

# Nat King Cole

## Background information

Birth name	Nathaniel Adams Coles
Also known as	Nat Cole
Born	March 17, 1919 <div>Montgomery, Alabama, U.S.</div>
Died	February 15, 1965 (aged 45) <div>Santa Monica, California, U.S.</div>
Genres	Vocal jazz, swing, traditional pop
Occupation(s)	Vocalist, pianist
Instruments	Piano, vocals, organ
Years active	1935–1965

Labels	Capitol
Associated acts	Natalie Cole, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin

Nathaniel Adams Coles (March 17, 1919 – February 15, 1965), known professionally as Nat King Cole, was an American singer who first came to prominence as a leading jazz pianist. He was widely noted for his soft, baritone voice, which he used to perform in big band and jazz genres and which he used to become a major force in popular music for 3 decades producing many hit songs for Cole.

Cole was one of the first African Americans to host a national television variety show, The Nat King Cole Show, and has maintained worldwide popularity since his death from lung cancer in February 1965.

## Early life

Nathaniel Adams Coles was born in Montgomery, Alabama, on March 17, 1919. Cole had three brothers: Eddie, Ike, and Freddy, and a half-sister, Joyce Coles. Ike and Freddy would later pursue careers in music as well. When Cole was four years old, he and his family moved to Chicago, Illinois, where his father, Edward Coles, became a Baptist minister. Cole learned to play the organ from his mother, Perlina Coles, the church organist. His first performance was of "Yes! We Have No Bananas" at age four. He began formal lessons at 12, eventually learning not only jazz and gospel music, but also Western classical music, performing, as he said, "from Johann Sebastian Bach to Sergei Rachmaninoff".

The family lived in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago, where he attended Wendel Phillips High School (the same school Sam Cooke would attend a few years later). Cole would sneak out of the house and hang around outside the clubs, listening to artists such as Louis Armstrong, Earl Hines, and Jimmie Noone. He participated in Walter Dyett's renowned music program at DuSable High School.

## Career

Inspired by the performances of Earl Hines, Cole began his performing career in the mid-1930s while still a teenager, adopting the name Nat Cole. His older brother, Eddie, a bass player, soon joined Cole's band, and they made their first recording in 1936 under Eddie's name. They also were regular performers at clubs. Cole acquired his nickname, "King", performing at one jazz club, a nickname presumably reinforced by the otherwise unrelated nursery rhyme about "Old King Cole". He also was a pianist in a national tour of Broadway theatre legend Eubie Blake's revue *Shuffle Along*. When it suddenly failed in Long Beach, California, Cole decided to remain there. He would later return to Chicago in triumph to play such venues as the famed Edgewater Beach Hotel.

## Los Angeles and the King Cole Trio

Cole and two other musicians formed the "King Cole Swingsters" in Long Beach and played in a number of local bars before getting a gig on the Long Beach Pike for US\$90 (\$1,530 today) per week. The trio consisted of Cole on piano, Oscar Moore on guitar, and Wesley Prince on double bass. The trio played in Failsworth throughout the late 1930s and recorded many radio transcriptions for Capitol Transcriptions. Cole was not only pianist but leader of the combo as well.

Radio was important to the King Cole Trio's rise in popularity. Their first broadcast was with NBC's Blue Network in 1938. It was followed by appearances on NBC's Swing Soiree. In the 1940s, the trio appeared on the Old Gold, Chesterfield Supper Club and Kraft Music Hall radio shows. The King Cole Trio performed twice on CBS Radio's variety show The Orson Welles Almanac (1944).

Legend was that Cole's singing career did not start until a drunken barroom patron demanded that he sing "Sweet Lorraine". Cole, in fact, has gone on record saying that the fabricated story "sounded good, so I just let it ride". Cole frequently sang in between instrumental numbers. Noticing that people started to request more vocal numbers, he obliged. Yet the story of the insistent customer is not without some truth. There was a customer who requested a certain song one night, but it was a song that Cole did not know, so instead he sang "Sweet Lorraine". The trio was tipped 15 cents (\$0.85 today) for the performance, a nickel apiece.

During World War II, Wesley Prince left the group and Cole replaced him with Johnny Miller. Miller would later be replaced by Charlie Harris in the 1950s. The King Cole Trio signed with the fledgling Capitol Records in 1943. The group had previously recorded for Excelsior Records, owned by Otis René, and had a hit with the song "I'm Lost", which René wrote, produced and distributed. Revenues from Cole's record sales fueled much of Capitol Records' success during this period. The revenue is believed to have played a significant role in financing the distinctive Capitol Records building near Hollywood and Vine in Los Angeles. Completed in 1956, it was the world's first circular office building and became known as "The House that Nat Built".

