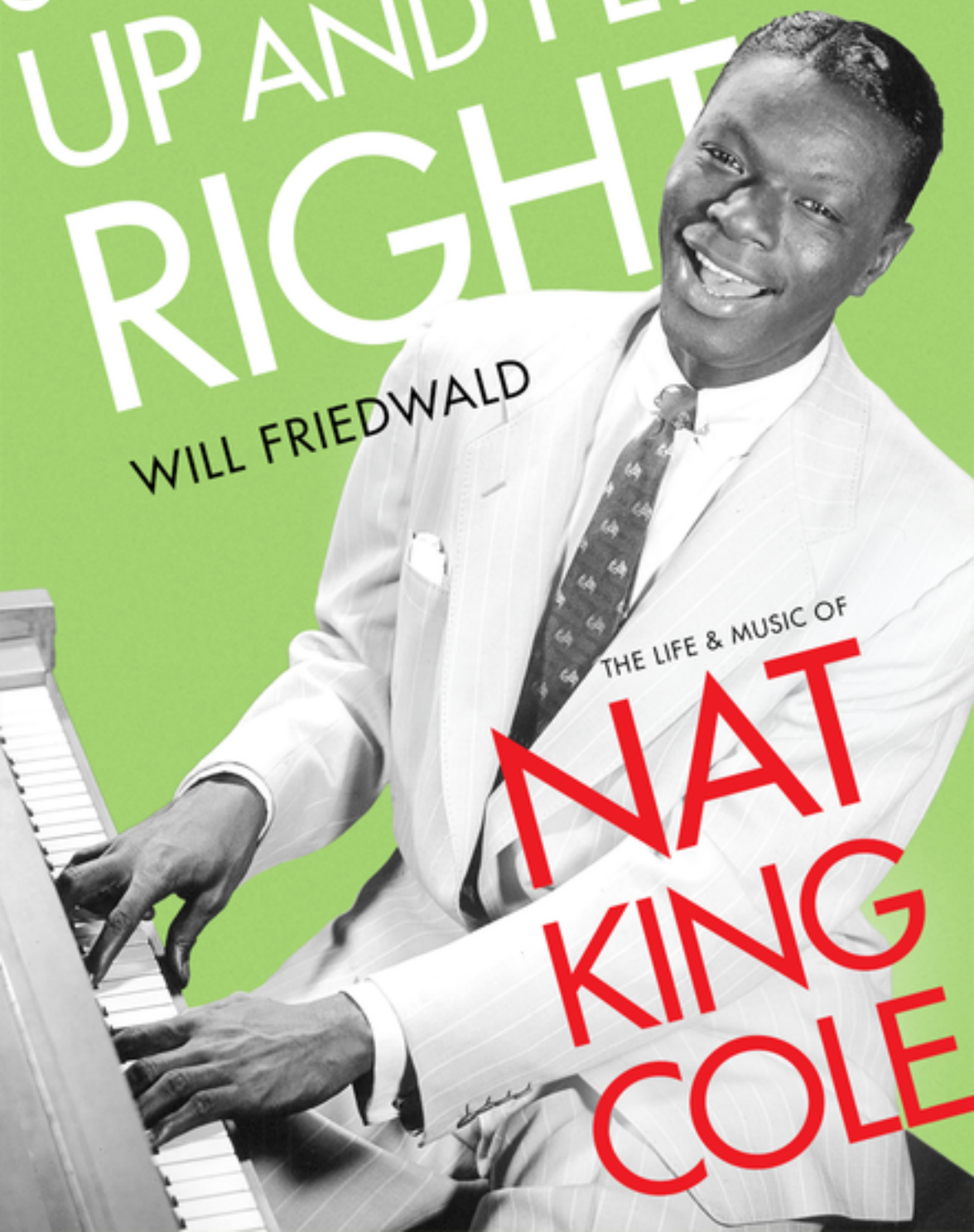
STRAIGHTEN UP AND FLY RIGHT

WILL FRIEDWALD



THE LIFE & MUSIC OF

NAT KING COLE

Straighten Up and Fly Right

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Dedicated to the children of Nat and Maria Cole—Natalie, Kelly, and the twins, Casey and Timolin (who were born exactly ten days after I was)—and especially to the much-missed Carole "Cookie" Cole, who loved what I wrote about "A Blossom Fell" and who encouraged me to write this book. And, not least, also to Freddy.

But most of all, as always, to Patty: my Mona Lisa, my ramblin' rose, and my ballerina.

Praise The Lord with the harp;
make music to Him on the ten-stringed lyre.
Sing to Him a new song;
play skillfully, and shout for joy.

—from *Psalm 33*

Old King Cole was a merry old soul,
And a merry old soul was he;
He called for his pipe, and he called for his bowl,
And he called for his fiddlers three.

Every fiddler he had a fiddle,
And a very fine fiddle had he;
Oh, there's none so rare, as can compare,
With King Cole and his fiddlers three.

—Traditional

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Editor's Introduction

Will Friedwald on NKC: cognoscenti will be thrilled, but hardly surprised, to find that this seemingly inevitable book (he has been analyzing and chronicling Nat King Cole for a few decades in essays, liner notes, and his indispensable *Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers*) exceeds its promise. There are other volumes on the incomparable King, but this is the one that marries the life to the art. It shows us how one of the finest pianists and most imaginative ensemble leaders of his generation became that generation's supreme crooner, swinging sublimely and setting hearts aglow with a uniquely suave candor and implacable charm. Reading this biography of Cole, you may even surmise that the postwar era in American popular music was truly the Age of Nat, rather than Frank or Elvis. Cole was everywhere, despite the restraints of bigotry. Here's a tip to get in the mood: go online and watch the TV duet of Nat Cole and Ella Fitzgerald on "It's Alright with Me." Can we agree that he was the very embodiment of aplomb?

The first two records I asked my mother to buy me for our monophonic console, back in the Autumn of 1956, were Presley's "I Want You, I Need You, I Love You" b/w "My Baby Left Me" (a 78 rpm disc because that's mostly what we had), and Cole's "That's All There Is to That" b/w "A Dream Sonata" (a purple, donut-hole 45), in part because those were two names I recognized from radio. We were in a suburban supermarket, browsing a display of new records available at three speeds. The 78, in time, slipped from my hands and shattered. The 45 lies before me, a reminder that, as Friedwald demonstrates, though Mr. Cole would not rock and roll, he did help to create rhythm and blues, without which, etc. etc. "That's All There Is to That" is now a forgotten rhythm number with triplets and male choir, but back then it got plenty of Top-40 radio play, and the B-side let you in on his cool manner with a ballad, a gift few pop singers could touch, let alone match. Ray Charles found his own style after an apprenticeship imitating Nat *and* his illustrious trio.

If Frank and Elvis divided the generations in those years, Nat never really did. Like Armstrong and Crosby, he was a musical unifier: easygoing, yes, but not easy listening in the derogatory sense. He had too much feeling for that. Friedwald offers a diverting depiction of Cole's unexpected success with "Nature Boy," a divining rod of a song in 1948, a harbinger of the beats to say nothing of the Summer of Love. It got so many radio spins that its producer pondered trying to limit them for fear that people would tire of it. People never did.

Still, many postwar jazz lovers had no idea how fully accomplished an artist he was. For me, that epiphany was cued by two comments: Dizzy Gillespie noted that there was no pianist he preferred to play with than Nat Cole; and a colleague expressed horror when I admitted I had not heard the 1957 album, *After Midnight*. (Another tip: go to that disc's "I Know That You Know" and check out the instrumental exchanges between Cole and the violinist Stuff Smith.) From then on, I had to hear everything he had done. Even so, it was not until years later that Friedwald himself told me about the 1958 album, *St. Louis Blues*, a far deeper work than Cole's biopic inspired by the life of W. C. Handy, in which the blues are miraculously transmuted into a cross between love songs and spirituals.

Cole effortlessly, or so it appeared, presided over the transitional culture of the 1950s, defining its surface optimism, beneath which a strange passivity masked a momentous daring waiting to erupt: as Marlon Brando said when asked, in *The Wild One* (1953), what he was rebelling against, "Whaddaya got?" Cole, forever natty and trim in his bespoke suits and narrow ties, brandishing a contagious confidence and self-esteem, was not above the meretricious ("Those Lazy-Hazy-Crazy Days of Summer"), but somehow it never tarnished him. Nothing could. He was the first African American to have his own network television show, though NBC could not find the sponsors for it. "Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark," Cole said, and moved forward. Though he died way too young, his art retained its undiminished satisfaction.

No one knows this better than Friedwald, who is by common consent the leading chronicler of the great American vocalists who sang and sing the great American songbook. He knows exactly where to look for the gems and the gemlike moments in Cole's oeuvre. All of his varied gifts as a researcher, a connoisseur of the evocative anecdote, and a critic of dependable discernment are brought to bear in his life of Nathaniel Adams Coles. I've known Will for many years, as friend and colleague, and I was particularly delighted when he suggested this project. I think you will agree that after some fifty-five years, the King now has a biography and critical assessment worthy of him.

Foreword

IT WAS EARLY January in 1980, as I recall it. I was playing music with my high school buddy/now college buddy Joe Francis on Monday nights at an Italian restaurant in Tappan, New York. Joe had the voice and matinee idol looks of Dick Haymes, while I was a cross between a young John Turturro and Detroit Tigers outfielder, Steve Kemp.

I would accompany Joe on my seven-string guitar as he performed a set of what we would come to learn was the Great American Songbook. Joe would occasionally ask me to sing a tune, and in those days I always had Kenny Rankin's "Haven't We Met" or James Taylor's "Don't Let Me Be Lonely Tonight" available in my musical back pocket.

One Monday night following our four-hour set, Joe's sister suggested I listen to a song called "Straighten Up and Fly Right" on the record *As Time Flies* by a singer/songwriter named Frank Weber. She said she thought it would be a good song for me. I obliged, learned it and, as always, played it for my father, jazz guitarist Bucky Pizzarelli, to have it vetted.

At what I thought would be an "I got him" moment he rolled his eyes and calmly said, "Go find the Nat Cole trio records, and you're gonna hear something . . ."

The "you knucklehead" was implied.

Lo and behold, Capitol Records had just re-released *The Best of the Nat King Cole Trio* (Volumes 1 and 2), and they happened to be in the bin of the local Sam Goody record store, awaiting my arrival.

I brought them back to Bucky Pizzarelli's house where my father, after perusing the track titles, instructed me to "Put on 'Paper Moon,' sit down, and listen."

As the four-speed Garrard turntable spun, it was at that moment that I heard things I'd been hearing for years on records my father had made and in the music of his drumless trio at the Café Pierre. I began to realize we'd hit father/son paydirt, an "A-ha" moment of other-worldly proportions. Things

had come full circle. This fifty-four-year-old man was re-experiencing the music that had moved *him* at age twenty.

Next song—"Sentimental Reasons." "Hear how he sings that." For "Route 66"—"Hear what Oscar Moore is doing—rhythm, block chords . . . single-note solos?"

We played both records non-stop for weeks.

"You big jerk!" my father would often say, which was his own way of saying "I love you." But that's a story for another time.

It was a life-changing afternoon that stays with me to this day and brings tears to my eyes as I write about it. I had found something that wasn't "I've Got You under My Skin," "Witchcraft," or "Lush Life." This was jazz—set up by a "buzzard and a monkey" and a highway that ran through the middle of America. It was a food source to be swung and smiled at—ballads that were accessible to this youngster who had just enough sincerity but who hadn't yet visited those "come what may" places.

I learned every note of every song on those two albums. My father and I had just started working together as a duo around that time, and he began to occasionally ask for the new songs in our sets with the words, " 'Straighten Up' or 'Route 66.' "

When the opportunity arose for me to record my first vocal album in 1983, it seemed only right to include many of those same Nat Cole songs. They have since made their way into everything I have done musically. My first professional group was even piano, bass, and guitar. I have released three tribute CDs to Nat. I have been honored to work with Natalie Cole, Nat's daughter. I also met Nat's wife, Maria Cole, and have shared stages and become friends with Nat's younger brother, Freddy Cole.

I have tried to learn as much as possible about Nat Cole by collecting every record that could be found and by seeking out people who knew Nat and made music with him. The joy that man and that group brought me on that early January day in 1980 has never faded, and the musicality of his trio sides remain as fresh and as vibrant as the day they were recorded. He is the reason why I do what I do.

We are lucky to live in a world that gave us Nat Cole—the man and his music. And we are fortunate indeed to have access to an account of that man—and especially his music—that only Will Friedwald could have written.

John Pizzarelli, New York, 2019

Acknowledgments

I walk on the world, but I'm not usually in it.
—NAT KING COLE, *1964*

IN 1990, I FLIPPED A COIN. Having finished my first book about music, *Jazz Singing*, there were two other books I was anxious to write, one about Sinatra and the other about Nat King Cole. I went with Sinatra—not merely because of the coin toss but because he was very much still with us, and so were most of the people he worked with. And also, my agent (at the time), Claire Smith, encouraged me to take the Frank path—Ol' Blue Eyes seemed to be everywhere at that moment, and the long-departed Cole was much less visible. We had no way of knowing that Natalie was about to release a bestselling single and album that would rekindle the public's love affair with her father. Ironically, in the early to mid-'90s, the two major artists competing for our attention would be Sinatra and Cole—exactly as it had been forty years earlier—Sinatra in his *Duets* albums and Cole in the form of the blockbuster "duet" single with his daughter and the album that went with it.

It was while working on *Sinatra! The Song Is You* that I established a career-long relationship with the legendary (I don't mind saying) editor Robert Gottlieb. From that point on, and for the next twenty years or so, we worked on a total of four books (so far) together. Bob encouraged me to write about the big picture of American music rather than focusing on any one individual artist, and thus we produced *Stardust Melodies* (2003), *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers* (2010), and *The Great Jazz and Pop Vocal Albums* (2017); with those three books, there's about two million words spilled about jazz and the Great American Songbook. (Along the way, I also accepted Tony Bennett's offer to work with him on his memoir, *The Good Life*.)

All of which is a roundabout way of saying that I never had the chance to work on my dream book about Nat Cole—not until now. In many ways, I'm glad I waited. I have easier access to much more information now than I did then, and besides, now I have the benefit of twenty years of steadfast research by my great friend Jordan Taylor, who has gathered information on

every aspect and every detail of Cole's short-lived but copious career. Jordan has been researching Cole's music since the 1990s, and he has done a lot of the heavy lifting, including countless hours spent poring through rapidly disintegrating contracts, piecing together the specifics of Cole's extensive recording sessions. Jordan's work is the most thorough that I have ever seen done on any major vocalist or entertainer. Authors are forever saying, "This book could not have been done without so-and-so," and while this book could have been done without Jordan, that just would not have been a book that I would want to have written, or even to read myself. I remain eternally in his debt. As with *Sinatra! The Song Is You*, this book is primarily about the music and the professional career of the artist in question, but there is a lot of biographical and historical context surrounding it—as we know, even an artist on the level of Cole doesn't create in a vacuum. My goal is to lead readers and listeners through the path of Cole's career while anatomizing his output; there's one brief sidestep out of the general chronology where we talk about his non-Trio, piano "jam session" recordings made from 1942 to 1946, most done under the aegis of his best friend at the time, producer Norman Granz. Throughout, my aim is to include biographical details where they're most pertinent to a greater understanding of the work itself. Even though Cole's wasn't a long career, it was an extremely productive one, filled with no less innovation and excellence than those of Cole's closest colleagues, like Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, and Duke Ellington.

