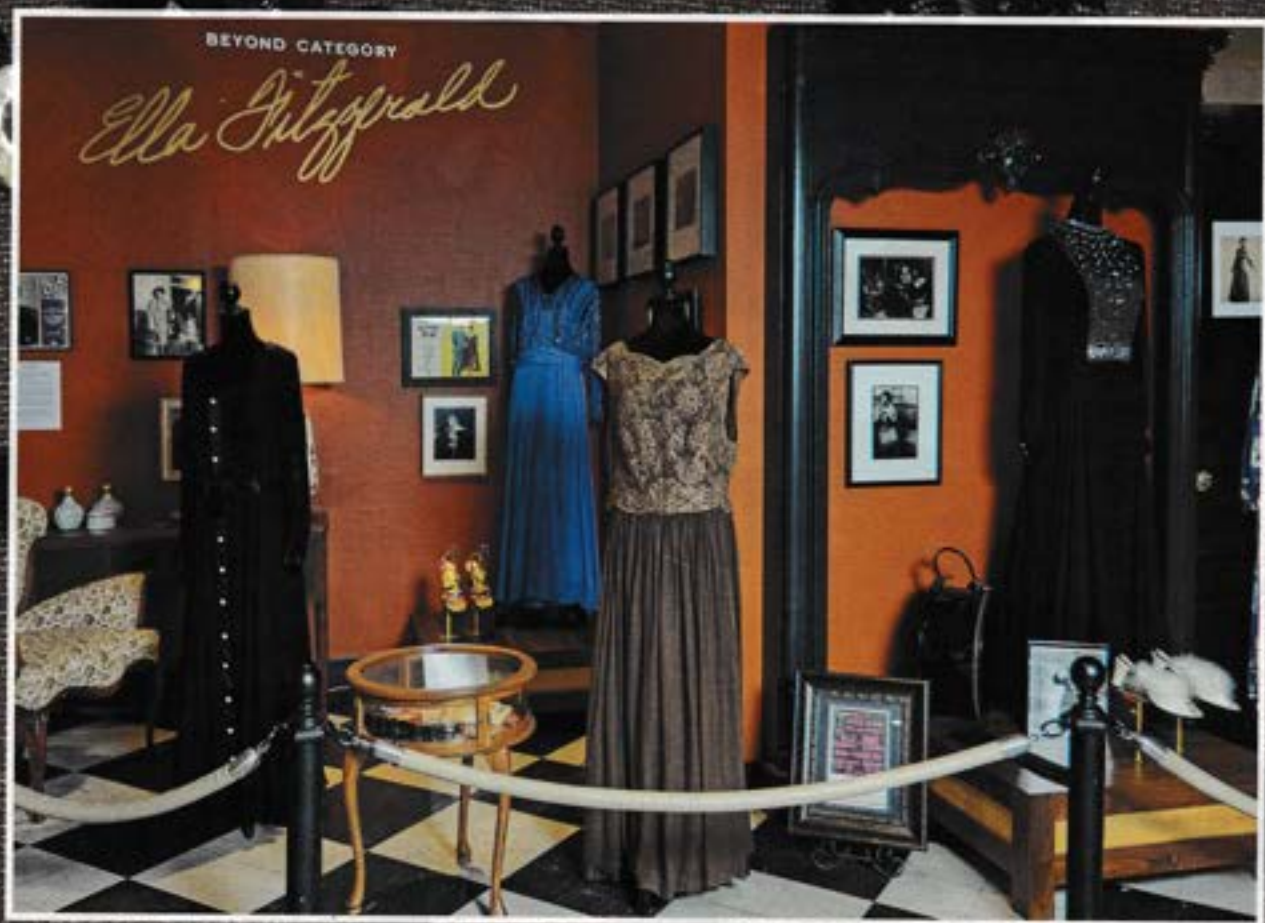


Don Loper Dresses

ELLA Fitzgerald

His fluid gown designs for the jazz icon featured details 'oh so nice'

BY MARY FUNT AND JEANNINE CLEGG



Couture gowns designed by Don Loper for world-renowned jazz vocalist Ella Fitzgerald are featured in an exhibit honoring her and her contributions to music at The Jazz Loft museum and performance space in Stony Brook, New York. The exhibit, "Ella Fitzgerald: Beyond Category," is on display indefinitely.