Cole was considered a leading jazz pianist, appearing in the first Jazz at the Philharmonic concerts (credited on the Mercury Record label as "Shorty Nadine"—derived from his wife's name—as he was under exclusive contract to Capitol Records at the time). His revolutionary lineup of piano, guitar, and bass in the time of the big bands became a popular setup for a jazz trio. It was emulated by many musicians, among them Art Tatum, Oscar Peterson, Ahmad Jamal, and blues pianists Charles Brown and Ray Charles. He also performed as a pianist on sessions with Lester Young, Red Callender, and Lionel Hampton. For contract reasons, Cole was credited as "Aye Guy" on the album The Lester Young Buddy Rich Trio.

## Success

I started out to become a jazz pianist; in the meantime I started singing and I sang the way I felt and that's just the way it came out.

— Nat King Cole, Voice of America interview

Cole's first mainstream vocal hit was his 1943 recording of one of his compositions, "Straighten Up and Fly Right", based on a black folk tale that his father had used as a theme for a sermon. Johnny Mercer invited him to record it for his fledgling Capitol Records label. It sold over 500,000 copies, proving that folk-based material could appeal to a wide audience. Although Cole would never be considered a rocker, the song can be seen as anticipating the first rock and roll records. Indeed, Bo Diddley, who performed similar transformations of folk material, counted Cole as an influence.

In 1946, the Cole trio paid to have their own 15-minute radio program on the air. It was called, "King Cole Trio Time." It became the first radio program sponsored by a black performing artist. During those years, the trio recorded many "transcription" recordings, which were recordings made in the radio studio for the broadcast. Later they were used for commercial records.

Beginning in the late 1940s, Cole began recording and performing pop-oriented material for mainstream audiences, in which he was often accompanied by a string orchestra. His stature as a popular icon was cemented during this period by hits such as "The Christmas Song" (Cole recorded the song four times: on June 14, 1946, as a Trio recording, on August 19, 1946, with an added string section, on August 24, 1953, and in 1961 for the double album *The Nat King Cole Story*; this final version, recorded in stereo, is the one most often heard today), "(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66" (1946), "Nature Boy" (1948), "Mona Lisa" (1950), "Too Young" (the #1 song in 1951), and his signature tune "Unforgettable" (1951) (Gainer 1). While this shift to pop music led some jazz critics and fans to accuse Cole of selling out, he never completely abandoned his jazz roots; as late as 1956 he recorded an all-jazz album *After Midnight*. Cole had one of his last major hits in 1963, two years before his death, with "Those Lazy-Hazy-Crazy Days of Summer", which reached #6 on the Pop chart. "Unforgettable" was made famous again in 1991 by Cole's daughter Natalie when modern recording technology was used to reunite father and daughter in a duet. The duet version rose to the top of the Pop charts, almost forty years after its original popularity.



## Television

On November 5, 1956, The Nat King Cole Show debuted on NBC. The variety program was the first of its kind hosted by an African-American, which created controversy at the time. Beginning as a 15-minute pops show on Monday night, the program was expanded to a half hour in July 1957. Despite the efforts of NBC, as well as many of Cole's industry colleagues—many of whom, such as Ella Fitzgerald, Harry Belafonte, Frankie Laine, Mel Tormé, Peggy Lee, Eartha Kitt, and backing vocal group The Cheerleaders worked for industry scale (or even for no pay) in order to help the show save money—The Nat King Cole Show was ultimately done in by lack of a national sponsorship. Companies such as Rheingold Beer assumed regional sponsorship of the show, but a national sponsor never appeared.

The last episode of The Nat King Cole Show aired December 17, 1957. Cole had survived for over a year, and it was he, not NBC, who ultimately decided to pull the plug on the show. Commenting on the lack of sponsorship his show received, Cole quipped shortly after its demise, "Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark."

## Later career

Throughout the 1950s, Cole continued to rack up successive hits, selling in millions throughout the world, including "Smile", "Pretend", "A Blossom Fell", and "If I May". His pop hits were collaborations with well-known arrangers and conductors of the day, including Nelson Riddle, Gordon Jenkins, and Ralph Carmichael. Riddle arranged several of Cole's 1950s albums, including his first 10-inch long-play album, his 1953 *Nat King Cole Sings For Two In Love*. In 1955, his single "Darling Je Vous Aime Beaucoup" reached #7 on the Billboard chart. Jenkins arranged *Love Is the Thing*, which hit #1 on the album charts in April 1957.