My acknowledgments need to start with Seth Berg of South Bay Music, who runs the estate of Nat King Cole, and who, unlike many of his peers (running the estates of certain other iconic entertainers that I could name), has proven to be extremely helpful with the writing of this book. Then, there's Norm Hirschy, who acquired and then edited this volume for Oxford University Press—here's hoping we can do many such projects together. Thanks also to my original mentor, Gary Giddins, who remains the best writer on music currently active and whose ongoing biographical epic on Bing Crosby remains a source of joy and inspiration. And thanks also to my extremely valuable literary agent, William Clark, and the love of my life, Patty Farmer.

I also wish to acknowledge Jeff Abraham, Jonathan Alexiuk, Brook Babcock, Jim Burns, Mark Cantor (the ultimate authority on the subject of jazz-and-film), Brian Chidester (biographer of eden ahbez), Eric Comstock and Barbara Fasano, Dave Dawes, Jim Davison, Anthony DiFlorio III, Patty Farmer, Zev Feldman (along with Matt Lutthans and George Klabin of Resonance Records), Michael Feinstein, Chuck Granata, Suanne Gray,

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Next, I need to give special thanks to four long-departed, much-missed scholars in four different countries who dedicated much of their working lives to researching the music of Nat King Cole: Ken Crawford (United States), Gord Grieveson (Canada), Roy G. Holmes (United Kingdom), and Klaus Teubig (Germany).

My final acknowledgment goes to Freddy Cole: I have known Freddy for more than twenty-five years and spoken with him dozens of times about his brother and their music. Forgive me if all the quotes and information supplied by Nat's kid brother aren't accurately footnoted: Freddy was never much of a talker, and he prefers not to give formal interviews, thus everything he told me was doled out in dribs and drabs over the years, usually before or after sets at Dizzy's, Birdland, or the Jazz Standard (alas, there's no way of documenting whether he told me something in 1997 or 2017).

Last, before we begin, I need to offer a note on a name. The artist was born Nathaniel Adams Coles, and he began leading the King Cole Trio at age eighteen. From around the time he was twenty, he was known professionally as "Nat King Cole" (although there were always a few close friends, like his pal and promoter Dick LaPalm, who addressed him affectionately with the more formal "Nathaniel"). For roughly twenty years, he was generally billed as "Nat 'King' Cole"—and occasionally also signed his name (as for his friend Claire Phillips Gordon) as "Nat (King) Cole" using parentheses. Then, around 1957, he had the name legally changed; he told one interviewer at the time, "You can take the quotes off [the name] when you print your story."[1] In this book, I refer to him as either "Cole" or "Nat," depending on the context. (In writing about his personal life, or talking about his family, I occasionally exercise the biographer's prerogative to use the so-called Christian name). In this book, just to be consistent, I refer to him throughout his adult life simply as "Nat King Cole" without any superfluous punctuation.

Will Friedwald, Harlem 2019

Straighten Up and Fly Right

Cole in the lobby, apparently, of the London Palladium, where he played from March 22 to April 3, 1954. "He who pays the minstrel calls the tune" (London Palladium, 1954). (Courtesy South Bay Music)

Introduction

OF FALLING BLOSSOMS AND PAPER MOONS

Frozen in time, I can't let it go
Nat Cole, Unforgettable
The pedestal
I'm on, I'm a end up on the Federal
Reserve note
Your money with a hip hop quote.
—From "Who Tells Your Story" (on The Hamilton Mixtape)

WHEN NAT COLE SINGS A SONG, he says what he means, clearly and distinctly, without any unnecessary complication. Yet everything in Cole's career and his life happened on at least two levels, and there is a constant duality in his art.

No other figure in American music ever succeeded so well at two entirely different pursuits. He was at once a major instrumentalist and then a major singer; there were precedents, but no one who did quite what he did—Louis Armstrong or Fats Waller, for instance, were both outstanding jazz players who doubled as equally brilliant jazz singers. But only Cole completely mastered the equivalent of two different instruments in what amounts to two different fields, being at once one of the greatest pianists in all of jazz as well as one of the most popular vocalists who ever lived. In fact, he succeeded so overwhelmingly as a pop singer that most people even forgot that he had ever played the piano. By comparison, Frank Sinatra was a popular vocalist who occasionally made a jazz album, while Ella Fitzgerald was a jazz artist who frequently added a pop dimension to her work. But only Cole was both indisputably jazz and inarguably pop at the same time—and virtually all the time.

Cole's statistics are staggering—approximately 150 chart hits, beginning in 1942, when he landed one of the first ten "number ones" on the *Billboard* rhythm-and-blues listing, and continuing at least as recently as 2019, as "The Christmas Song" continues to chart annually. He has had, so far, one of the longest spans ever on the pop charts—almost seventy-five years as of his centennial—and what makes it doubly remarkable is that he created all this

music in such a relatively short time span, a career that was curtailed by his death from lung cancer at the age of forty-five.

Cole also represented completely different ideals to the jazz listener and the pop audience; Cole also stood for something very different to white listeners and black listeners. To the latter, he was both a romantic figure and a role model for Afro-American achievement, whereas the former embraced him and treated him with more respect and admiration than they ever had for a black performer, before or since. And the dichotomy of his music persists: like Sinatra and Fitzgerald, Cole excelled at singing what we refer to as the Great American Songbook, the largely theater-centric canon of Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and their peers. Yet Cole could and did sing just about everything, having hits in every variety of the blues (from the basic traditional blues to high-powered rhythm and blues [R&B] and even the nascent rock and roll of his day), to Gospel music to Latin American music (*tangos, choros, boleros*), and, at the end of his life, country and western. He could also take the silliest novelty song and, by singing it without condescension, make it seem both funny and poignant. He could do almost anything that any other artist could do, but no one else could do what he did.

ON DECEMBER 20, 1954, Nat King Cole, accompanied by arranger-conductor Nelson Riddle, recorded "A Blossom Fell." The song would be one of Cole's big hits of 1955 (#2 in the United States and #3 in the United Kingdom); in April 1956, it would become the lead-off track of his album *Ballads of the Day*, a popular compilation of successful singles from the years 1953 to '55. Cole regarded the song as significant enough for him to re-record it in stereo in 1961 for his retrospective album *The Nat King Cole Story*.

"A Blossom Fell" was, in many ways, a typical Nat King Cole song. Like many of his hits in the '50s and '60s, it was a European import (a trait he shared with another of his heroes, Louis Armstrong, whose Eisenhower-era repertoire also consisted largely of foreign-born melodies). This song came from England, the work of three rather obscure authors named Harold Cornelius, Dominic John, and Howard Barnes.[1] And even more than any of his colleagues, Cole's audience, no less than his material, was hugely international. Around the same time that "A Blossom Fell" was released in America, Cole's disc also charted in the song's native country, climbing considerably higher than rival recordings of the song by home-grown crooners Dickie Valentine and Ronnie Hilton.

"A Blossom Fell" is also an archetypical Nat King Cole hit in that, with no disrespect intended to Mr. Valentine and Mr. Hilton, I doubt that anyone

would remember this particular song—along with a great many others—were it not for Cole. Classic songs like "All the Things You Are" have a way of surviving even if they were originally written for flop shows, but we would have no reason to remember a great many songs in Cole's canon were it not for him. He not only put such songs on the map, but he was the whole map. This "Blossom" has continued to flower in performances of other artists who grew to love it through the classic Cole-Riddle version. (Filmmaker Terrence Malick tapped into its power by using it as a central element in his seminal 1973 *Badlands*, much as Richard Benjamin did with Cole's "Stardust" in his classic 1980 comedy *My Favorite Year*.)

The lyric pivots on two key points, the first being the use of plants as a metaphor. Cole would sing other songs that used variations on this idea, most notably the famous "Blue Gardenia" (1953), the obscure "Sweet William" (1952), and the classic "Autumn Leaves" (1955). The other factor in the narrative is also a time-honored conceit of songwriters: the notion that gypsies (itself a politically incorrect term these days), being fortune tellers, are a race of mystics who have the inside dope on fate. While many of the ethnic stereotypes of Tin Pan Alley had faded away by the postwar era, such preconceived ideas regarding the Romany people were apparently alive and well. In songs like "Golden Earrings," "The Gypsy," and even Cole's own, earlier "That Ain't Right," lovers assess the fidelity of their partners based on tell-tale signs that can only be read by gypsies via tea leaves and crystal balls.

The tradition presented in "A Blossom Fell" is one of those concepts that's so goofy that only Tin Pan Alley could have dreamed it up.[2] In "Golden Earrings," we are told that if your love wears the so-described jewelry, "then she belongs to you." Here, in a "A Blossom Fell," if two lovers are sitting beneath a tree, exchanging vows of affection, and a petal happens to fall off a branch and touch the lips of one of them, it means that one of them isn't telling the truth when professing love for the other.

It's an awkward idea to express in song, and make no mistake, it is very awkwardly expressed. The song opens, "A blossom fell / From off a tree / It settled softly / On the lips you turned to me." As you can see, the last two lines of the A section are particularly cumbersome. They make little sense when you read them in print, especially considering that even if this is a genuine gypsy tradition, it's certainly one that not many people would be familiar with. Sammy Cahn believed that it was a mortal sin for a lyricist to put something in a line that needs to be explained: a songwriter's job is to make his point immediately understandable. It can be deep and profound, like those ideas found in

the texts of such high-level sages as Cole Porter or Alan Jay Lerner, but never obscure or incomprehensible.

The most obvious point was that only a really top-drawer vocal artist—a Cole, a Sinatra, a Clooney, a Holiday—could take a lyric like this and not only make its meaning crystal clear but turn it into a hit. As he so often did, Cole compensates for any inadequacies a text might have—he puts over exactly what the lyricist wanted to say even on those frequent occasions where the lyric is lacking. The lyric needs help, and it gets it.

Arranger-conductor Nelson Riddle does the same for the melody: he opens with a glorious string flourish that literally depicts the wind blowing leaves and branches around in a cherry orchard with blossoms falling hither and thither. The secondary voice on "Blossom Fell" is valve trombonist Juan Tizol, who appears frequently on Cole's sessions in the mid-'50s, most prominently on the 1956 album *After Midnight*. (In the 1961 stereo remake, Cole takes the chart slightly slower and replaces the valve trombone with the customary slide instrument.)

One of Cole's key strengths as a vocalist was his unique capacity to improve any melody, for emphasizing the parts of the tune that worked and minimizing its shortcomings. It's no insult to Sinatra to say that, for all his musical strengths (including a remarkable sense of timing), he had to take a backseat to Cole in the realm of pure melody. The only major singers who compete with Cole in this respect were Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan, and neither of those grand divas was the lyric interpreter that Cole was.

Bing Crosby or, say, Carmen McRae could have sung "A Blossom Fell" and made us understand, but Cole does something that no other singer could have possibly done with it: he makes us believe it. Cole sings it as if he was imparting wisdom gained from actual experience, and he makes the words and music sound unique to his idiom. Even though Frank Sinatra did more than anyone to perfect the art of lyric interpretation, he would have a hard time convincing anyone that he actually exists in this particular stylistic universe—where prevaricators can be readily identified by the blossoms sticking to their lying lips. This is not meant symbolically; Cole makes you believe it in the most concrete way: there never would have been any Watergate scandal in this world, because Nixon would have had blossoms all over his face.

Such an approach is perhaps hard to fully fathom in the world of 21st-century popular culture—where precious little actually means what it's supposed to mean. Everything in the millennial era is ironic or sarcastic, a series of codes where the truth is hidden, and nothing is obvious. Yet Cole is precisely the opposite: Cole doesn't mean things metaphorically, he means exactly

what he says, literally. We could only accept this from Cole at all because he is so imminently believable and never tells us anything but the absolute truth; there are no blossoms on his lips.

And that is the central tenet of Cole's music. Sinatra, contrastingly, was about singing great songs with multiple levels of meaning—songs with deep gray areas between black and white, like "Glad to Be Unhappy." Even when Sinatra sings something simple, he makes it deeper and more complicated and adds in gradations of feeling—Johnny Hodges–like microtones and emotional glissandos in between points A and B. Cole, on the other hand, is more direct. Sinatra can take a simple song and make it profound; Cole takes a complex song and makes its meaning abundantly clear.

As Peggy Lee, a close colleague of both men, put it, "Nat had the advantage of phrasing very well, and phrasing beautifully, and the taste of a fine musician. Perhaps it was the simple honesty and the really sincere depth of feeling that he had, he understood every lyric that he sang."[3] Another factor was his enunciation: he came from an era when the African Americans worked hard to assimilate into white culture by speaking as properly as possible, when the black bourgeoisie disdained blues shouters but praised black classical violinists and tenors. The black male singers whom Cole heard when he was growing up, like Pha Terrell with Andy Kirk and Bill Kenny of the Ink Spots, tended to enunciate almost exceedingly correctly; and in his own generation, singers like himself (as in, "are you *wahm*, are you *rill*, Mona Lisa . . ."), and even more so those like Al Hibbler and Della Reese, carried it to such an extreme that they often sounded like students of Professor Henry Higgins.

The driving force behind Cole's career was neither his keyboard artistry, which was evident from the beginning, nor his vocal virtuosity, which matured later, but rather the superlative musical intelligence that powered both. Cole had started his career leading a big band in Chicago, for which he wrote all the arrangements; thus, in later years, rather like Quincy Jones, he didn't need to write all of his own orchestral arrangements, but it was his own ability as an arranger that allowed him to work with such giants of pop music orchestration as Nelson Riddle, Billy May, and Gordon Jenkins, even before Sinatra. Likewise, he knew how to write a song—all three of the numbers that propelled him to the top of the "race records" charts were his own: "Gone with the Draft," "That Ain't Right," and "Straighten Up and Fly Right." This became a virtual superpower that enabled him to find good songs (and, in some cases, help hone them into shape, as he would do with "Unforgettable"), songs that the public would love, well before his friends and rivals.

