

# ALL THAT'S JAZZ

by Tom O'Neill



## NAT KING COLE

[This is the thirty-third article about legendary figures in the Jazz world, presenting little-known facts about those artists, about whom we thought we knew everything, or as time went on, had forgotten.]

Your first impression of Nat is probably his soft, smooth, silky baritone voice, singing pop ballads like *A Blossom Fell*, *Nature Boy* and *Mona Lisa*, not exactly jazz standards. But that would ignore his jazz roots, which were substantial.

Nathaniel Adam Coles was born in Montgomery, Alabama on St. Patrick's Day, March 17, 1919. When in his mid-teens, Nat used his formal piano training, not his voice, to join up with brother Eddie, who played bass, and played a variety of clubs, even recording in 1936 at age 17. Soon, Cole, dropping the 's' in his surname, was touring nationally with *Eubie Blake's Revue*, as a jazz pianist. When the tour folded, in Long Beach, Nat decided to stay in the Los Angeles area, forming a trio known as the "King Cole Trio." The group played a lot of club dates, creating quite a following, and, in the late 30s, was booked on several major radio networks' shows. But still, he remained Nat, the jazz pianist.

The popular legend is that his singing career took off only after one inebriated club patron heckled him unmercifully to sing a tune that Cole didn't know. Instead he sang *Sweet Lorraine*, earning a tip for the trio of 15 cents, a nickel apiece! After that, he noticed his fans were requesting more and more vocals, and he obliged them, inserting his voice into many of the trio's instrumentals. This only added to the group's soaring popularity, and the upstart Capitol Records signed them to the label in 1943. It was Johnny Mercer who convinced Capitol to record Nat and his original composition, *Straighten Up and Fly Right*, which was based on one of his preacher-father's sermons. The record sold over a half million copies! Largely fueled by revenues over the next dozen years from a string of Cole's hits, it's believed that Capitol Records opted to build their very unique headquarters near Hollywood & Vine, which was completed in 1956. It was one of the first circular office buildings, and it was dubbed "the house that Nat built."

Cole never fully abandoned his jazz roots, releasing an all-jazz album in 1956 called *After Midnight*. But by now, his recordings would today be termed "crossover," in that the artist began to sing more and more ballads and pop tunes. In late 1956, NBC debuted *The Nat King Cole Show*, the first television variety show hosted by an African-American. As a sign of those times, controversy swirled, and in about one year, due to the lack of a national sponsor, the show folded. Always the gentleman, but showing his frustration, Cole quipped "Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark."



Musical tastes are always changing, and the demand for Cole's product began to wane. Yet in the 60s, he scored big with such hits as *Let There Be Love*, *Ramblin' Rose*, and *Those Lazy-Hazy-Crazy Days Of Summer*. But his three-pack-a-day romance with Kool Menthol's took its toll, felling this musical giant with lung cancer. He died in Santa Monica on February 15, 1965. He was not yet 46 years of age.

In his personal life, Cole and his second wife, Maria, raised five children. Stories concerning two of their children stand out in my mind. Referring to Nat's versatility, his daughter, Carole, recalled, in an *American Masters* documentary, that "Dad also enjoyed the music of other cultures and made it a point to sing at least one of his signature tunes in the language of the country he was visiting." In fact, Nat went to Havana, Cuba, in 1958 and recorded *Cole Español*, an album sung entirely in Spanish.

The second story is more familiar to us, where daughter Natalie, only 15 years old at the time of Nat's death in 1965, as a child had always wanted to sing with her Dad, but never got the chance. Then in 1991, helped by the magic of recording electronics, was able to lay down her superimposed vocal track on Nat's hit *Unforgettable*, effectively dueting with her father some forty years after his original recording. In 1992, the song and album of the same name won seven Grammy awards.

What is your all-time favorite Nat King Cole song? My vote goes to what some refer to as the *Chestnuts Roasting...* tune, but actually entitled *The Christmas Song*, a perfect vehicle for the man with the soft, smooth, silky baritone voice that most likely will always be "unforgettable."

*Tom and his wife Cheryl perform locally as "Just Me 2", a live music duo specializing in songs from the Great American Songbook. They can be reached at (772) 532-5054 or at [www.JustMeLiveMusic.com](http://www.JustMeLiveMusic.com). See them on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic](http://www.facebook.com/JustMeLiveMusic)*