An exhibit honoring Ella Fitzgerald (1917–1996) at The Jazz Loft museum and performance space in Stony Brook, New York, features six gowns worn by the revered jazz artist, including several Don Loper designs.

The finely constructed dresses are displayed with 200 Ella Fitzgerald items, including photos and album covers showing the First Lady of Song performing in the gowns. Though many fans may remember and admire Fitzgerald's elegant dresses from her performances, few have seen the thoughtful designs and their meticulous construction up close.

The dresses at The Jazz Loft were created by Loper (Lincoln George Hardloper, 1907–1972), a dancer, costume and set designer, and a choreographer turned fashion designer to the stars. Loper's clientele included silver screen stars Jane Russell, Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford, Lana Turner, and Claudette Colbert, among others. His lavish creations captured the days of Hollywood glamour.

They were even the focus of an episode on the television hit *I Love Lucy* in 1955. In "The Fashion Show" sketch, Loper plays himself introducing one extravagant ensemble after another.

For Fitzgerald, Loper designed gowns with fluidity. They were tastefully adorned and fitted for the 13-time Grammy winner who had once aspired to be a dancer. Instead, she chose to share her unforgettable voice that could scat, swing, and improvise. Today, her impact on the music world cannot be overstated.

The couture construction techniques on Fitzgerald's gowns are worth examining. On the following pages, see details from these designs and how to incorporate three techniques from them into your next garment.

Couture expert Mary Funt, CloningCouture.com, provides the steps for techniques that she and Threads managing editor Jeannine Clegg discovered in the gowns. Special thanks to The Jazz Loft and founder/president Thomas Manuel for access to the collection.



From Dancer to Designer

Designer Don Loper, called California's Arrogant Couturier by the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1960, showed creativity and love of fashion as a boy. He helped design the windows of his father's clothing store in Toledo, Ohio. He also took ballet lessons, which led him to a successful dancing career.



In 1942, he danced with Ginger Rogers in *Lady in the Dark* and appeared in several more movies. Before that, he and dance partner Maxine Barrat appeared on Broadway, at Radio City Music Hall, and at top nightclubs, including New York's Copacabana. There, he also designed the costumes and produced the floor show, which included creating some of his dance partner's garments for onstage and off.

A big personality, Loper secured a six-way contract with film giant MGM as a producer, director, choreographer, performer, and costume and scenic designer, which ended in 1946, the *Saturday Evening Post* reported. It was the same year he and partner Charles Northrup opened a couture salon on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood. In 1951, they moved the fashion boutique to Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills.

Loper's portfolio also included interior design, ready-to-wear women's clothing, neckties and other men's accessories, suits for flight attendants at Pan Am and Eastern Airlines, and uniforms for nurses. The Advance pattern company sold at least two Don Loper-designed patterns: a dress and coat-cape ensemble from 1962, and a women's two-piece suit. He also designed patterns, including a coatdress in 1968, for Modes Royale, the high-end American mail-order pattern company.



web extra

For more images of the couture gowns and to learn how they were acquired, visit ThreadsMagazine.com.

It's Deluxe, It's De-Lovely

DRESS DETAILS

The midnight blue silk charmeuse and silk chiffon gown that Fitzgerald wore in concert and on the cover of her 1972 *Ella Loves Cole* vinyl album, released by Atlantic Recording, features 12 rhinestone buttons down the front placket. The bound buttonholes, nonworking on the bodice and working on the skirt, are meant to frame the showy buttons. The real working closure is the zipper in back, which is mostly concealed by vertical tucks. In front, vertical tucks also are worked cleverly into the bodice's front darts. A charmeuse bow belt is tacked in place in front and closed with hook and eye in back. The dress is lined with a more durable fabric. Interior details include lingerie guards at the shoulder seams.

The full chiffon skirt over-layer is unattached from the zipper closure. Small tears at the skirt's hem and on the back of one chiffon bishop sleeve near the armhole were repaired masterfully.



Exquisitely constructed bound buttonholes frame high-profile rhinestone buttons down the gown's front placket. In addition, a silk charmeuse bow is tacked at the front waist. It closes with a hook and eye over the center-back zipper.