This power was absolutely essential to Cole, not least because he had less access to the other media that his white colleagues did, specifically film and television. He didn't just stumble across good songs; he knew how to find them, in part by cultivating songwriters. He sang "It is Better to Be by Yourself" by Bob Wells before the same writer came back to him with "The Christmas Song," and he performed "Calico Sal" by Irving Gordon, who returned to him with "Unforgettable." His long hours playing piano in small clubs, six hours a night, six nights a week, helped him learn how to predict which songs would be beloved by the public; as a result, he introduced more new standard songs than anyone after Fred Astaire and Bing Crosby. "Working in those clubs for years, I learned that you have to reach audiences." As he later told Ralph Gleason, "You have to get across the footlights to the crowd. If you don't—you're sunk."[4]

That's partially why Cole is so closely identified with individual songs—and had so many hit singles—whereas Sinatra was better suited, in the long run, to create his masterpieces in the album format. Cole could put over a song and make his point in three minutes; Sinatra did better when he could put a story together point by point. And in his career, Cole would introduce many more classic songs than anyone of his generation, even Sinatra, whose brilliance lay more in celebrating the great songs of the past—although, Cole, as we know, did that as well. Sinatra created more classic albums in the long run, but Cole's best albums—*Nat King Cole Sings for Two in Love* (1953), *After Midnight* (1956), *Love Is the Thing* (1956), *Just One of Those Things* (1957), *St. Louis Blues* (1958), *The Very Thought of You* (1958), *Wild Is Love* (1960), *The Touch of Your Lips* (1960), and *Nat King Cole Sings / George Shearing Plays* (1961), *Let's Face the Music* (1961), *Where Did Everyone Go?* (1962)—are second to none.

Cole was markedly different from his contemporaries in other ways; for roughly ten to twenty years after the war, the majority of hitmakers on the pop charts were veterans of the big band experience, from Sinatra on down. This applied to the white artists as well as the small number of black performers, led by Cole and Billy Eckstine, who were beginning to break through to the "mainstream" audience. Cole was the only jazz musician to ever make the transition, with the exception of Louis Armstrong—and even to the end of his life, no one ever forgot Armstrong was a trumpet player. Cole went so far into the world of mainstream pop that virtually everyone forgot he had ever played the piano.

The larger truth is that Cole was a key player in the era when multiple artists, a female singer, a male singer, a big band, frequently were in competition

on the charts with different—sometimes very different—versions of the same song. But Cole's signature hits were so unique that no one could have done them anywhere nearly as effectively. In that way, Cole's relationship with his material foreshadows the pop of a decade later; when there was, essentially, only one artist per song, and by that point, so called "covers" were anathema.

In the second half of his career, Cole was both amused and confused to be confronted by fans who wanted him to revive the Trio or just play more piano—as the older Richard Rodgers was when fans would remind him of his earlier work with Lorenz Hart. He had actually thought of himself, from the beginning, as an entertainer rather than a pianist or singer, and the medium with which he entertained was secondary. (And it's also a myth that he stopped playing the piano; virtually every live performance we know of has at least a few numbers where he plays.)

His relationship with other singers was different too. Said Sammy Davis Jr., "When he had a big hit, other singers paid him a particular compliment. They didn't rush out to copy him on the same song. I've heard singers, including me, say 'Forget it. Nat's done it already.' "[5] Usually singers had the opposite effect on Sinatra: when he heard an artist he admired, like Bing Crosby, or Ella Fitzgerald, or Judy Garland, or Tony Bennett, introduce him to a song, he felt compelled to sing it as well, to add his own imprimatur to it. Nat Cole seems to be the only artist who scared him away from doing a song—most famously "Lush Life," which Sinatra made the mistake of attempting, but wisely aborted halfway through, and it was obviously because of Cole that Sinatra never left us with a definitive "Stardust."

"UNDER THE MOON THE BACKLOT was thirty acres of fairyland—not because the locations really looked like African jungles and French *chateaux* and schooners at anchor and Broadway by night, but because they looked like the torn picture books of childhood, like fragments of stories dancing in an open fire." In other words, a Barnum and Bailey world of paper moons and muslin trees.

That line, from *The Last Tycoon* always makes me think of "It's Only a Paper Moon," a 1932 song that the King Cole Trio recorded at their second session for Capitol Records on December 15, 1943. This had been one of the first songs written by the new team of composer Harold Arlen (then ensconced at the Cotton Club regularly writing songs for with Ted Kohler) and lyricist E. Y. Harburg. In addition to Arlen and Harburg, one other collaborator receives credit for the song, Billy Rose, best known as a Broadway producer and later an influential columnist. In 1932, Rose was producing a play called

The Great Magoo, a story about con men and hustlers on a carnival midway, and even though it wasn't a musical, he had the idea to include a single song that spoke to the discrepancy, the cognitive distance as it were, between reality and illusion. Armed with that inspiration, they proceeded to write the song—Harburg had actually thought of the "Paper Moon" title a few years earlier, and now he had the excuse to use it.[6]

The Great Magoo opened on December 2, 1932, and closed eleven performances later. However, Rose was nothing if not street smart and knew he had a valuable copyright on his hands. He arranged for the song to be featured in *Take a Chance*, a 1933 Paramount Pictures musical filmed at the Kaufman Astoria Studios in Queens. Here, "Paper Moon" is the basis for an elaborate production number in which the leading man and leading lady project themselves into a *Three Musketeers*–like romantic fantasy. Early on, "Paper Moon" was recorded famously by Paul Whiteman's Orchestra with a vocal by Irene Taylor, and also by the pioneering jazz and pop singer-instrumentalist Cliff "Ukulele Ike" Edwards, who sang the verse. Both of these 1933 recordings have more than a slight edge of melancholy, focusing on the song's minor-key aspects. (After Cole brought the song back to everyone's attention, Warner Bros., who by then owned the publishing rights, used it again in a 1945 picture titled *Too Young to Know*.)

Cole recorded his version of "Paper Moon" at the same session as another all-time career signature song, "Sweet Lorraine." The Trio treatment is sleek and swinging, more upbeat than bittersweet. Its most salient feature is the harmonic interweaving of Cole's keyboard and Oscar Moore's guitar, a combination that utilizes elements of block chords as well as octave playing, added to doubling and tripling of notes between piano and guitar. The idea of block chords is generally attributed to Milt Buckner,[7] one-time pianist with Lionel Hampton, but Cole and the Trio refined it considerably, and, it later became the sonic signature for the George Shearing Quintet.

The remarkable sound of the piano and guitar playing so closely, you literally can't tell where one ends and the other begins, also helps to bring out the inner lyric: the main instrument playing the Arlen melody isn't a piano or a guitar but something completely new, a single hybrid instrument created by a merger of the two, being operated by two amazing musicians functioning as one. A two-headed giant with four arms, a fabulous creature that fully belongs in a song about blurring the boundaries between fantasy and reality.

If a bittersweet love song was appropriate in the depths of the depression in 1932–33, what was called for during the wartime era was a cheerful, optimistic, and swinging song about unreality: men were thousands of miles away

in foxholes and trenches, women were wearing overalls and working in assembly lines straight through the night. It was an age of paper moons and cardboard seas—and the news arriving constantly from Europe, about entire populations being obliterated, seemed even more unbelievable. And for all of its brash chutzpah, Harburg's lyric can still be interpreted as a World War II–era song of separation: "Without your love / It's a honky tonk parade. . . . It's a melody played on a penny arcade." Cole's only lyric alteration is slight but significant: the lyric originally opened with a throwaway syllable, "*Say* it's only a paper moon . . . " That was cute, but so 1933. Cole adjusts it by re-expanding the contraction in a way that seems much more swingingly up-to-date: "*It is* only a paper moon . . ." "It is" is much more formal than "it's," but the extra beat also makes it much more swinging and syncopated.

All the more remarkably, "It's Only a Paper Moon" was a major hit when it was first issued, even though it was not actually released as a single, but only one of eight songs on Cole's first album, *The King Cole Trio*, released in October 1944. Yet it reached the #5 spot on the Harlem Hit Parade (then the term for the *Billboard* Rhythm-and-Blues chart) and became one of the career perennials that he would perform almost every night for the rest of his life. At least fourteen different recordings exist, both live and studio, including (as with "Sweet Lorraine") two hi-fi album remakes—on *After Midnight* (1956) and *The Nat King Cole Story* (1961). There's also an excellent full-on arrangement that combines big band with piano and trio-style interplay (the best document of this version was taped live at the Latin Quarter in Tokyo in 1963).

In taking a melancholy song and transforming it into a joyful and optimistic—not to mention thoroughly irresistible—swinger, Cole was directly foreshadowing what Sinatra would achieve a decade later in classic albums like *Songs for Swingin' Lovers*. Yet "Paper Moon" was primarily a song for the late wartime and early postwar era, overflowing as it is with brash peacetime optimism. The joy Cole radiates in his vocal, as well as that amazing instrumental combination of piano and guitar, expresses a euphoria that both supports and undercuts the lyric. In the end, the final message is that it doesn't matter whether the world is real or not, whether it's "a melody played in a penny arcade" or something more substantial. It only matters that *you* believe in *me*. Love is the thing, he is telling us, it is the only thing that matters, even in a world where reality itself is up for grabs.

HOW WAS COLE ABLE TO ACHIEVE so much, so many albums and innumerable singles in the middle of a constant schedule of touring, combined with radio

and then television appearances? And somehow do it all in a span that was much shorter than the careers of any of his peers? For one thing, Cole kept constantly changing what he was doing—even more so in the second act of his career than the first. Every period was different from the previous one, and every era was a time of transition. During the years 1948 to 1951, when he very gradually shifted from trio to orchestral accompaniments, virtually every session brought something new, something he had never tried before.

"You have to be bold," he said in 1961; "you gotta keep changing. You need to do it for *you*—to keep growing. You also need to do it for the public." He continued, drawing on an analogy from baseball, his favorite non-musical pastime, "You gotta keep 'em loose—you know, like a ballplayer. Keep the public loose at the plate. You gotta cross 'em up, throw something different at their head."[8]

In Cole's short life, he simply hadn't time to repeat himself. In 1953, he made *Nat King Cole Sings for Two in Love*, a classic album of vocals on standards with stellar arrangements by Nelson Riddle, and though it was widely accepted as a masterpiece, he never did another set quite like it—the same for *After Midnight* (1956), his brilliant set of small group jazz with vocals. It was only closer to the end of his career, when *Cole Español* (1958) became such a huge hit that more Spanish albums were clearly called for, and then even later, when *Ramblin' Rose* was such an overwhelming success that he had to fill the demand for more country-centric albums. But, for the most part, his classic albums were sui generis. As he said at the time of what was then announced as his twenty-fifth anniversary in show business in 1962, in the wake of his smash "Ramblin' Rose," "Sure, I want another hit record, and I'll be trying hard with 'Dear Lonely Hearts' and 'Who's Next in Line?' But you'll notice that neither one of them is a copy of 'Ramblin' Rose.' I never tried to follow 'Nature Boy' with a copy either. If an artist thinks he's found the right formula with one hit, he's mistaken. Copying is such a blind alley. You've got to be fresh and new each time out."[9]

The Latin albums, which started with *Cole Español* (1958), were, no less than the country albums, another highly rewarding detour that none of his friends and fans saw coming—especially since Cole, unlike his close friend Sammy Davis Jr., didn't actually speak Spanish. Davis was the grandchild of Cuban immigrants, and he grew up speaking Spanish to his mother, the Latina dancer Elvera Sanchez. At the height of the popularity of the three *Español* albums, Sammy would constantly kid Nat about his diction on Spanish and French songs. "He learned the songs phonetically, and they sure sounded like

it. But when I went to South America, everybody asked me, 'Why don't you sing in Spanish like Nat?' I stopped teasing him."[10]

To the end of his short life, he never stopped experimenting, he never stopped varying the mixture; even his final work, the *L-O-V-E* album, released even while he was in the hospital with just a few weeks to live, was a whole new concept, a set of Eurocentric swing numbers unlike anything anyone had ever done before. As we've seen already, Cole could do many things: he could play the piano, he could sing, he could lead a band and write arrangements for it, he could write songs, he could run a business empire that included production and publishing firms. He could do virtually everything except stand still.

"You gotta keep moving," as he put it; "you know the public can curl up on you and go to sleep if you don't watch it."[11] In 1962, he elaborated, "I guess some people would sit back and rest on their laurels after having a successful career. Not me! I want to keep building. If you don't give yourself plenty to do, you go stale."[12] As we are about to see, he constantly kept moving and never sat back. Like Lin-Manuel Miranda's "Hamilton," Nat King Cole "got a lot farther / By working a lot harder / By being a lot smarter / By being a self-starter."

Prelude: Paris, 1930

In the summer of 1930, Noble Sissle and his Sizzling Syncopators were on top of the world—or, at the very least, at the top of the food chain of black show business. Sissle (1889–1975) already had distinguished himself on multiple fronts, the first of which was, literally an actual front of warfare; during the big one, he had served with honor as a member of Jim Europe's New York 369th Infantry "Hellfighters" Regiment. He distinguished himself on the cultural battlefield as well, as part of the band that helped introduce American jazz to Europe and the world. A songwriter, singer, violinist, bandleader, producer, and talent scout, Sissle had been one of the creators of *Shuffle Along*, a show that, again quite literally, changed the face of Broadway. Then, as the leader of his own hugely popular orchestra, Sissle was, at the start of the Great Depression in 1930, considerably more famous than Duke Ellington or Fats Waller, especially internationally.

In a lesson he would indirectly impart to Nat Cole, Sissle had already outgrown the racist constraints placed around black musicians in the United States and spent much of the post–*Shuffle Along* period, in the late 1920s, touring Europe; his was one of the first African American bands to play Paris and London. At the time of his forty-first birthday in July 1930, the

Sizzling Syncopators were ensconced in one of the most celebrated venues in the world. Les Ambassadeurs on the Champs-Elysées was described as "the prize job of the continent," and the Sizzling Syncopators had beaten out many a competing orchestra, domestic or American, black or white, to claim that prize.

Back home, "the Negro press," as it was known, didn't generally have a budget for foreign correspondents, but a journalist bylined as J. A. Rogers was in town and interviewed Sissle for the *Philadelphia Tribune* (then, as now, the oldest established black paper in the United States). Not surprisingly, Sissle had a lot to say about the state of jazz and popular music. First things first, he told Rogers, "The Negro was the real inventor of jazz music. Immediately after the war, the world was sad, it wanted noisy music to cheer it up." He added, "Soon after the war, no society leader would have thought of having an affair without a Negro orchestra."[13]

"Later, however, that was superseded by soft, symphonic music still of jazz origin, and here was where most of our Negro musicians fell down, and just where the white ones came in. ... when the time for softer music came in, then came more than ever the time for the use of brains. The white musicians, who had been imitating Negroes, used their brains, while the Negroes continued to rely on their natural talent. Entertaining calls for brains and real cleverness these days."

He continued, "The Negro can make people laugh. That is his gift. But he is afraid to do it, thinking he is being undignified. Why, there is no greater gift than that of being able to create laughter. It is an art, and nothing wins friends easier."