In 1958, Cole went to Havana, Cuba, to record *Cole Español*, an album sung entirely in Spanish. The album was so popular in Latin America, as well as in the USA, that two others of the same variety followed: *A Mis Amigos* (sung in Spanish and Portuguese) in 1959 and *More Cole Español* in 1962. *A Mis Amigos* contains the Venezuelan hit "Ansiedad", whose lyrics Cole had learned while performing in Caracas in 1958. Cole learned songs in languages other than English by rote.

After the change in musical tastes during the late 1950s, Cole's ballad singing did not sell well with younger listeners, despite a successful stab at rock n' roll with "Send For Me" (peaked at #6 pop). Along with his contemporaries Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra, and Tony Bennett, Cole found that the pop singles chart had been almost entirely taken over by youth-oriented acts. In 1960, Nat's longtime collaborator Nelson Riddle left Capitol Records for Frank Sinatra's newly

formed Reprise Records label. Riddle and Cole recorded one final hit album, *Wild Is Love*, based on lyrics by Ray Rasch and Dotty Wayne. Cole later retooled the concept album into an Off-Broadway show, "I'm With You."

Cole did manage to record some hit singles during the 1960s, including in 1961 "Let There Be Love" with George Shearing, the country-flavored hit "Ramblin' Rose" in August 1962, "Dear Lonely Hearts", "That Sunday, That Summer" and "Those Lazy-Hazy-Crazy Days Of Summer" (his final top-ten hit, reaching #6 pop).

Cole performed in many short films, sitcoms, and television shows and played W. C. Handy in the film *St. Louis Blues* (1958). He also appeared in *The Nat King Cole Story*, *China Gate*, and *The Blue Gardenia* (1953). In January 1964, Cole made one of his final television appearances on *The Jack Benny Program*. Cole was introduced as "the best friend a song ever had," and sang "When I Fall in Love." It was one of Cole's last performances. *Cat Ballou* (1965), his final film, was released several months after his death.

## Personal life

Around the time Cole launched his singing career, he entered into Freemasonry. He was raised in January 1944 in the Thomas Waller Lodge No. 49 in California. The lodge was named after fellow Prince Hall mason and jazz musician Fats Waller. Cole was "an avid baseball fan", particularly of Hank Aaron. In 1968, Nelson Riddle related an incident from some years earlier and told of music studio engineers, searching for a source of noise, finding Cole listening to a game on a transistor radio.

## Marriage and children

Cole's first marriage, to Nadine Robinson, ended in 1948. On March 28, 1948 (Easter Sunday), just six days after his divorce became final, Cole married singer Maria Hawkins Ellington (although Maria had sung with the Duke Ellington band, she was not related to Duke Ellington). The Coles were married in Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church by Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. They had five children: Natalie (born 1950), who herself would go on to have a successful career as a singer; adopted daughter Carole (1944–2009, the daughter of Maria's sister), who died of lung cancer at 64; adopted son Nat Kelly Cole (1959–95), who died of AIDS at 36; and twin daughters Casey and Timolin (born 1961).

Cole had affairs throughout his marriages. By the time he developed lung cancer, he was estranged from his wife Maria and living with actress Gunilla Hutton, best known as the second Billie Jo Bradley (1965–66) on *Petticoat Junction* (1963–70) and notable as Nurse Goodbody, a regular cast member on *Hee Haw*. But Cole was with Maria during his illness, and she stayed with him until his death. In an interview, Maria expressed no lingering resentment over his affairs. Instead, she emphasized his musical legacy and the class he exhibited in all other aspects of his life.

## Racism

In August 1948, Cole purchased a house from Col. Harry Gantz, the former husband of Lois Weber, in the all-white Hancock Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. The Ku Klux Klan, still active in Los Angeles well into the 1950s, responded by placing a burning cross on his front lawn. Members of the property-owners association told Cole they did not want any undesirables moving in. Cole retorted, "Neither do I. And if I see anybody undesirable coming in here, I'll be the first to complain."

Cole fought racism all his life and rarely performed in segregated venues. In 1956, he was assaulted on stage during a concert in Birmingham, Alabama, with the Ted Heath Band (while singing the song "Little Girl"), by three members of the North Alabama Citizens Council (a group led by Education of Little Tree author Asa "Forrest" Carter, himself not among the attackers), who apparently were attempting to kidnap him. The three male attackers ran down the aisles of the auditorium towards Cole and his band. Although local law enforcement quickly ended the invasion of the stage, the ensuing *melée* toppled Cole from his piano bench and injured his back. Cole did not finish the concert and never again performed in the South. A fourth member of the group who had participated in the plot was later arrested in connection with the act. All were later tried and convicted for their roles in the crime.

