

KURT ELLING BIOGRAPHY

Renowned for his singular combination of robust swing and poetic insight, GRAMMY winner **Kurt Elling** has secured his place among the world's foremost jazz vocalists. Declared "the standout male vocalist of our time" by *The New York Times*, Elling has garnered unprecedented accolades, including a fourteen-year run atop the *DownBeat* Critics Poll, a dozen GRAMMY nominations, and eight Jazz Journalists Association awards for "Male Singer of the Year."

Elling's voice is instantly recognizable, embracing listeners with his warm, rich baritone and navigating the full span of his four-octave range as a virtuoso instrumentalist and a compelling storyteller. Whether transforming timeless standards or crafting his own enthralling originals, Elling balances elegant lyricism and technical mastery with wry humor, profound emotional depth, and keen observations into the human condition.

"Elling combines authenticity with stunning originality," is how *The Wall Street Journal* describes his talents, while *The Guardian* has called him "a kind of Sinatra with superpowers." *The Toronto Star* has gone so far as to say that "Kurt Elling is the closest jazz will ever get to having its own saint," while *The Guardian* makes up one voice in a chorus that has called him "one of jazz's all-time great vocalists."

Elling's most recent release, *The Questions*, vividly exemplifies his ability to respond to the world around him with both urgent immediacy and a unique perspective. Co-produced by NEA Jazz Master and acclaimed saxophonist Branford Marsalis, the album searches for answers to the culture's most divisive social, political and spiritual issues in the songs of Bob Dylan, Carla Bley and Leonard Bernstein, and the poetry of Rumi and Wallace Stevens. His wide-ranging repertoire and thoughtful approach led *The Times* of London to applaud Elling for creating "a calm arena where patriotism and protest become poetry and peace."

Elling has not only thrilled audiences around the world in jazz clubs, symphony halls and festival stages, but at the White House, where he gave a command performance for President Obama's first state dinner. He has collaborated with jazz legends and classical orchestras; created multi-disciplinary theatrical works for the Steppenwolf Theatre and the City of Chicago; served as Artist-in-Residence for the Singapore and Monterey Jazz Festivals; and explored the fertile common ground between jazz and poetry, working with the words of Allen Ginsberg, Rainer Maria Rilke, Pablo Neruda and others.

Elling had previously joined Marsalis and his long-running Quartet for 2016's GRAMMY-nominated *Upward Spiral*, which *All About Jazz* hailed as "suffused with graciousness, beauty, and, on occasion, heartbreak." The fruitful collaboration has continued (alongside a heated, if tongue-in-cheek, Twitter rivalry), with Marsalis praising Elling for "the ability to create color with his voice that is really unique. Much like Billie Holiday, he can change the sound of his voice to match the emotion that's required for the song."

Elling's recent discography showcases his remarkable versatility. *The Questions* was preceded by *The Beautiful Day*, a decidedly non-traditional Christmas album that celebrated the season's unifying themes of hope, faith and goodwill. *Passion World* found Elling on a musical world tour, charting the course of romance through songs from Brazil, Ireland, Germany, Scotland, Cuba and elsewhere. He stuck closer to

home with GRAMMY-nominated *1619 Broadway – The Brill Building Project*, delighting in the era-defining songs that emanated from that iconic Manhattan address. *The Gate*, produced by the legendary Don Was and also GRAMMY-nominated, featured Elling's stunning interpretations of songs from Miles Davis to King Crimson. He was awarded the GRAMMY for *Dedicated to You: Kurt Elling Sings the Music of Coltrane and Hartman*, recorded live at Jazz at Lincoln Center.

A native of Chicago, Elling began singing in Windy City clubs at night while studying at the University of Chicago Divinity School by day – a balance of the spiritual and the sensual that he would eventually strike in his music. He became known in the mid-'90s via his now-legendary run at the city's revered Green Mill Lounge, making his debut on Blue Note Records with *Close Your Eyes* in 1995. That album not only secured Elling his first GRAMMY nomination but showcased many of the aspects that came to define his sound: a mix of jazz standards and original compositions, the union of poetry and music, and Elling's gift for vocalese.

Over the ensuing years, Elling has become one of the music's most renowned practitioners of vocalese, the writing and performing of words over improvised jazz solos. Advancing the innovations made by pioneers like Eddie Jefferson, King Pleasure and Jon Hendricks, Elling has set his own lyrics to the solos of jazz giants including John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, Keith Jarrett and Pat Metheny, often incorporating images and references from writers such as Rilke, Rumi, and Neruda into his work. Said Robert Pinsky, former Poet Laureate of the United States, "In Kurt Elling's art, the voice of jazz gives a new spiritual presence to the ancient, sweet and powerful bond between poetry and music."

Elling has strengthened that bond in countless ways throughout his career. In 1998, he undertook a critical, multi-dimensional exploration of the life and work of Beat poet Allen Ginsberg at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre that the *Chicago Tribune* called, "an evening of poetry and music informed by a sense of morality, as well as an aversion to politically correct points of view." He later collaborated with poet Gwendolyn Brooks, author and historian Studs Terkel, word-jazz artist Ken Nordine, blues legend Buddy Guy, members of the Joffrey Ballet, and visual artists Ed Paschke and Tony Fitzpatrick on "This Is Our Music, These Are Our People," a ground-breaking event in honor of the City of Chicago's millennial celebration.

Elling's collaborations also include his fellow vocalists: in 2002 he produced the vocal summit "Four Brothers" at Chicago's Park West Theater, which featured Elling, Mark Murphy, Kevin Mahogany, and Jon Hendricks – launching a tour that ended with a final blowout performance in Chicago's Millennium Park, featuring the great Sheila Jordan and re-christened "Three Brotha's and a Motha." Along with Kate McGarry he performed the words of Walt Whitman for pianist/composer Fred Hersch's acclaimed song cycle *Leaves of Grass* in 2004.

Taking the long view of Elling's audacious and richly varied career, the *Washington Post* lauded, "Since the mid-1990s, no singer in jazz has been as daring, dynamic or interesting as Kurt Elling. With his soaring vocal flights, his edgy lyrics and sense of being on a musical mission, he has come to embody the creative spirit in jazz."