That was roughly the way Sissle saw it from the perspective of 1930, the start of the Depression and the age of radio, five years before what we now call the Swing Era, when Jelly Roll Morton and Bix Beiderbecke were still active, and the game-changing innovations of Louis Armstrong and Earl Hines were still fresh in everyone's ears. As Sissle saw it, Negroes invented the music, but clever white men, using their brains and not merely relying on natural talent, had managed to take the play away from the originators.

But Sissle was optimistic. "But some new men are entering the field, and if this keeps up, the Negro will soon be coming back into his own, for the public really likes the colored musician, but he must be able to deliver the goods." Doubtless by the term "new men," he meant Armstrong, Hines, Ellington, Waller, and a few others, all of whom were a generation younger than he. Obviously, we can debate the finer points of his summation of jazz history up to that point, but there's no arguing his assertion that these "new men" were

indeed in the process of putting the spotlight back on black musicians and delivering the goods.

As a rather generous footnote to history, the *Tribune* story gives us a complete list of the current personnel of the Sizzling Syncopators.[14] Playing "bass tuba" in the band is a young man from Montgomery, Alabama, by way of Chicago, Illinois, the twenty-one-year-old Edward Coles. His kid brother, Nathaniel, was only eleven at the time, making him the very newest of the "new men." But although still just a boy, Nat was about to make his first public and professional performance. Maybe even then, Nathaniel somehow knew that he had to get started as early as possible, as if he somehow knew that he would not live to be an old man. But in his relatively short time on earth, Nat King Cole would not only change the meaning and the sound of both jazz and popular music several times over, but he would also significantly alter the public perception of what it meant to be black.

Sissle concluded, "In some quarters, there is a definite propaganda against the colored musicians, entertainers, and we need all such good men as we can get." The story ended with the optimistic pronouncement that "The Noble Sissle Ambassadeur's Revue will remain until the close of the season."

Origin Story (1919–1937)

> My father didn't like my being a musician at all, in fact, he disapproved of it entirely. But my mother thought it was a good idea and eventually talked him 'round. Now he goes out and buys all my records as they are released and says it's for my two kid brothers.
>
> —Nat King Cole, 1945

In my younger and more vulnerable years, I read a famous line by F. Scott Fitzgerald that I've been turning over in my mind ever since, especially as it applies to Nat King Cole. Of all the hundreds of thousands of words written by Fitzgerald in his four finished novels and 164 short stories, it's ironic that one of the most quoted phrases in his canon never even made it into one of his actual works. You know the one I'm talking about: "There are no second acts in American lives." Seven words strung together into a very powerful thought. Yet we'll never know exactly what Fitzgerald meant, since the line originates in the rough notes for his unfinished final novel, *The Last Tycoon*. Was this meant to be an observation by the narrator? Was it a line of dialogue? Does it reflect the author's own personal philosophy? If he had lived to complete the

book, would that line have even made it into the final draft? We'll never know. But for me, at least, it's impossible to hear those words without thinking of Cole, whose life divides almost perfectly into two highly symmetrical acts, each a fourteen-year period, from 1937 to 1951 and then from 1951 to 1965.

Francis Scott Fitzgerald died at age forty-four in 1940, largely in the aftermath of his longtime addiction to alcohol; Nathaniel Adams Cole (originally "Coles") died at age forty-five in 1965, the direct result of his lifelong addiction to tobacco and cigarettes. There are actually several points in their biographies when they were roughly in the same place at the same time. Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda Sayre (who, in the 21st century, is perhaps an even greater cultural icon than her husband), was the daughter of one of the more prominent families of Montgomery, Alabama, the same city where Nat's father, the future Reverend Edward Coles, was then working as a grocer and a butcher.

In 1918, momentous changes were concurrently occurring in both families, even as they were for millions of other families in the United States and Europe during this final year of the Great War. In the more upscale part of town, the young Private Fitzgerald was courting a judge's daughter; meanwhile, a few miles away in the "colored" section, at 1524 St. John's Street, Mrs. Coles, the former Perlina Adams, was carrying her fourth child. The two families could have hardly been aware of each other; the distance between them wasn't so much geographic as it was social, ethnic, and economic.

Yet, twenty years later, that divide had begun to erode. At the end of the 1930s, it's far more likely to imagine that the paths of Cole and Fitzgerald might have crossed in Los Angeles. By then, Cole would have surely heard of Fitzgerald, one of the major American writers of his era. And it's altogether possible that Fitzgerald had heard the King Cole Trio: they were the talk of Los Angeles at precisely the period when Fitzgerald was writing for Hollywood. Who's to say that Scott and his lover, Sheilah Graham, didn't find their way into the Swanee Inn or the Radio Room, or any of the other Los Angeles night spots, to hear this sensational new trio that the whole movie colony was buzzing about? But the most obvious point that these two cultural icons had in common is this matter of "second acts." Both were able to transition through many distinct phases of their artistry in very brief careers; the Fitzgerald of the Hollywood years is different from the brash young writer who so vividly detailed the doings of flappers and philosophers fifteen years earlier.

The career of Nat King Cole encompasses two very distinct phases, and the customary way to distinguish them is between Cole the pianist and Cole the singer. This is obviously an oversimplification: Cole sang on the great

majority of his recordings during the early Trio period, and he also kept playing the piano right up to the end of his life. It's better to think of these two acts as those of Cole the bandleader versus Cole the star. In his early phase, keeping the Trio going was just as much of a focus for him as his own playing and singing, the emphasis was always on the ensemble, the Trio as a whole. In the second act, his key collaborators were his arranger-conductors: Nelson Riddle, Gordon Jenkins, Billy May, and Ralph Carmichael. In the first act, he regarded (and paid) his bassist and guitarist as equals. In the second phase, his collaborators were tasked with putting the focus exclusively on him, making him sound good, while being largely invisible themselves.

This pattern of duality occurs over and over again in Cole's career: jazz versus pop, solo versus trio, piano versus voice, wife number one (Nadine) versus wife number two (Maria), the good songs versus the less-than-good songs, the rhythm numbers versus the ballads, the funny songs and novelties versus the "serious" songs of love and loss, Cole as an advocate for the Great American Songbook versus Cole the intrepid explorer of other options: world music, rhythm and blues, country and western.

There are many worthy figures in American music who were able to achieve only one glorious act, like Louis Jordan and Dick Haymes, both of whom were selling hit records alongside Cole in the 1940s but whose stay on the charts was largely finished by the Eisenhower era. There are also major artists whose careers very neatly divide into first and second acts, with a noticeable break in between the two, like Frank Sinatra, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington. Cole, conversely, paralleled Louis Armstrong, who kept going from one phase to another with absolutely no entr'acte; in the words of Stephen Sondheim, they both simply "careered" "from career to career."

THE RESIDENTS OF MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA, can point to four residents who have changed the world. As we've seen, there was Zelda Sayre Fitzgerald, born in 1900, whose life became the stuff of literary legend and whose courtship served as the basis for what many regard as the Great American Novel. Apart from Nat King Cole, born in 1919, there was also Hank Williams, a great American songwriter and a founding father of an entire genre of American music, in 1923. Then, there was Rosa Parks, born in Tuskegee in 1913, but whose actions in Montgomery would spark the civil rights movement.

Fittingly, three out of these four Montgomerians have local museums, and other civic landmarks, celebrating their achievements, in current day Montgomery. There is an imposing Rosa Parks Museum on Montgomery Street, just a few blocks away from an independently operated but very

charming Hank Williams Museum on Commerce Street. Then there's the house at 919 Felder Avenue, where Scott and Zelda lived in 1931 and 1932, when he was writing his fourth novel *Tender Is the Night*. This too has also been preserved as a museum.

The only major cultural icon from Montgomery not celebrated in a local museum is Nat King Cole. Most likely, the absence of a Cole museum is because the family moved from Montgomery to Chicago when Nathaniel was about four.

Nathaniel was the middle child, of the five siblings who survived to adulthood, between two older and two younger. He was born on March 17, 1919, and both the day and the year are important. For most of his life, he didn't know what his actual birth year was; he grew up thinking it was 1917. Hence, virtually everything written about Cole up to about his thirty-first birthday makes him out to be at least two years older. He learned the truth in 1950, at the time of his first overseas tour, when he applied for a passport. He asked his mother for his birth certificate, and so she "rummaged around. There were other children and several birth certificates—the one she found with the name 'Nathaniel' had the birth date of March 1919."[15]

As he grew older, the St. Patrick's Day birthday gave Nat a whimsical penchant for all things Irish, a fascination that was later encouraged by one of his best friends, the great Irish poet of a lyricist, Johnny Burke. But even as early as 1947, when he was celebrating what he thought was his thirtieth birthday, he told the *New York Amsterdam News* that he went everywhere with a shamrock in his pocket.[16] Both African American and Caucasian fans alike were amused by the idea of a black entertainer who identified with the Irish.

In leaving Alabama for Illinois, the Coles joined the movement known to history as "The Great Migration," describing the path for millions of mostly African American families from the agrarian South to the industrialized North. Upon reaching Chicago, they settled at 4200 South Prairie Avenue. Tragedy struck within roughly two years of their arrival in the North, when the eldest child, the daughter Eddie Mae, died of pneumonia at fifteen or sixteen in 1925. However, to their surprise, two more children then arrived over the next few years, both boys. Thus, the age range, from the first to the last, was twenty-two years, from Eddie Mae (1908), Eddie Jr. (1909–1925), and Evelyn (1912) to Nathaniel (1919), Isaac (known as "Ike," 1927), and Lionel Frederick (known as "Freddy," 1931). By the time Freddy arrived, the oldest surviving child, big brother Eddie Jr., had already been working for a while as a professional musician.[17]

The Coles family soon learned that there were all kinds of opportunities in the new land of the Urban North: professional, musical, and even spiritual. All four of the Cole brothers grew up to become musicians, but the overwhelming ambition of Edward Coles Sr. was to preach The Holy Word. He had done so at every opportunity at the local church back in Alabama, but now the layfolk were planting in the New Land even faster than God could keep up with them. Within a short while of their arrival on South Prairie, Edward was doing The Lord's work full-time; the 1930 census lists his occupation as "Baptist Minister." He was originally called to work with the Second Progressive Baptist Church and the True Light Baptist Church.[18] Perlina Coles was in charge of the music in her husband's church; even with five surviving children to take care of (and no eldest daughter to help) she found time to lead the choir and play organ on Sundays and other services.

Now fully ordained as a minister, Edward Sr. was particularly zealous about his work in God's newer houses, and The Almighty was much on everyone's mind. One of the earliest memories that anyone has of Nathaniel was later shared by Ike. "There's one cute little story, about when Nat was small. We were in Chicago at the time, but I wasn't born yet. My daddy and mama used to tell it. My daddy was a Baptist Minister, and we had this big potbellied stove that was in the living room, and it was red hot, and Dad noticed Nat looking at it, and he said, 'Son, what's the matter?,' and Nat said, 'Daddy, can God do anything?' and Dad said, 'Yes, of course, he can do anything,' and Nat said, 'Are you sure?' and Dad said, Yes, of course He can!' And Nat said, 'I betcha He can't sit on that hot stove!' They talked about that for years."[19]

Thus, the two biggest influences in Nat's formative years were the church, specifically the African American Protestant Church, and the city of Chicago. Cole's most successful original song—and his first major hit, "Straighten Up and Fly Right" (1943), was inspired by his father's folkloric sermons. In 1958, he recorded an album of Gospel music titled *Every Time I Feel the Spirit*. Although this wasn't one of his better efforts, its existence illustrates the depth of the impact of the church on Cole's music, and, indeed, on his soul. The mere fact that he chose to express himself using the two instruments that are most frequently found in worship everywhere, the keyboard and the human voice, is additional proof of that.

Some of the early biographies of the pianist report that "he had six years of formal piano instruction, and used to play in his father's Chicago church, where his mother directed the choir ('I'd let loose sometimes')."[20] Milt Hinton, one of jazz's all-time great bassists, later claimed that his mother, Hinda Gertrude Robinson, had been one of Nat's teachers,[21] but Cole himself

insisted, "Mom was the only music teacher I ever had."[22] "My church work was a constant worry to dad," Nat remembered in 1941; "I was inclined to play the accompaniments too much on the hot side, which often resulted in a familiar raising of his eyebrows. That meant, 'Tone it down, son, or take the consequences later.' "[23]

In the 1930 census, the family's address is given as "South Parkway in Chicago." Three children, Nat, Evelyn, and Isaac, were currently living with their parents, along with an older cousin, one William Robinson, who is described as working in a shoe-shine parlor. Conspicuously absent is the big brother, Eddie Jr.

If the Reverend Coles had wanted his four boys to become something other than musicians, then he made the worst possible decision in moving the family to Chicago. He could have had no idea that he was placing his sons right in the absolute eye of the cultural hurricane that Fitzgerald christened "The Jazz Age," at precisely the right place and the right moment when the twenties were beginning to roar. Possibly more than any other city—even New Orleans, Kansas City, Harlem or the whole of New York—the South Side of Chicago was the epicenter of jazz in the years of Prohibition. There was glamour, gambling, gangsters, and good times, and the soundtrack of it all was the new music created by African Americans and other people of color in New Orleans.

Nine years older than Nathaniel, Eddie was both a big brother and a second father to him—as well as a musical role model. By his late teens in the mid-1920s, Eddie had grown into an in-demand tuba player, and, as the music evolved and the Jazz Age began to evolve into the Swing Era, Eddie switched from tuba (i.e., the brass bass) to the string bass. Soon, he was playing with jazz and dance bands all over the South Side—and, surprisingly soon, all over Europe. He joined a band led by one Vernie Robinson,[24] around 1927 or '28, which took him to Madrid, and then probably around 1929, he moved up the hierarchical ladder to Noble Sissle and His Sizzling Syncopators.[25] He was playing tuba with the band during their summer 1930 engagement in Paris, as we've seen, as well as their December 1930 run at the equally swanky Ciro's in London. During that period, the band recorded for Columbia Records' British branch, and also made an early sound film.

This is a Pathé short subject filmed in Ciro's, which captures the Sizzling Syncopaters in a medley of two current American hits, "Little White Lies" and "Happy Feet." The leader sings the first, and then, without missing a beat, the band jumps into the second, wherein the drummer, Jack Carter, stands up from his kit, moves forward, and starts to sing, even while Eddie puts down

his tuba. After one chorus, we hear Sissle saying quickly (and somewhat off-mic), "Eddie's got happy feet!" The tempo then goes into double time, and, surprise, surprise, Eddie flies into a lightning-fast tap dance.