NARROW BOUND BUTTONHOLES

The dark navy gown has the narrowest bound buttonholes I've ever seen. They are fabricated from silk charmeuse. Charmeuse folds more sharply along the lengthwise grain than the cross-grain; for the narrowest buttonholes, fold the lips along the lengthwise grain. —Mary Funt

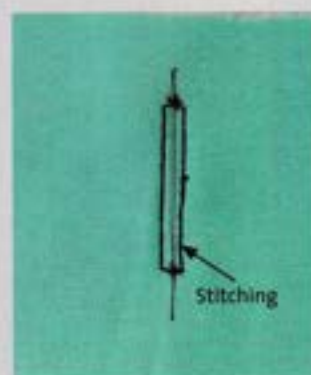
- 1 Interface the garment fabric with lightweight fusible interfacing.** However, avoid interfacing the fabric patch that will form the buttonhole lips. Position the charmeuse patch, right sides together, making sure the patch's lengthwise grain is parallel to the buttonhole opening mark.



- 2 Mark the stitching lines.** For the buttonhole lips to be this narrow yet perfectly parallel to each other, marking can be tricky. Try placing a piece of narrow tape—I used 1/8-inch-wide auto striping tape—that is cut to the exact length of the finished buttonhole.



- 3 Stitch around the tape.** Use a fine needle, lightweight cotton thread, and 0.5-mm stitch length. Start and stop stitching midway along one long edge. Overlap a few stitches where you start and stop stitching; don't backstitch. Remove the tape.



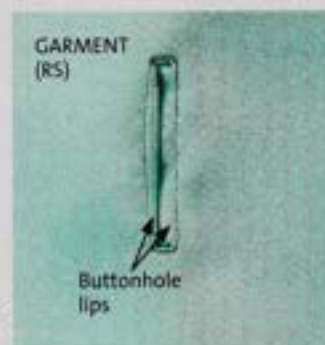
- 4 With a sharp blade, make a slit exactly in the middle of the stitched rectangle.** Stop about 1/8 inch from each end and clip diagonally exactly to the corners.



- 5 Push the patch through the slit to the wrong side.** Fold back the patch and finger-press open the narrow seam allowances of the garment fabric and patch. These seam allowances are only 1/16 inch wide, but you can coax them open.

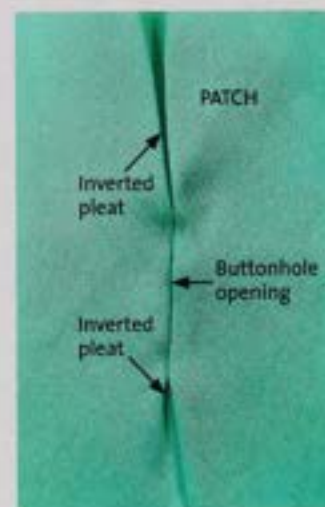


- 6 Fold the patch around the seam allowance, forming the buttonhole lips.** Make sure both lips are the same width and meet in the center of the buttonhole.



On the garment's wrong side, a tiny inverted pleat will form at each end of the buttonhole on the patch fabric.

No additional finishing was required on the exhibit gown, as the buttonholes wouldn't be used. If you want functional buttonholes, secure the lips on the wrong side with small hand stitches.



Nothing But Blue Skies

DRESS DETAILS

This is a heavy gown, due to the many rows of bugle beads, sequins, and blue rhinestones covering the V-neck bodice and long sleeves. The circular chiffon skirt includes a gathered and tacked chiffon sash that folds over itself and drapes in front and closes with a hook and eye in back. The zippered closure is at center back. Inside, the lining and a deep, pinked edge facing provide added support to the heavily beaded exterior. Underarm dress shields tacked to each armscye seam helped prevent perspiration stains.



A gathered and tacked matching chiffon sash closes with a hook and eye over the zipper at center back. Inside the lined gown, removable underarm dress shields protect the gown from stains.