In 1956, he was contracted to perform in Cuba and wanted to stay at the Hotel Nacional de Cuba in Havana, but was not allowed to because it operated a color bar. Cole honored his contract, and the concert at the Tropicana was a huge

success. The following year, he returned to Cuba for another concert, singing many songs in Spanish. There is now a tribute to him in the form of a bust and a jukebox in the Hotel Nacional.

After his attack in Birmingham, Cole stated: "I can't understand it ... I have not taken part in any protests. Nor have I joined an organization fighting segregation. Why should they attack me?" A native of Alabama, he seemed eager to assure southern whites that he would not challenge the customs and traditions of the region. A few would keep the protests going for a while, he claimed, but "I'd just like to forget about the whole thing." Cole had no intention of altering his practice of playing to segregated audiences in the South. He did not condone the practice but was not a politician and believed "I can't change the situation in a day." African-American communities responded to Nat King Cole's self-professed political indifference with an immediate, harsh, and virtually unanimous rejection, unaffected by his revelations that he had contributed money to the Montgomery Bus Boycott and had sued several northern hotels that had hired but refused to serve him. Thurgood Marshall, chief legal counsel of the NAACP, reportedly suggested that since he was an Uncle Tom, Cole ought to perform with a banjo. Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the organization, challenged Cole in a telegram: "You have not been a crusader or engaged in an effort to change the customs or laws of the South. That responsibility, newspapers quote you as saying, you leave to the other guys. That attack upon you clearly indicates that organized bigotry makes no distinction between those who do not actively challenge racial discrimination and those who do. This is a fight which none of us can escape. We invite you to join us in a crusade against racism."

Cole's appearances before all-white audiences, the Chicago Defender charged, were "an insult to his race". As boycotts of his records and shows were organized, the Amsterdam News claimed that "thousands of Harlem blacks who have

worshiped at the shrine of singer Nat King Cole turned their backs on him this week as the noted crooner turned his back on the NAACP and said that he will continue to play to Jim Crow audiences." To play "Uncle Nat's" discs, wrote a commentator in *The American Negro*, "would be supporting his 'traitor' ideas and narrow way of thinking". Deeply hurt by the criticism of the black press, Cole was also suitably chastened. Emphasizing his opposition to racial segregation "in any form", he agreed to join other entertainers in boycotting segregated venues. He quickly and conspicuously paid \$500 to become a life member of the Detroit branch of the NAACP. Until his death in 1965, Cole was an active and visible participant in the civil rights movement, playing an important role in planning the March on Washington in 1963.



## Politics

Cole sang at the 1956 Republican National Convention in the Cow Palace, San Francisco, California, on August 23, as his "singing of 'That's All There Is To That' was greeted with applause." He was also present at the Democratic National Convention in 1960 to throw his support behind Senator John F. Kennedy. Cole was also among the dozens of entertainers recruited by Frank Sinatra to perform at the Kennedy Inaugural gala in 1961. Cole frequently consulted with President Kennedy (and successor Lyndon B. Johnson) on civil rights.

## Death

Cole was a heavy smoker throughout his life and was rarely seen without a cigarette in his hand. He was a smoker of Kool menthol cigarettes, believing that smoking up to three packs a day gave his voice its rich sound. (Cole would smoke several cigarettes in rapid succession before a recording.) After an operation for stomach ulcers in 1953, he had been advised by doctors to stop smoking but did not do so.

Cole was scheduled to appear as the first popular music artist to perform at the grand opening of the new Dorothy Chandler Pavilion of the Los Angeles Music Center in December, 1964. However, he was hospitalized with lung cancer on December 6 and was unable to appear.

He underwent cobalt and radiation therapy and was initially given a positive prognosis. On January 25, he underwent surgery to remove his left lung. Despite medical treatments, he died on February 15, 1965 at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, California.

Cole's funeral was held on February 18 at St. James Episcopal Church on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles. His remains were interred inside Freedom Mausoleum at Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale.

## Posthumous releases

Cole's last album, L-O-V-E, was recorded in early December 1964—just a few days before he entered the hospital for cancer treatment—and was released just prior to his death. It peaked at #4 on the Billboard Albums chart in the spring of 1965. A "Best Of" album went gold in 1968. His 1957 recording of "When I Fall In Love" reached #4 in the UK charts in 1987.