AS IT HAPPENED, Eddie was out on the road just at the moment when Nat could have benefited from his guidance; a few years later, Nat had left for California just when Ike and Freddy needed him. Cole, however, had long since discovered the man who would be his number one inspiration as a musician, the legendary pianist Earl "Fatha" Hines (1903–1983). As Nat said in 1962: "He was my idol."[26]

Hines's inner essence is captured not only in the copious recordings he made over a sixty-year period but also in two famous photographs: one seen on the cover of his 1966 album *Once upon a Time* and the other on the cover of Stanley Dance's 1977 book, *The World of Earl Hines*. The first shows Hines's beaming face and a radiant smile with the piano keyboard reflected in his spectacles; the second shows Hines's face itself reflected in the mirrored paneling above the keyboard of the piano. In one, Hines seems to be inside the piano; in the other, the piano seems to be inside him. In both, Hines and the piano are miraculously merging into the same entity, a combination of instrument and man, so much so that we can't tell where one ends and the other begins.

It's impossible to imagine the evolution of jazz piano without the influence of Earl Hines. Before Hines, there was stride piano, ragtime piano, and blues piano, but Hines was among the first to play in a style that resonates in contemporary ears as unhyphenated jazz piano: no subgenre necessary, just pure jazz. Earlier masters like Jelly Roll Morton conceived of the piano as a microcosm for an entire jazz orchestra, and they replicated a whole set of brass, reeds, and rhythm with their fingertips. This was also largely true of the stride piano masters, like James P. Johnson, Willie "The Lion" Smith, and Thomas "Fats" Waller. Hines, contrastingly, figured out how the piano would fit in with the other instruments in the jazz ensemble and developed an approach with which the keyboard could hold its own against any horn soloist. He called it "trumpet style piano," and when we listen to Hines today, he sounds less like his predecessors, like Morton, and more like his successors, like Teddy Wilson or Art Tatum.

Over and over, Hines is the musician that Cole most consistently cites as his major influence. In 1944, he referred to himself as a "Hines man" and also praised the emotional aspect of the Fatha's playing, explaining "he's got a soul."[27] In 1957, Cole described Hines's playing as a welcome improvement

upon the earlier, more orchestral style of the Harlem stride pianists. Cole later recorded several Fats Waller songs ("Honeysuckle Rose" and "Ain't Misbehavin' "), but when it came to the piano, there was no contest for Nat.[28] "It was his driving force that appealed to me. I first heard Hines in Chicago when I was a kid." He continued, "His was a new, revolutionary kind of playing because he broke away from the Eastern style, where the left hand kept up a steady, striding pattern. Of course, I was just a kid coming up, but I latched onto that new Hines style. Guess I still show that influence today."[29]

Hines would spend most of his career in Chicago, and in the '20s he established his reputation by working with two pioneers from New Orleans, clarinetist Jimmie Noone and trumpeter Louis Armstrong. Both collaborations would exert a profound influence on the young Nathaniel Coles. Hines's recordings with Armstrong begin with a session under the nominal leadership of clarinetist Johnny Dodds in 1927 and continue through the iconic Armstrong Hot Seven sessions (among them perhaps the number one masterpiece of the jazz idiom, "West End Blues"). The twenty or so sides made by Armstrong and Hines literally changed the course of civilization; it's these sides that did more than any other to establish the primacy of the improvising soloist in jazz.

And that's the other reason Cole loved Hines so much, because in loving the best of Hines, he was also loving the best of Armstrong—who not only inspired him as a musician and an entertainer but also provided a role model as to how a black artist might comport himself in a white world. Talking about one inevitably led back to the other: Fatha is to the piano "like Louis is to the trumpet" (1944) and "He was regarded as the Louis Armstrong of piano players" (1957). In comparing Hines to Armstrong, Cole was paying him the ultimate compliment.

It's hardly a surprise that Cole was influenced greatly by the Hines-Armstrong sessions—so was every musician ever to work in jazz. But it was Hines's next professional experience that made an even greater and more personal impact on Nathaniel: the band at Chicago's Apex Club was billed as "Jimmie Noone's Apex Club Orchestra," but it was more properly a quintet, consisting of two clarinets (Noone and "Doc" Poston, the latter doubling on alto saxophone), plus Hines, guitarist Bud Scott (another Armstrong associate), and drummer Johnny Wells. This was the group that really captured Nat's imagination. He would religiously listen to their broadcasts on local Chicago radio, and on nights when they weren't on the air, he would hang around outside the club; he was too young to enter legally, and he didn't have the price of a cover charge or a drink in any case. He would stand in front,

in the side alley, by the backdoor, listening to the music, soaking it all in, memorizing every detail.

Cole wasn't alone in his love for Noone and Hines; among the other major figures in jazz they profoundly influenced were future bandleaders Benny Goodman and Stan Kenton. Cole also fell in love with the band's theme song, "Sweet Lorraine" by the pianist Clifford Burwell, then (1928) playing with Rudy Vallée and his Connecticut Yankees. Cole would make four distinct recordings of the song even before he turned twenty-five. You never forget your first love; no less than with the song "Sweet Lorraine," Cole remained infatuated with both Hines and Noone for the rest of his life.

Hines was a vain man and eventually became virtually the only person ever disparaged by Louis Armstrong—who, famously, had something good to say about (practically) everybody. According to the back-alley talk bruited about by musicians, the nickname "Fatha" was a boast of his romantic prowess with the ladies. This was an age, apparently, when many pianists were homosexual, and Hines wanted to make sure there was no doubt regarding his sexual preferences. It may be telling, however, that the major time Hines mentioned Cole in an interview—rather than the other way around—he had plenty of praise for the younger man, but only as a singer. "Among the singers, I especially liked Nat Cole—just as natural and smooth as could be."[30] It wasn't recorded what he thought of Cole as a piano player. Hines famously did have an affinity for great singers; his big band launched the careers of Herb Jeffries, Billy Eckstine, Sarah Vaughan, and Johnny Hartman. (Hines did make a testimonial speech at Cole's "Twenty-fifth Anniversary" celebration in 1962; alas, exactly what he said was not documented.)

Cole's love for Hines went beyond any specific aspect of the older man's style or his prodigious technique. When he discovered Earl Hines, he didn't just fall in love with this Fatha and his music but the instrument itself—it was Hines who made Nathaniel Coles want to play the piano to begin with. Hines's work with Armstrong and Noone was more or less unique, sui generis. But it was the big band Hines launched at the Grand Terrace Ballroom on Hines's twenty-fifth birthday, December 28, 1928, that provided Cole with his greatest inspiration. A jazz orchestra led by a dazzling superstar of a virtuoso pianist; in the parlance of the 21st century, here was a business model that was both sustainable and scalable. Throughout the Jazz Age and into the Swing Era, the great black bands would be led overwhelmingly by piano players—there were more of them than all other instruments combined—Duke Ellington, Earl Hines, Fletcher Henderson, Count Basie, Claude Hopkins, Cliff Jackson,

Eubie Blake, Fats Waller, Bennie Moten—thus, playing the piano was more than an end unto itself; it was also a path to bandleading.

By the time he was ten or eleven, Cole was obsessed with music, practicing constantly and playing at every opportunity. At the moment while Eddie Jr was playing with Sissle in London, Nathaniel was winning honors of his own, thanks to the "Bud Billikens" Club. This was a special organization for black children in Chicago that centered on a unique kids' column in the *Chicago Defender*, the country's leading black newspaper. On Sunday, November 22, 1930, the Billikens mounted their most elaborate affair yet. It began with a massive parade of at least 10,000 people (including 6,000 children) marching up South Parkway leading to the Regal Theater. At that point, 3,000 kids managed to cram their way into the theater (thankfully, including Nathaniel) while another "3,000 Billkins [were] still in the streets and they remained there like little soldiers until the Billiken show was over."[31]

Inside, there was a huge party, in which one of Chicago's most prominent bands, led by Dave Peyton (still another pianist), performed, along with an entertainer named "Sweet Papa Garbage," described by the *Defender* as "Chicago's favorite comedian" (a picture of "Garbage" shows him looking like a turn of the century minstrel, with an elaborate top hat, burnt cork face, and exaggerated white lips). The entire day culminated in an elaborate talent show, in which hundreds of youngsters competed. "Nathaniel Cole," in his first ever press notice (and photo), was one of ten winners who came home with the top prize, "a freshly killed and dry-picked turkey."

He won again for three successive years. "Every year they used to give a turkey away," brother Ike remembered, "and he won the turkey. And we could almost depend on Nat bringing a turkey home every year."[32] The November 1931 contest was an especially memorable one; the final Cole child, Lionel Frederick, had been born on October 15, 1931, and the prize was welcomed by the rest of the family, even though the new arrival, nicknamed "Freddy," wouldn't be eating any turkey for at least a few years. More important for Nathaniel, as part of the 1931 festivities, Earl Hines and his Grand Terrace Orchestra were playing on stage. Not only was this a rare opportunity to hear them in person without sneaking around the Grand Terrace, but there was always a chance that the Fatha might stick around and listen to Nathaniel.

Shortly after winning for the third year in a row, in November 1932, the thirteen-year-old prodigy wrote a letter to the column. "Dear Bud Billiken: Just a line telling you how much I enjoyed the turkey I won for Thanksgiving. This makes the third turkey I have won at your parties. Here's hoping I shall win the fourth. From Nathaniel Coles, 4034 Prairie Ave., Chicago."[33] This was

the last time, however, that Cole competed against other kids; suddenly, he was grown up and professional, and was playing for stakes considerably larger than a turkey.

IN SEPTEMBER 1933, Nathaniel Cole, now fourteen, entered Wendell Phillips High School, and it was there that his musical dreams began to take shape. This was where the self-confidence of the Fatha began to rub off on him: he decided, very early on, that he could never be a sideman. He had to be the leader of whatever ensemble he was playing in. "I kind of thrive on responsibility," he told Edward R. Murrow in 1957. "When I started out with a high school band in Chicago, I wanted to be the leader, and I guess I've stuck my neck out all these years."[34] It's tempting to speculate how history might have changed if Cole had instead tried out for the piano chair in, say, McKinney's Cotton Pickers, Cab Calloway's Orchestra, or Don Redman's Orchestra. (His own favorite band, after Ellington and Hines, was easily Jimmie Lunceford's Orchestra; in an interview from three years after Lunceford's death, Cole lamented that there were about five Glenn Miller clone bands going strong, but that no one was keeping alive the great Lunceford sound.)[35] But even more than Hines, who served as a sideman for a few years on arriving in Chicago, Cole knew that the musical vision he would follow would have to be his own.

He put together his first band at Wendell Phillips. Located at 244 East Pershing Road in the city's "Bronzeville" section, Wendell Phillips Academy High School was the perfect place for Cole to study, at least for a year or so. Eddie Jr. had attended there, and so had many soon-to-be famous black musicians and entertainers: bandleader Lucius "Lucky" Millinder, bassist Milt Hinton (who was probably in the same class as Eddie), and later Dinah Washington, Sam Cooke, and Herbie Hancock. Music students at Wendell Phillips were fortunate enough to train under one of the country's most imposing musical educators, Captain Walter Henri Dyett (1901–1969), a strict taskmaster who suffered no fools gladly and made sure that his charges were well versed in the musical rudiments; they all became first rate "readers." By the time he was fifteen, Cole could not only read music as well as any classical or studio musician but was also an ace improviser, with a gift for devising ingenious "head arrangements" right on the spot. Nathaniel played in the school ensembles led by Captain Dyett, and it's there that he met other aspiring young black musicians who, like him, were bitten by the jazz bug and determined to find their place in this new music. He was playing every night around the South Side, and somehow also making it to classes in the morning. For most of the 1933–34 school year, he was apparently also working regularly

around town as a sideman in the evenings but diligently assembling like-minded players both night and day for his own bands.

Around this time, Nathaniel met Malcolm B. Smith, who would later claim, with some justification, to have "discovered" Cole and launched his career. Smith is described in the press clippings at the time as a "newspaper-business man."[36] His actual job description blurred the boundaries between journalist (for the *Pittsburgh Courier*), publicist, and manager.[37] He encouraged Cole to put together a dance band, eight pieces at first, and hired them to play for other teenagers on Sunday afternoons at the Warwick Hall, 543 East 47th Street. Cole got the job when the ballroom abruptly fired its current band as, he later remembered, they "tried to put the squeeze on the management for a boost in wages." At the last minute, Cole was offered the gig if he could get a band together in time.[38] It's probably because of Smith's promotional skills that Cole's name, photo, and band were in the *Courier* and the *Defender* fairly regularly for the two-year period during which he was a professional musician in Chicago, 1934 to 1936. In early October, the *Defender* ran a photo of Nathaniel and described him as "the leader of one of the hottest bands in the Middle West."[39]

By November, the Nat Cole Orchestra at the Warwick had expanded to ten pieces, including himself and a male vocalist.[40] They were then alternating with another young orchestra, led by Tony Fambro, whom the paper described, with considerable hyperbole, as Chicago's answer to Duke Ellington. The promoters played up this two-band engagement as a "battle of jazz." Said battle was still raging at the Warwick into December. "The orchestra of youngsters plays a style of syncopation that seems to express the pent-up emotions of the Race as interpreted by the younger set," the *Pittsburgh Courier* reported. Cole's band "won a trophy in a local battle of jazz. Out of a total vote of 274, Nat Cole won 271."[41]

Cole was still attending classes, but by now Sunday was the busiest day of the week. He would start early in the morning playing the organ for his father's service, then play an afternoon Tea Dance at the Warwick, and follow that with a second church service on Sunday evening. When an interviewer later asked him, "When did you get your homework done?" he reluctantly answered, "Well, I guess it didn't get done."[42] When Cole entered his second year of high school, he was fully a professional musician, as confirmed by his membership in the local union. At this point, after fluctuating between "Coles" and "Cole" for a few years, he now settled on "Cole" as a permanent, professional name.

His first working band was billed as "Nat Cole and His Royal Dukes." What's significant is that even a few years before Nat began referencing the "Old King Cole" nursery rhyme, he was already participating in the long tradition of monarchical hierarchy in jazz nomenclature. Famously, there had been a King Oliver and a Duke Ellington, and Bessie Smith was officially billed "The Empress of the Blues"; Ferdinand Morton had even written a song to designate himself "Mr. Jelly Lord." For a highly democratic music, jazz had a notable preoccupation with royalty: around this time, there would emerge both a Count Basie and a King of Swing. Even down in the Caribbean, perhaps as a holdover from British rule, the top Calypso singers were known as Lord Invader, Lord Flea, and the Duke of Iron. Hines later realized that his given name admitted him into the pantheon; in 1941, Mel Powell wrote a dedicatory piece to Hines's prowess, titled "The Earl," for Benny Goodman's Orchestra.

All of which gives credence to the story that it was bassist Wesley Prince who thought up the "King Cole" name in 1937. Surely, if Nat had thought of it earlier, he would have used it; "King Cole and His Royal Dukes" would have been a great band name.[43] In a profile from December, the *Courier* also states, "All members of the orchestra are students at Wendell Phillips High."[44] By Thanksgiving that was no longer true; the grind of full-time musician and full-time student was too much for Nat, so he had stopped showing up for classes at Wendell Phillips. It wasn't that Captain Dyett had run out of things to teach him, but there was much more that he could learn—and earn—in the world of professional music. However, he was still living at his parents' house on South Prairie Avenue. This was only appropriate. After all, he was only fifteen.

