forgets the lyrics to "How High the Moon" during a live performance on the album "Mack the Knife: Ella in Berlin" (1960), she makes up new ones and scats the rest. It's an exhilarating, high-speed performance that comes right after the same thing happened on the previous song—"Mack the Knife"—a recovery that helped her win two Grammys.

I first heard this recording of "How High the Moon" [by Nancy Hamilton and Morgan Lewis] on a plane with my dad when I was around 14. I found Ella so inspiring. Her clarity, her spontaneity and her musicianship swept me away. She didn't sound like a singer but a member of the quartet playing behind her.

What's most exciting is

how she first admits she has forgotten the words—going into this sort of free fall—and then manages to save the song by improvising. You're hanging on to her as she races along, and there's

of course, is that she also had to be musical.

It's amazing to hear Ella—who was so technically perfect—mess up. For me, it makes her and the music so much more interesting.

Through imperfection, you gain insight into her personality and virtuosity. Characters in film are only as interesting as their flaws, and I think the same is true for music.

I've never scatted "How High the Moon"—I'm not a scat singer. But I have put on Ella's version and tried to sing along in the car while driving my kids around. When I do, I get those looks in the rearview mirror, like, "Mom is

playing her weird music again." But I think I'm going to play Ella's version for my 10-year-old daughter. I suspect she'll like it. Kids love when adults screw up and bounce back.

► Listen to the song at WSJ.com/review.



ELLA FITZGERALD performs in Chicago in 1958.

this wonderful urgency and breathlessness about her voice.

As an actress, I'm constantly terrified by forgetting dialogue or lyrics. But you're going to forget things. You need to be agile enough to improv your way out of it. The extra challenge for Ella,