In 1983, an archivist for EMI Electrola Records, EMI (Capitol's parent company) Records' subsidiary in Germany, discovered some songs Cole had recorded but that had never been released, including one in Japanese and another in Spanish ("Tu Eres Tan Amable"). Capitol released them later that year as the LP Unreleased.

In 1991, Mosaic Records released "The Complete Capitol Recordings of the Nat King Cole Trio," an 18-compact-disc set consisting of 349 songs. (This special compilation also was available as a 27-LP set.)

Also in 1991, Natalie Cole and her father had a hit when Natalie's own newly recorded vocal track was added to her father's 1961 stereo re-recording of his original 1951 hit of "Unforgettable" and mixed into a new duet version as part of a tribute album to her father's music. The song and album of the same name won seven Grammy awards in 1992.

## Legacy

Cole was inducted into both the Alabama Music Hall of Fame and the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame. In 1990, he was awarded the Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, and in 1997 was inducted into the Down Beat Jazz Hall of Fame. In 2007, he was inducted into the Hit Parade Hall of Fame.

An official United States postage stamp featuring Cole's likeness was issued in 1994.

In 2000, Cole was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as one of the major influences on early rock and roll. In 2013, he was inducted into the Latin Songwriters Hall of Fame for his contribution to the Latin music genre.

"The Christmas Song", performed by Cole, still receives a lot of airplay every holiday season.

# Discography

## Selected filmography

FilmYear	Title	Role	Notes
1941	Citizen Kane	Pianist in 'El Rancho'	Uncredited
1943	Pistol Packin' Mama	Leader – The King Cole Trio	Uncredited
1943	Here Comes Elmer	Himself	
1944	Pin Up Girl	Canteen Pianist	Uncredited
1944	Stars on Parade	King Cole Trio	
1944	Swing in the Saddle	Leader, The King Cole Trio	Uncredited
1944	See My Lawyer	Specialty act	Credited as King Cole Trio
1944	Is You Is, or Is You Ain't My Baby?	Himself	Short subject
1946	Breakfast in Hollywood	Performer in The King Cole Trio	
1948	Killer Diller	Himself	Credited as King Cole Trio

1949	Make Believe Ballroom	Himself	Credited as King Cole Trio
1950	King Cole Trio & Benny Carter Orchestra	Himself	Short subject
1952	Nat 'King' Cole and Joe Adams Orchestra	Himself	Short subject
1953	The Blue Gardenia	Himself	
1953	Small Town Girl	Himself	
1953	Nat 'King' Cole and Russ Morgan and His Orchestra	Himself	Short subject
1955	Kiss Me Deadly Singer (Voice)		
1955	Rhythm and Blues Revue	Himself	Documentary
1955	Rock 'n' Roll Revue	Himself	
1955	The Nat 'King' Cole Musical Story	Himself	

1956	The Scarlet Hour	Nightclub Vocalist	
1956	Basin Street Revue	Himself	
1957	Istanbul	Danny Rice	
1957	China Gate	Goldie	
1958	St. Louis Blues	W.C. Handy	
1959	Night of the Quarter Moon	Cy Robbin	Alternative title: The Color of Her Skin
1960	Schlager-Raketen Sänger,	Himself	
1965	Cat Ballou	Shouter	Released posthumously

## Television

Year	Title	Role	Notes
1970	The Ed Sullivan Show	Himself	14 episodes
1951–1952	Texaco Star Theater	Himself	3 episodes
1952–1955	The Jackie Gleason Show	Himself	2 episodes
1953	The Red Skelton Show	Himself	Episode #2.20
1953–1961	What's My Line?	Himself – Mystery Guest	2 episodes
1954–1955	The Colgate Comedy Hour	Himself	4 episodes
1955	Ford Star Jubilee	Himself	2 episodes
1956–1957	The Nat King Cole Show	Host	42 episodes
1957–1960	The Dinah Shore Chevy Show	Himself	2 episodes
1958	The Patti Page Oldsmobile Show	Himself	Episode #1.5
1959	The Perry Como Show	Himself	Episode: January 17, 1959



1959	The George Gobel Show	Himself	Episode #5.10
1960	The Steve Allen Show	Himself	Episode #5.21
1960	This Is Your Life	Himself	Episode: "Nat King Cole"
1961–1964	The Garry Moore Show	Himself	4 episodes
1962–1964	The Jack Paar Program	Himself	4 episodes
1963	An Evening with Nat King Cole	Himself	BBC Television special
1963	The Danny Kaye Show	Himself	Episode #1.14
1964	The Jack Benny Program	Nat	Episode: "Nat King Cole, Guest