NINETEEN THIRTY-FIVE WOULD be the year that Benny Goodman ignited the explosion known as the swing era; essentially, this meant taking the music of the black bands on the South Side of Chicago, from Harlem, and Kansas City, and sharing it with the larger audience of white Americans—and the rest of the world. As the year began, Nat Cole was working regularly with his ten-piece band, Sundays at the Warwick and elsewhere. Mal Smith later told the *Chicago Defender* that the Warwick tea dances were a losing proposition for him, that he paid for the band and the venue out of his pocket, but in 1934 and '35, the papers were full of stories, undoubtedly placed by Smith, about how popular Cole and his band were. The year started out with a well-placed portrait of Cole in the *Defender* on January 19, looking very serious and somewhat mysterious. If the idea was to make him look older than fifteen, then it

worked. The caption read, "Nat Cole, one of Chicago's most popular band leaders, who dishes music for dancers at Warwick Hall Sundays, is considering an offer to tour in the East. He has one of the finest orchestras in the city."[45]

Their popularity began to expand beyond the Warwick. On Friday, March 1, 1935, they played for an adult crowd at the Madison Street Casino ballroom, "one of the largest on the west side"; supposedly a thousand people showed up to dance. "According to the management, young Cole brought the house down with his latest dance hit, 'Blue Moon.' "[46] Announced the *Defender*, "Nat Cole's Band Is New Sensation."

Edward Sr. and Perlina were still somewhat suspicious of the sinful atmosphere of the Chicago dance halls, so, for at least a few Sundays, they sent along Nat's sister Evelyn, seven years older, as an unofficial chaperone. She later remembered that Nat was so shy at this point that the throngs of young girls who would cluster around the bandstand were actually a problem; Nat managed to dodge them by claiming, "I have to take my sister home." Apparently, he was already so tall and mature-looking that no one questioned why a twenty-two-year-old woman needed a fifteen-year-old boy to escort her home.[47]

On Sunday, February 7, Cole took a kind of a sideways look into the future when he presided over an event at the Warwick that was a combination of master vocal class and talent show. "Students Learn to Sing with Nat Cole," the *Defender* proclaimed.[48] This is the first indication we have that Cole was interested in singing—at a time when his own band carried a male vocalist (the otherwise unknown Arthur Hicks)—and well before we have any indication that he ever sang in public, or even in private. Regarding the talent shows, Cole said, "I shall continue them" and on June 7, he participated in a bigger competition at the Regal Theater, where he had won a turkey three years in a row. Now serving as the professional band opening for an amateur show, "the Warwick Ballroom Orchestra burnt up the stage in their playing of [Jimmie Lunceford's] 'Rhythm Is Our Business,' [his own future classic] 'Stardust', and [the jazz standard] 'Dinah.' "[49]

Meanwhile, the band was growing; on the day before he turned sixteen, he received a present in the form of a glowing write-up from the *Courier*. "He's only 17 [*sic*] but what manner of man is this Nate [*sic*] Cole, who swings piano along the Duke Ellington approved style, yet with refreshing originality of his own. . . . Dapper Nat Cole is the talk of the town. A good pianist par excellence, young Cole's band is composed of eleven [rather than ten] teenage boys."[50] Smith—or someone—also heavily promoted a Friday night

dance, "The Aces' Confetti-Kiss Frolic," on March 29: "Come and Dance to the Beautiful and Tantalizing Music of Nat Cole and his Royal Dukes at the Beautiful Warwick Hall." The event started at 10:00 p.m. and promised "dancing until the Wee Hours."[51]

On May 5, 1935, Smith took out a large ad in the *Defender*, promoting the band's Sunday dance on Mother's Day (May 12) and billing himself above Nat. "Malcolm B. Smith presents to the World—God's Little Chillun of Rhythm'—'Nat' Cole and his Band." Now the band is clearly twelve pieces; as the leader, Nat is in a white suit and towers over most of the others, who are shorter and wearing dark suits.[52] He's wearing the same suit in a *Courier* item on the same day, which describes the band's "monster Easter concert at the beautiful Warwick Ballroom in Chicago," in which they were joined by singer Pearl Baines, who usually worked at the Grand Terrace, and one Euclid L. Taylor, who is described as Cole's attorney. "He's Marvelous," Miss Baines said of Cole. "According to his manager, Malcolm B. Smith, the occasion was Nat's greatest triumph. Throngs of people were turned away."[53]

Even allowing for all the promotional hype, Cole himself was clearly becoming a fixture on the South Side "nite life" scene. He was undoubtedly present when columnist Jack Ellis opened his own establishment, "The Clef Club" (in the Harlem Hotel on Michigan Avenue). The premiere attraction was his hero Louis Armstrong, joined by his second wife, Lil Hardin, and Cole's band was announced to follow.[54]

In the summer of 1935, Cole experienced his first important gig outside of Chicago, as well as his first personal tragedy since the death of his oldest sister. He seems to have stopped working with Smith around this time, apparently under the belief that "he could make better progress under white management." He then began working with a Caucasian impresario named Earl Taylor. Taylor set up a "show tour" for the band, which also led to Nathaniel's first experience playing for singers and dancers in a revue.

The Royal Dukes were booked in Kankakee, Illinois, about sixty miles outside of Chicago, on Sunday, August 4. Some of the musicians went swimming in a rock quarry between shows, and, unfortunately, seventeen-year-old trumpeter Charles Murphy developed a cramp and suddenly disappeared. When the *Defender* asked Smith about the incident, he responded that "he did not know that the band was out of town."[55] "Expert swimmers" were recruited to search for the body, at the request of Illinois Governor Henry Horner, but came up empty handed. The next step was to drain the rock quarry,[56] but it's not known if the corpse was ever found.

NAT WAS, NOT SURPRISINGLY, greatly disturbed by the tragedy, but he found some comfort, at least briefly, in a renewed relationship with his prodigal, wandering big brother, Eddie Jr. The Sissle orchestra returned to Chicago in the summer of 1935, and this time, Eddie made a point to bring his fellow Sizzling Syncopators to hear Nat's band. "Edwin [*sic*] Cole, Noble Sissle's bass player, took his mates over to hear young Nat Cole [on] Memorial Day, and, after seeing the boys smile in appreciation, asked 'How you like me kid brudder?'"[57] This *wisenheimer* verbiage is consistent with the Eddie we know, always a cut-up and a comedian. It's been said that with Nat's success as a bandleader, Eddie was already somewhat jealous of the success of "the kid brudder." Still, if Eddie had wanted to be a superstar leader, he never would have chosen the tuba or bass—there simply were no marquee-name jazz bassists at that time.[58]

Was Eddie thinking of joining forces with Nat at this point? If so, his mind was made up for him after the events of September 7, 1935. It's not known how it came to pass, but on that night Nat Cole and his fledgling orchestra, less than a year old and with a sixteen-year-old leader, played a battle of the bands with the most celebrated pianist-bandleader in Chicago, Earl Hines and His Orchestra, at Chicago's Savoy Ballroom. The news made the top item in Jack Ellis's column. "Hello, gang. Earl 'Father' Hines and Nat Cole's cats swung down to a low gravy at the Savoy. No, Nat didn't wash Earl, but he was in his collar all night. You gotta give it to these kittens, they rehearse every day from 11 to 5 at the union and when he turns that five-part brass loose, the bricks in the wall begin to jump around." But, Ellis concluded, "Father Hines dished the jazz in a big way."[59] "That was a tough band Nat faced," as *Metronome* reported nine years later, probably relying on Cole's own account, "Nat rehearsed as many of Earl's arrangements as possible—Hines was and still is his piano idol—but those, together with his own originals, still totaled only fifteen. Nonetheless, the enthusiasm of the crowd was with Nat Cole and the Rogues of Rhythm, and Hines was thoroughly cut in that battle."[60]

It was a David-and-Goliath battle of the piano, but Nat realized that he didn't actually have to beat the Fatha to win. Cole was like one of those nervous amateur boxers that you see in old movies, where the promoter advertises "$100 to anybody who can stay in the ring with the Killer!" All Cole had to do was to "beat the spread" and show that he could stay alive in the ring. If he could avoid being knocked out completely, that would count as a victory—and this he did. Everyone agreed that Cole and company had acquitted themselves adequately, and it was at this time that Cole began billing his band as "The Rogues of Rhythm" or "The Rhythm Rogues." Dempsey

Travis, a neighbor of Nat's, put it this way: "They were 'rogues,' because they stole from Earl Hines."[61] Whether or not they won the battle, they won the prize: they were now hired as the regular Sunday afternoon band at the Savoy Ballroom on 47th and South Parkway.[62] On September 22, 1935, they played by themselves, and on September 29 they shared the gig with a group led by trumpeter (and violinist and vocalist) Ray Nance, who would go on to jazz immortality with Duke Ellington's Orchestra.[63]

This seems to have been the final inducement for Eddie Jr. He had spent the last six or seven years on the road and was now ready to return to the town that he called home. "Jelly Coles," as he was referred to in the papers,[64] officially left Sissle's employ in Rochester, New York, and joined his brother in late October 1935. His first move was to cut the band down to six pieces.[65] Eddie was much more of a promoter than Nat, much more given to exaggeration and promotion, and when they first began working together, he loudly announced, "The Coles brothers band will start a tour early next week that will keep them on the road for several months. They will tour Oklahoma, Arkansas, and other points in the Southland and then set sail for the east. The band is booked to appear in New York in early December." Big talk, but there's no evidence that any of this was more than a pipe dream on the part of "Jelly" Coles.[66]

Around March 1936, they went to work for Chicago nightclub entrepreneur, Benny Skoller, who brought them into the Panama Cafe at 307 East 58th Street,[67] opened the previous June by Skoller, who already owned the Swingland Cafe. The Panama was another valuable experience for Cole in playing for dance acts and entertainers rather than strictly for social dancing. At the Panama, there was an evening's worth of entertainment put together by producer Jimmie White, which also included the "clever dance team of Robert Bell and Katherine Walker. Dorcelle Chapman and Blanche Cole are the stars of the revue."[68]

A *Courier* write-up from April describes the Cole band as "the best small combination in the entire city" and tells us that their theme song is "Blue Paradise." The group includes Kenneth Johnson, doubling violin and trumpet (*à la* Ray Nance); two reed players, Tommy Moore and William Wright; and drummer Johnny Adams, in addition to the Cole brothers. This essentially was Nat's band, but now Eddie was positioning himself as the leader and star, doing some of the same kind of song-and-dance routines he had done with Sissle, "assisted by his brother Nat."[69] Nat was still the musical director and arranger[70]—clearly he can't have been happy doing all the work while someone else took the bows.

Eddie wasn't the only dancer working at the Panama; this was the moment when the brothers crossed paths with Nadine Robinson. She was the daughter of Charles Robinson and the former Emma Oliver, born in East St. Louis, Illinois, on June 10 1909, making her a year older than Eddie and a decade older than Nat.[71] As the *Negro Who's Who in California* reported in 1948, "She was educated in the public schools of East St. Louis and Chicago. Soon after her graduation from high school, she began her career as a dancer, becoming quite famous in her chosen art."[72] Robinson was working in Chicago and being noticed by the black press as early as 1934. She was, indeed, quickly famous in the windy city for both her dancing skills and her remarkable beauty, her lovely face, and long legs. Apparently, both brothers were smitten, but then, so was much of the male population of the South Side. Despite the difference in their ages, by the summer of 1936, Nat and Nadine were, as Walter Winchell would have said, an "item." This is the first romance of his that we know about.

On June 17, 1936, the Panama opened a new revue, titled "Rhapsody in Rhythm," the *Defender* proclaiming that the cafe enjoyed "turnaway crowds"—"even during the hot spell."[73] The new show, again produced by White, starred Babe Matthews, "golden voiced siren, direct from the Ubangi club in Harlem" and Mae (a.k.a. May) Alix, a vocalist (of sorts) who had famously recorded with Louis Armstrong in 1926. The comedy star was "Lovin' Sam" Theard, remembered as a novelty songwriter who wrote signature numbers for both Louis Armstrong ("(I'll Be Glad When You're Dead) You Rascal You") and Louis Jordan ("Let the Good Times Roll"). "Eddie Cole's swinging music men, with Nat Cole at the piano, supplied the music. The chorus has been augmented to eight girls."[74] On July 25, Jimmy White changed the lineup again, adding a crooner (Lawrence Steele), a female dancer ("dainty-toed Maurice Mitchell"), and a comedy team ("Slick & Slack"). The *Defender*'s review closed with a sentence that must have stopped the brothers dead in their tracks when they read it: "Few bands in the middle west can compare with Ed Cole's outfit, considering its size. Nat Cole at the piano would give Earl Hines the jitters."[75]

It does sound like the show was a success—even with the columnist's exaggeration—and the Panama was indeed a jumping, "happening" spot. One man paying attention was J. Mayo Williams (1894–1980), a veteran record producer and music publisher, who had been making "race" records ever since a few ambitious entrepreneurs discovered, in the early 1920s, that black people would actually buy records by black artists. Williams had been appointed head of the race division for the new Decca label at the time of its

inception in 1934. Williams and Eddie had both been present when Sissle recorded in Chicago two years earlier, and now Williams was obviously reading the black papers. The consistently positive notices regarding the Coles were as good a reason as any to take a chance on a new band.

The band that convened in Decca's Chicago facility on July 28, 1936, was largely the same as reported a month earlier at the Panama. Kenneth Johnson had been replaced by trumpeter Kenneth Roane, who later played with Sidney Bechet and Louis Jordan; saxophonist Tommy Moore had been replaced by Tommy Thompson,[76] but the other reed player, Bill Wright, and drummer Jimmy Adams were still there, along with Nat and Eddie. The six men recorded four original selections, all of which were by Nat, and Decca released the titles as "Eddie Cole's Solid Swingers." Nat can't have been thrilled that Eddie's was the name on the label—not his—but he must have been delighted to be making his recording debut at age seventeen. The records don't seem to have been noticed by anybody at the time; the Chicago papers don't mention them, but most mainstream newspapers weren't doing record reviews and the jazz press barely existed at all.

Metronome's Barry Ulanov, writing about the four sides in 1944, described them, as "hard to come by now, [and] more interesting as a picture of Nat's development as a pianist than anything else. The ensemble is fairly rough and the arrangements not especially interesting, but Nat plays some good Hines-style piano."[77] The inspiration of Hines's Grand Terrace Orchestra does indeed loom large. All four are piano-centric numbers for social dancing, especially "Stompin' at the Panama (Skoller's Shuffle)," an obvious bow to the club and owner Benny Skoller. Here, Cole's piano connects everything together and links the horn solos and the ensembles in a manner much informed by Hines's big band. "Bedtime" (issued also as "Sleep, Baby Sleep" and "Sleepy Moan") is more of a number for slow dancing than a lullaby, with vaguely Ellingtonian aspirations.