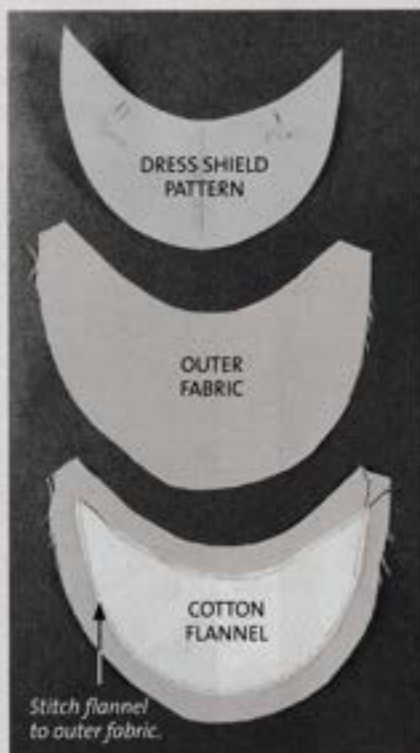
PROTECT THE GOWN WITH DRESS SHIELDS

Underarm shields are often used in stagewear and performers' clothing, which must withstand frequent wearing. They are easy to construct and add to your own garments. For a sleeveless top, trace the underarm section of a garment or trace the underarm section of the pattern. The noted dimensions are approximate and can be altered. —Mary Funt

FOR SLEEVELESS GARMENTS

- 1 For each shield, cut one layer of absorbent cotton (cotton flannel works best) plus two layers of lightweight silk or cotton. Add $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch-wide seam allowances for the silk/cotton outer layers. Trim $\frac{1}{8}$ inch away from all sides of the cotton flannel layer.

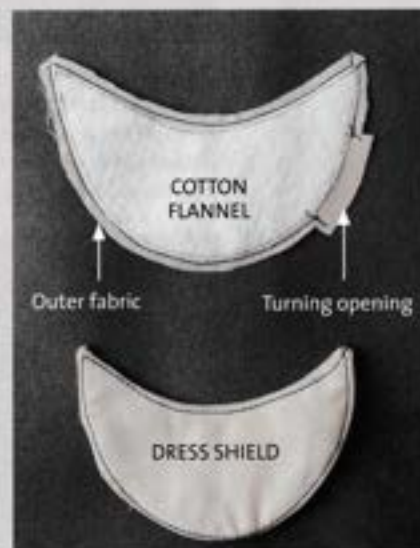
Center the cotton flannel layer on one outer fabric piece. Stitch around the flannel's edge to secure it.



- 2 Place the layers right sides together and stitch around the edges, leaving an opening to turn. Turn right side out and close the opening with hand stitches. Press.

For an easier finish, with right sides together, stitch just the underarm curved section. Press the seam open and fold along the seamline. Now the unfinished outer edges are aligned, with wrong sides together. Stitch along the raw edge. Trim, serge, pink, or overcast the raw edge.

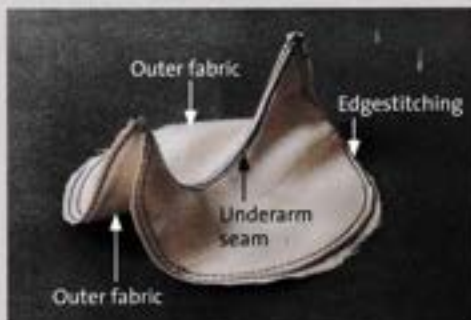
Tack the shield to the garment along the underarm. Alternatively, sew tiny snaps at the shield points and corresponding snaps to the dress interior.



FOR GARMENTS WITH SLEEVES

- 1 Cut two flannel layers and four outer fabric layers for each shield. Stitch the two flannel layers to two outer fabric layers. Stitch the two flannel-backed layers together along the underarm seam. Stitch the two plain outer layers together along the underarm seam.

- 2 With the sections wrong sides together, align the outer edges. Stitch in the ditch along the underarm seam. Finish the raw outer edges with edgestitching.



- 3 Sandwich the garment's underarm curve between the shield layers and secure with thread tacks or small snaps.



Making the Darkest Night Shine

DRESS DETAILS

The black beaded dress with high neck has an inset waistband with bejeweled front "buckle." Its heavily embellished bodice is backed by a light-colored lining, which highlights the adornment. The gown's bias skirt, in silk crinkle chiffon, is a half circle in front and two quarter circles in back. The sheer bishop sleeves echo the skirt's lightness, though they are made in a different fabric than the skirt. A zipper closes the dress at center back.