"Thunder" is even more of a riff number for lindy hopping, embellished by diatonic riffs reminiscent of Lunceford's "Raggin' the Scale." Cole's piano solo is the main attraction here, and it comes in three sections, starting with a catchy, deliberately repetitive triplet pattern that reminded some listeners of Fats Waller up at the top end of the treble. The last section, which sounds the most like Hines, is a call-and-response with the band. Taken as a whole, the solo seems disjointed, as if these were three separate piano breaks on three unconnected records—maybe even by three different pianists—and a far cry from such brilliantly constructed, masterpiece solos as Cole's 1944 version of "Body and Soul." As Dick Katz later observed, "Nat was only 17 years old,

but he had already mastered the essentials of Hines's style. The lightning-fast octave passages and the syncopated left-hand runs were fully assimilated. But in the manner of most youngsters, he tried to show all of his 'stuff' at once."

The first tune recorded, "Honey Hush" (which survives in two takes) represents Cole's first known interest in songwriting; clearly, his ongoing obsession with the beautiful Nadine inspired him to write words for the first time, as well as music. (Eddie, the alleged leader, takes the vocal.) More specifically, "Honey Hush" is a first cousin of "Babs," a 1935 song by Fred Ahlert and Joe Young that Cole learned from Lunceford. Both songs fall into a well-established category of genre novelty songs written by and for black artists, excitingly recounting the considerable charms of a better-than-average woman. In the tradition of "Sweet Georgia Brown," "Louisville Lou," "Hard-Hearted Hannah," "Miss Brown to You," and "Streamlined Greta Green," here we have a femme fatale, who, though it's rarely stated explicitly, is understood to be African American. As all these "Brown" and "Green" women may suggest, these women are highly prized for their skin color; the girl in "Honey Hush," one "Miss Sadie Green," is described as a "high yellow," a thankfully now-archaic term referring to the light-skinned girls, who were valued more highly than your basic black women. "In those days, there was a lot of intra-racism—prejudice by blacks against blacks," as Cole's daughter, Natalie, would later write. "And dark [skin] was considered socially inferior to pale. My mother called it 'a matter of breeding.' "[78]

This would be the first and last recording session for the band. In September 1936, they left Chicago for the second time and misfortune struck again. They were now signed to an agency called the Graham Artists' Bureau, Inc., and they announced "an extensive tour beginning the week of September first" for the band, which now consisted of "14 expert musicians, with his younger brother, Nat Cole, at the Steinway Grand."[79] But then, two weeks later, Earl J. Morris, Senior Theatrical Correspondent of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, reported that the Cole brothers' band was somehow "stranded." He doesn't say where, he doesn't say why, but it sounded fishy to him. Morris thus went to the Graham agency to investigate, and he reported, "A visit to the pretentious offices of Mr. Graham will cause one to think that it is a million dollar set-up. His offices are in the South Center Building and [occupy] a large suite with office girls and visitors by the score."[80] The splendiferousness of the Graham offices is relevant; not only were the Cole brothers broke, but the Graham agency also claimed to be busted as well, so much so that they were unable, they claimed, to send any money to the brothers.

Fortunately, their boss at the Panama, good old Benny Skoller, described as a "good Samaritan," wired them the funds needed to get back home.

It was obviously a highly embarrassing moment for the Cole(s) family, especially since, right around this time, Edward Sr. had graduated to a higher-level position at a more prominent house of worship, the First Baptist Church, in North Chicago.[81] So why were the brothers broke? Did some local promoter refuse to pay them? Did someone steal their payroll? It became part of Cole's early mythology that his band was stranded in Jackson, Tennessee, and they had to bum their way back to Chicago by persuading a bus driver to accept their instruments as collateral.[82] There's one likely reason they were stuck without a cent: "Jelly Coles," as the press referred to him, was long known to have a gambling problem.[83] Yet even if the "big brudder" had lost the band's "kitty" shooting crap, that still wouldn't account for the agency refusing to help them. Said Morris, "It just doesn't sound kosher to me."[84]

SEPTEMBER 1936 WAS an extremely busy month for the Cole brothers. On September 4, they announced they were, at long last, going on tour. Then, on September 19, they suffered a rather public humiliation when the news broke that the band was stranded and had to be bailed out before they could come back to Chicago. But by September 25, they were on the road again, this time serving as the pit band for a touring musical revue. This was the new 1936 edition of the venerable *Shuffle Along*. Premiering in 1921, *Shuffle Along* is, to this day, easily the most successful and important black Broadway show of all time (though not the first) and established a presence for African Americans in the mainstream musical theater.

Created by two teams, librettists and star comedians Flourney Miller and Aubrey Lyles, and songwriters Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, *Shuffle* launched the careers of Adelaide Hall, Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson, Florence Mills, and Fredi Washington; it introduced any number of hit songs and standards, like "Love Will Find a Way" and "I'm Just Wild about Harry." Virtually all the black shows of the 1920s and '30s, including *Hot Chocolates* (1929) by Fats Waller and Andy Razaf and Lew Leslie's *Blackbirds* revues, were children of *Shuffle Along*. The 1921 show launched a vogue for black entertainment that was part and parcel of both the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression, and extended to black night spots, like the Cotton Club, as well as full-scale theatrical productions.

Unfortunately, as the 2016 show-about-the-show, titled *Shuffle Along, or, the Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed*, made clear, the four original partners could never get their act together to create a

suitable follow-up. As late as 1932, Miller and Lyles were still planning a new edition of *Shuffle Along*, but Lyles, aged forty-eight, died in July of that year. By that time, Sissle was touring the world with his "Sizzling Syncopators," and Blake, who also briefly led his own big band, was writing songs with Andy Razaf. In 1936, Miller planned a new touring production of *Shuffle Along*, costarring his new partner, Mantan Moreland (later of *Charlie Chan* movie fame) which would start in Chicago and gradually head west. Where the original *Shuffle* had something of an actual book (it was hardly Eugene O'Neill), the 1936 production was strictly a revue—a fifty-five-minute "tab show" that could play movie theaters as well as "legit" houses. It was obviously Sissle who recommended his former sideman, Eddie Cole, and his piano wizard kid brother, as the guys to lead the pit orchestra.

Miller reached out to other black stars to shuffle along with them, but the best he could do was close relatives of two headliners, Louis Armstrong's wife and Cab Calloway's sister. Lil Hardin Armstrong was extremely popular in the black community at the time; alas, when *Shuffle Along* opened at the Orpheum Theater in Lincoln, Nebraska, on September 25, her name was on the marquee, but she was nowhere to be found. Likewise, Jean Calloway, who was billed as "Cab's little sister," was apparently an out-and-out fraud.[85] *Variety*'s review was especially harsh on her and not very positive overall. The reviewer wasn't too fond of the headliners, Miller and Mantan ("just fair") but he had more positive words for the dancing, the "ten-gal chorus line," and for Ollivette Miller, a jazz harp virtuoso who was also the producer's daughter. *Variety* also mentioned that Eddie Cole led the band nearly all the way through, and "biz" was "fine" in spite of the higher-than-usual ticket price—all of 40 cents—which also included the movie, a 20th Century Fox B-picture titled *Back to Nature* starring Jed Prouty and Dixie Dunbar.[86]

Not exactly an auspicious beginning. But if there had been no actual book in this *Shuffle Along*, there was plenty of drama backstage, much of it concerning the Cole Brothers. One dancer not mentioned in the initial review of the revue is Nadine Robinson, who was now one of the ten gals in the chorus line, thanks to Nat. The story that has come down to us is that, by now, the brothers were constantly fighting over Nadine; Eddie didn't want to see the "kid brudder" involved with a woman, a dancer no less, who was even older than he himself was. Nat thought that Eddie, who already had one divorce, was in no position to give him advice and even less so to order him around. It was later reported that "Nat and Eddie fought so hard . . . that their parents had to hold them apart" and, in the aftermath, "the brothers didn't speak for a year."[87] What seems clear is that Eddie, who had traveled the whole world

between 1929 and 1935, no longer "had eyes for" the road, as Lester Young would say; even though he made announcements about taking the band on tour, he seems to have wanted to stay in Chicago. Nat, on the other hand, was thrilled to be immersed in show business—that's one reason he eventually became something more than a musician. And he also liked being around those ten gorgeous girls, especially Nadine. It's also obvious that Nat, who had welcomed the idea of working with his big brother a year earlier, now realized that he had outgrown Eddie. The reasons for the two of them to split up, even as the Dorsey Brothers band had in 1935, come even more sharply into focus if it was, as seems highly possible, Eddie's misdeeds that had caused the band to be stranded in the middle of nowhere just a few weeks earlier. So, if Nat had to choose between staying with Eddie and remaining a sideman in Chicago and being on the road with Nadine where he was now, once again, the leader and conductor, then this was one of the easier decisions he would ever make. By early December, when the tour started in earnest, Nat was now conducting for *Shuffle* alone, and Eddie was leading a new band at Chicago's 5100 Club.[88]

The tour was now under way, and Nat got his first taste of the constant traveling that he would do for the rest of his life. After Lincoln and then a few shows in Chicago,[89] they began crisscrossing the Midwest: La Cross (Wisconsin),[90] Fort Wayne (Indiana),[91] Ann Arbor.[92] They received some positive press in Grand Rapids, while playing a five-day run at Keith's Theater: "The show was exceedingly good and drew large and enthusiastic crowds." While there, on January 19, the owner of a local black night spot, the Club Indigo, invited the cast to come as his guests, and many were happy to perform spontaneously. The evening was described as "a show of shows featuring the entire *Shuffle Along* company and Nat Cole's band." Between the traveling thespians and his regular local patrons, the club owner reported he drew his biggest crowd of the year.[93]

The company was in the mood to celebrate in Michigan, for reasons that had nothing to do with the show itself. The revelry in the Grand Rapids Club Indigo doubled as a wedding party: Nadine Robinson, age twenty-seven, and Nat Cole, seventeen, would be married on Friday, January 29. The ceremony was held at midnight, after the final show, at the home of one Thomas Harris in Ypsilanti. The *Defender* ran a formal portrait of the happy couple, the "well known young band leader" and the "lovely young favorite of the theater." They look made for each other; he seems older and she, younger. If they're not the most attractive couple ever pictured in the pages of that paper, it's impossible to imagine who would be.[94] The groom, listed as "Nathaniel Coles" on the marriage certificate, gave his age as twenty-one (no one checked for a

driver's license or a birth certificate), so his parents' permission wouldn't be necessary, even though he wouldn't even be eighteen for another two months. In fact, there's no evidence at all that Edward Sr. and Perlina had even met Nadine before the ceremony; the God-fearing reverend and his wife could hardly have been pleased with the news that Nat had essentially eloped with a showgirl a decade his senior.

As remembered by Claire Phillips Gordon, one of Nat's few friends to be close to both of his wives, "Nadine was a small, slender woman with a dancer's grace and figure. It was said that she was older than Nat, but it wasn't something you'd notice."[95]

THE PROGRESSION OF EARLY 1937 was hardly a straight line: Cole's big band worked extensively both with and without the *Shuffle Along* company. In February they played RKO houses in Chicago, on their own,[96] then rejoined the troupe for an exceedingly busy March that included at least twenty-one days of shows (in many cases doing multiple shows per day) in some twelve different theaters and cities,[97] among them Minnesota, Wisconsin, back to Minnesota, South Dakota, Montana, and Washington. In early April, the band was set to "hit Hollywood [on] April 5, where they will swing a two week's stand at the Golden Gate"[98] and then rejoin the show once again in northern California for the rest of April; "the big collection of stars and chorines [has] been playing up and down the coast."[99]

In the first week of May, the full company arrived in Los Angeles, and then opened on Saturday, May 8, for a five-day run, including a "special midnight show added on the opening night." The *Los Angeles Sentinel* previewed the opening by proclaiming that *Shuffle Along*, at the Lincoln Theater on Central Avenue, was "packed with ebony dynamite." Said "dynamite" referred to a new dancer named Helene Phillips, described as a "female Bill Robinson," along with "the rhythmical Brown Spots" plus "a chorus of bronze Creole beauties, and Nat Cole's swing band."[100] The *Defender*, which had a Los Angeles column written by Harry Levette, also gave the production a definite thumbs up and posted a report of good business. "Flournoy's Shuffle Along, 1937, packed them in at the Lincoln all week," Levette wrote. He had positive things to say about "Jean Calloway, dynamic queen of swing," and even more about the orchestra. "Nat Cole's hot band brought many new arrangements that have set the town whistling."[101]

There was something of an upset during the five-night run at the Lincoln, however. The *Pittsburgh Courier* reported that Jean Calloway was "so mad at the crude management of the Lincoln Theater and she is literally biting nails."

The paper suggested that the cast was badly treated by the assistant manager, whom they referred to as "Mr. Right" and identified as "Negro"; but they also pointed out that the primary manager, Jules Wolf, who was white, "has always been very generous to colored enterprises." In other words, no black act had ever complained of ill treatment before. The *Courier* concluded that the assistant manager was "the cause of all the disturbance" and added, "Although the show was a rip-roaring smash hit, it refuses to run a second week."[102] This seems odd, since it was announced only as a five-day run to begin with, and they had another booking to get to.

The next stop was fairly near to Los Angeles, at the New Strand Theater in Long Beach, California. Since arriving in the area, the newlyweds, Nat and Nadine, had been staying with one of the bride's aunts, who lived in Long Beach; obviously the New Strand Theater was a much easier commute for them. According to one source, "In Long Beach, the revue got its biggest audience of the tour."[103] Flournoy Miller had more stops scheduled; after Long Beach, *Shuffle Along* was booked to play Denver and Salt Lake City.[104]

They never made it past Long Beach. The next thing we hear about the production is a rather ominous notice from the end of May. "For some reason not disclosed to the press, the famous *Shuffle* revue closed without notice following their last date [about May 25] in Long Beach," the *Defender* reported, "The revue has busted up."[105] Nat offered his own explanation as to what happened, saying in 1954, "After the show"—which suggests that the production only played one performance in Long Beach—"it was discovered that one of the company had vanished with the box-office receipts. 'We guessed that he got maybe $800,' says Cole. 'None of us have ever seen the light-footed rascal since.' "[106]

Cole is being surprisingly light-hearted about a major crime—almost $15,000 adjusted for inflation to 2019 dollars—which put a whole company of forty players and musicians out of work and left them stranded thousands of miles from home. We'll never know what actually happened or if it had anything to do with the incident at the Lincoln. When Cole talked about such events in his life, he was invariably trying to tell the most entertaining story, not trying to seriously document what actually happened for the benefit of future historians and biographers. Still, no matter how it had gone down, without that payroll, the company couldn't keep going. The show was indeed, as the *Defender* reported, "Busted Up."[107]

FLOURNOY MILLER, HOWEVER, was a man of his word. He couldn't continue with his full-scale revue, but he wasn't about to let his cast, including his

daughter, Olivette, and the band, who were all depending on him, go hungry. With Nat's support, he looked around for more opportunities; he made every effort for the company to stay together and to find work more or less as a unit. Alas, he had to let his "ten chorus girls" go; he knew that it was unlikely that he would find a venue big enough to accommodate a full-scale chorus line; presumably, he at least was able to give them train fare home. "The chorus was sent back to New York, as this concluded the cross country tour."[108]

On June 3, Nat and Nadine and about seven members of the band, plus Olivette Miller, were all present at a birthday party.[109] At least two of the musicians, saxophonist George Skinner and bassist Henry Fort, had been with Nat since the forming of his very first band in fall 1934. Even if they weren't being paid to play at the party, at least they took the opportunity to eat. But it wasn't long before Miller found something.

On Thursday, May 6, a new club, the Ubangi, opened on Atlantic Boulevard; as the name suggests, it was a showcase for "Race" talent. Like Frank Sebastian's Cotton Club, the primary audience was "ofay" (white) but "Race profession and press are always welcome." (In other words, other black singers and dancers, especially celebrities, and black journalists, could come in, but not your basic rank-and-file black folks.) Around mid-June, a much-truncated edition of *Shuffle Along* opened at the Ubangi, described in the *California Eagle* simply as "Flennoy [*sic*] Miller's Stage Show."[110] They played at the Ubangi for about a month, long enough for the *Chicago Defender* to run an item, showing a smiling picture of Nat, and proclaiming him a "hit on coast."[111] "Youthful maestro and pride of Bronzeville with his young tunesmiths are spreading white heat rhythm for dance patrons at the swanky Ubangi club in Los Angeles." But that was all; the club ended the engagement around July 15, "closing out the all-colored band and company and replacing them with whites." So much for the Ubangi; needless to say, the Flournoy Miller crew was not pleased, and neither was the local black press.

Now in need of work, Cole was sending out feelers to his old friends back in the Midwest. It was announced that he and his band would participate in one of the year's major events, "The Swing Parade," an all-star spectacular event to be mounted at his old stomping ground, the Chicago Savoy Ballroom, and set to feature no fewer than seventeen big bands. Following this all-star event, the band would play several other unnamed Chicago venues for about two weeks, before then moving on to an unnamed venue in Detroit, beginning on August 1.[112] But it wasn't to be. Despite these optimistic projections, Cole wouldn't make it back to Chicago until 1941.

Instead, Miller found them a gig at another new-ish nightclub spotlighting African American talent, the Century Club, also known as the Cafe Century, on Beverly Boulevard, near Fairfax Avenue. During these weeks (roughly July 28 to August 18), the final holdouts from the *Shuffle Along* company were members of Miller's immediate showbiz family: Miller himself, Mantan Moreland, and Olivette Miller (the hot harpist). But Cole was also beginning to make long-lasting professional and personal connections with other talent that he met at the club. There was Marie Bryant, later a well-known Hollywood dancer (and longtime girlfriend of Nat's future buddy and partner, Norman Granz); she would enjoy a long association with Cole and served as choreographer for his 1956–57 NBC TV series.

And there was also Dorothy Dandridge, a fourteen-year-old aspiring singer from Cleveland, then part of the Dandridge Sisters Trio. For the last year and a half, ever since the Panama Café back in Chicago, Cole had primarily been in the business of accompanying singers and entertainers. The girls' mother, Ruby Dandridge, commissioned him to write some arrangements for the group, which launched a lifelong, apparently platonic friendship between Cole and the future movie star and pioneering black actress. Twenty years later, Nat and Dorothy would daydream together about starring in their own TV sitcom—a family show about an orchestra leader and his wife. (In the vague outline, it suggests a black *I Love Lucy*.)[113]

The engagement at the Century ended before Labor Day.[114] This was not quite the end of the line for Cole's association with Flournoy Miller; remarkably, there would be yet another new *Shuffle Along* in July 1938. But the August 1937 booking at the Century would be important to history for one major reason: this was the last known gig for Nat Cole before the formation of the King Cole Trio.

ACT ONE

The King Cole Trio

1

The Birth of the Trio

1937–1943

We were playing maybe even better then [in 1941] than we did later on.
— NAT KING COLE, *1951*

YOU KNOW, IT'S A STRANGE THING that everything that brought me success was an accident," Nat Cole said in 1945. "For instance, I always wanted to have a big band, never thought of a trio, particularly as there were no small groups playing on the Coast. It was Bob Lewis of the Swanee Inn who suggested that I add guitar and bass and bring the trio into his place. I figured it would be just another job for a few weeks and look what happened! It still amazes me."[1]

Nat King Cole was a great believer in luck. Or, at least, he made himself out to be so in the personality that he projected to the media—especially to the interviewers and feature writers who profiled him in newspapers and magazines. Rather than giving himself any of the credit for his own success, he was much more likely to claim it all had happened because he had "the luck o' the Irish"—after all, he had been born on St. Patrick's Day and he carried a shamrock in his pocket.[2] To hear Cole tell it, everything that helped to push his career from one level up to the next was invariably a lucky accident. There was the formation of the trio: the idea of putting together a band consisting of piano, guitar, and bass was so out-of-the-box in 1937 that it almost had to be a mistake, albeit one that almost immediately righted itself. Surely no one could have come up with such a combination deliberately.

Then there was idea of Cole singing, which, as he always claimed, he had never set out to do, but something that he just tried, more or less on a whim, during long sets when they were mostly playing background music in noisy cafés, and something which the audience, to his surprise, responded to. "That was another accident," he explained (in 1945). "A trio is so limited by lack of instruments that I sort of had to sing to add to the group. All of a sudden,

people decided they liked my voice. It was quite a surprise to me to be placed on so many polls as a singer."[3]

Virtually every journalist who ever wrote about Cole was, in a very real way, his willing co-conspirator. They were all partners and participants in the artist's highly ingenious myth-making. Yet the more one looks at the facts, and the closer one examines the documented evidence, the more undeniably apparent it becomes that Cole knew exactly what he was doing—at every step of the way. Luck had nothing to do with it, although good timing certainly did.

The biggest accident and the luckiest break that he liked to talk about was how he just happened to wind up in Los Angeles. He never actually planned to relocate to the West Coast, or so he claimed. No, that was just where he happened to be when *Shuffle Along* folded, and where he was stranded, along with the rest of the company. He had just turned eighteen at the time and, a few weeks before that birthday, had gotten married. In some accounts, Nadine was the one who wanted to remain—she had family there; they were currently bunking with her Aunt in Long Beach. The way that Nat later told it, when they were stranded in Los Angeles, they had no means of returning home.

But Cole had multiple reasons for staying on the West Coast. Barely nine months earlier, when he and Eddie had been stranded on the road, the Reverend Cole undoubtedly gave both of his prodigals a stern talking-to on their eventual return. Now, if he were to come back once again like a whipped dog "with his tail between his legs," he would not only have to face his father but worse, would have to admit that Eddie was right in not leaving Chicago to begin with. And now he had to think about Nadine as well as the other twelve or so musicians in his band. He didn't want to admit to anybody, especially himself, that he had simply made a bad decision and hitched his wagon to the wrong star.

But as we've seen, as recently as February, he had been working with his big band in Chicago, and he could have easily put in a call to Benny Skoller, or any other club owner on the South Side, and gotten some kind of booking. It seems obvious that Cole wanted to start his marriage and a new phase of his life with a new beginning in a whole new part of the world—even as his parents had done less than fifteen years earlier.

"California jazz echoes the spirit of California," as Cole wrote ten years later. "It's progressive, daring, individual stuff. It's cocky, corny, great stuff, with the flash of flash bulbs in its sound, the excitement of a class-A 'whodunnit' in its originality. California jazz may not be the greatest in the world, but it certainly has guts and originality."[4]

When Cole landed on the Left Coast, he immediately realized that Los Angeles was becoming a new black mecca, and Central Avenue, where *Shuffle Along* was about to open, was its epicenter. Red Callender, who played bass with Cole in 1942, remembered, "The town was full of jazz. All the bands were coming through and all the movie stars went slumming on Central, because that's where the jazz was happening. You'd see Mercedes-Benzes, Cadillacs, Bentleys; people like Mae West, John Barrymore, John Steinbeck. All the stars, black and white, came to Central Avenue. We might arrive there at two or three in the morning, hang out until ten or twelve o'clock the next day. We rarely got tired, it was too much fun. Jack's Basket Room, Milamo's on Western, Last Word, the Turban Room, the Brown Bomber, Brothers . . ."[5] Even the *Chicago Defender*, which had, to mix a metaphor, no axe to grind and no particular reason to beat the drums for Los Angeles, observed, "Central Avenue has been transformed into Seventh Avenue and East Los Angeles into Harlem."[6]

COLE'S EARLY MONTHS IN CALIFORNIA were generally described later as his "last temptation of Christ" period, his time in the wilderness, not knowing what to do next or where to turn. "It was really tough then," as he later put it; "I played piano in almost every beer joint from San Diego to Bakersfield."[7] Like so much else in his personal mythology, he deliberately exaggerated the hardship to make his genuine rags-to-riches story seem more dramatic. In actuality, there doesn't seem to be any point at which Cole was really up against it. He may have been earning only $5 a night in 1937, according to many of his own accounts (roughly $90 or $100 adjusted for inflation to 2019 dollars). But how many eighteen-year-old musicians do you know of in the 21st century who are making the equivalent of $3,000 a month playing the piano? It's important to remember that even though he was already supporting a wife, he was still just a kid. It's hardly unusual that a teenager, even one as mature as Cole, would have to serve an apprenticeship, to work hard and scuffle to find both his style and his career opportunities.

Yet it might not have been even a month between his last gig with the remnants of the *Shuffle Along* company at the Century Club and the debut of the King Cole Trio. Bob Lewis, the owner of a club called the Swanee Inn (at 133 North La Brea Avenue, one block South of Beverly Boulevard),[8] had heard Cole at the Century and invited him to put together a group.[9] As with virtually everything else in Cole's career, there are multiple stories as to how he got together with guitarist Oscar Moore and bassist Wesley Prince around August or September of 1937 to form the original edition of the King

Cole Trio. As usual, Cole chalked it up to lady luck, but the opposite seems true: that Cole's musical vision was so clear and his ambition so overarching that he would have found a completely new format for the jazz piano no matter what, along with brilliant collaborators to join him on his journey.

Within a few months of his arrival on the coast, Cole had already become close with two percussionists, Lee Young and Lionel Hampton, who were connected to everything that was happening within the burgeoning community of jazz and black musicians in the greater Los Angeles area. Young was the kid brother of the tenor saxophone colossus Lester Young, and over the years, both brothers would make musical history with Cole. Hampton was a whole generation older than Cole but had followed a similar geographical and musical trajectory: he had been born in the South (Louisville, Kentucky, in 1908), coming of musical age in Chicago where he learned to play drums and later vibraphone, and then, at about twenty, relocating to Los Angeles. By the mid-1930s, he was a true star of California jazz, including some notable appearances with Louis Armstrong. In 1935–36, he led his own band, which featured trumpeter Teddy Buckner and bassist Wesley Prince.[10] Hamp's band was a hit with the local black community, but he was willing to give it up to join Benny Goodman, after the legendary clarinetist heard him at the Paradise in summer 1936.

Hamp later remembered[11] that he first met Cole at the Paradise; this would have been in the summer of 1937, while he and the Goodman band were doing record dates, a radio series, and the movie *Hollywood Hotel*. While Hampton was working with Goodman, Cole, as we've seen, was playing at the Ubangi and then the Century Club. But after their paying work was through, the two would join forces at the Paradise, just for the thrill of working with each other. "Nat hadn't been on the coast from Chicago long," the percussionist later remembered. "He didn't even have a steady gig."[12] Hampton added, "He and I used to jam every day, and I was going around town trying to hip people to him."[13]

Hampton also remembered distinctly that the first time he encountered Cole, the pianist was already in the middle of a partnership with the outstanding guitarist Oscar Moore. Because he had been born on Christmas Day in Austin, 1916, Moore's friends sometimes addressed him as "Jesus Boy."[14] Like Nat, Oscar had grown up in the shadow of a significantly older brother, Johnny Moore, who was also a guitarist. Oscar landed in Los Angeles in 1936, a few months before his future partner, and like him, he was quickly accepted by musicians on the local scene.[15] "The first time I laid eyes on Nat," Moore chuckled in 1957, "he looked like a real mean guy—his eyes almost closed,

glintin' out at you, diggin' what was goin' on. After I met him, I found out how wrong I was."[16]

So, whatever group Cole would bring in to the Swanee Inn, it was already bound to feature Oscar Moore. Other musicians were up for grabs. Bob Lewis and Cole both knew that the twelve-piece band was too ambitious for his small club; with no other work around for the full contingent, Cole reluctantly had to disband. "The manager of the Swanee had told Nat that if he could get a [group] together, he had a job," Hampton remembered. "So Nat got Oscar, and then they started looking for a bassist."[17] Cole's first choice was Wesley Prince, who had formerly played in Hampton's own band at the Paradise, and he was now available ever since Hamp had broken up that band to go on the road with Goodman.[18]

For a drummer, Cole reached out to Lee Young, and there are multiple accounts of why that didn't happen—either because three musicians was the maximum number that could fit on the Swanee bandstand, or, equally likely, Young just never showed up. Thus, whether by accident or design, the group that began playing at the Swanee Inn in September 1937 featured Nat Cole, piano; Oscar Moore, guitar; and Wesley Prince, bass. At that point, said Moore, "We just thought that the Trio was going to be a good thing. We had faith in it."[19]

One major inspiration for the new group came not from Cole himself but rather from his new bassist. As Prince later remembered, "I thought of the name of the trio, and put two and two together, I thought of 'Old King Cole was a merry old soul,' you know, and that's what gave me the idea of calling him Nat King Cole."[20] Nat had fluctuated between Coles and Cole for years, but somehow, he had never thought about using that old nursery rhyme, again in millennial parlance, for marketing and "branding" purposes. As we've seen, he had already named his first band, in Chicago in fall 1934, "The Royal Dukes." And this is clearly why the band had to be a trio; the nursery rhyme, which goes back at least to 1708, states explicitly that Old King Cole "called for fiddlers three." The very first mention of the Trio in print is an ad in the *Los Angeles Times*, announcing "Chicago's Sensational Trio, King Cole's Swingsters Three appearing at the Swanee Inn."[21]

A trio of piano, guitar, and bass—where did such an idea come from? The dominant keyboard sound of the 1930s was stride piano, and the greatest exponent was Thomas "Fats" Waller. Waller's band, the "Rhythm," utilized bass, drums, and guitar (along with trumpet and sax), but none of his sidemen were essential, either harmonically or rhythmically—stride was foremost