Sewn-on beads and rhinestones elevate this gown to the status of special garment. Fitzgerald wore this dress repeatedly through the years. The light-colored lining made the embellishment more visible and drew attention to her face—and her vocal mastery.



HEM BIAS-CUT SKIRTS

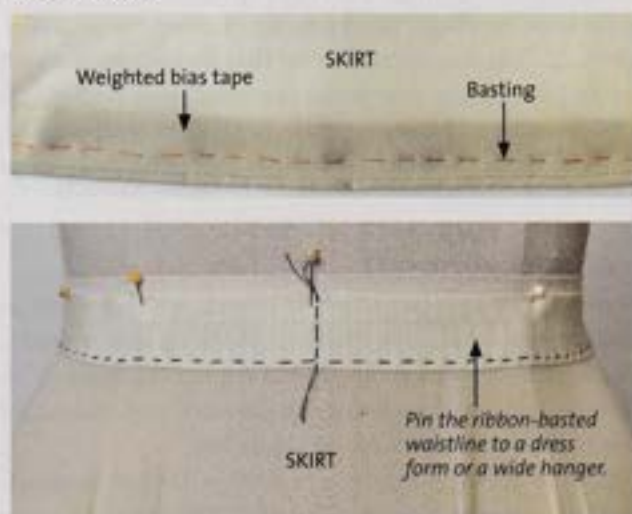
Loper's designs for the jazz vocalist had full, or nearly full, circle skirts cut from silk chiffon. For a full circle skirt, two half-circles of chiffon are cut with the lengthwise grain forming the side seams. The center seam, or fold, is on the cross-grain.

If you cut and hem a circular piece of fabric, when hung, the fabric stretches out differently over time, resulting in an irregular length hem. To compensate for this, I have adapted a method described in Betty Kirke's book, *Madeleine Vionnet* (Chronicle, 2012). Kirke writes that she was taught by one of Vionnet's employees to attach weights along the garment's lower edge, hang the garment sections, and allow the weights to stretch the fabric. Rather than attach individual weights (which might stretch the fabric unevenly), I recommend distributing the weight evenly along the hemline. —Mary Funt

- 1 Create weighted bias tape.** Use a strip of 2-inch-wide bias tape about 4 yards long. This is long enough for one half of most circular skirts. To weight both skirt halves, make two of these. Fold the bias tape over weighted lead drapery cording and stitch.



- 2 Attach the prepared tape.** Baste the weighted tape to the skirt's bottom edge. Baste the waistline of the skirt to a waistband or length of ribbon. Pin the waistband to a dress form and leave the skirt to hang for a couple days. The weighted tape encourages the fabric to stretch. If you don't have a dress form, pin the waistband to the wall or a wide hanger. Notice that the two selvages are now shorter than the midpoints between the sides and center. The center has stretched a little but the bias grains are now much longer.



- 3 Remove the weighted tape.** Note: If you don't remove the weighted tape before marking, the hemline will be too short. Cut the skirt 1 inch longer than the finished length. Fold up the fabric edge $\frac{3}{4}$ inch, press, and stitch close to the folded edge.

- 4 Trim the hem.** With sharp scissors, trim the excess fabric close to the stitching.



- 5 Fold the hem edge up again and stitch close to the previous stitching.** Press.



tip

CHOOSE THREAD AND STITCHING CAREFULLY. Lightweight cotton thread produces a fine hem finish. Change to a straight stitch throat plate and use a size 65, 70, or 75 needle for the best results.

UP CLOSE

Don Loper, an American fashion designer to many stars in the mid-20th century, created this gown.

It was rediscovered in a cache of items from the late jazz icon Ella Fitzgerald. The lined couture dress has a fitted lace bodice and gathered silk chiffon skirt. The bodice lace slightly overlaps and conceals a corded and angled waist seam, which holds the skirt's extensive chiffon gathers. The center-back zipper is attached unobtrusively to the bodice and the skirt lining, without catching the delicate chiffon outer layer. Hand stitching is evident throughout the dress, such as at the skirt's deep hem. Inside, a built-in corset includes an elastic underbust stay. To learn about other Loper designs for Fitzgerald, turn to p. 42.



Photos: Peter Coco Photography
Source: The Jazz Loft, Scarborough, New York
Text: Jennifer Deeg

