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A Tragedy of Errors

The monomaniacal nature of TV news becomes ever more egregious. The all but inescapable coverage of the O.J. Simpson case (at one time five channels of television in Los Angeles were devoting "live" reportage to the trial and recapitulating it all on later "news" broadcasts), the JonBenet Ramsey murder, the saga of Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan, the Columbine killings, the death of John F. Kennedy Jr., the Monica Lewinsky special (or should that be specialty?), the death of the vapid Princess Di followed by her lugubrious interminable public wake and near-canonization, and more recently, the Elian Gonzalez debacle in Miami, are examples.

Doug Ramsey, known to many jazz lovers as an excellent writer on music, has a formidable background as a newspaperman, television reporter, news director, and news anchor in San Francisco, New Orleans and New York. Doug said, in the midst of the Elian frenzy, "Every time, when it's all over, the industry beats its breast and says, 'We overdid it, but we've learned from our mistake. We won't do *that* again.' And then they do it all over again."

And all the talking heads, including Geraldo Rivera and Bill O'Reilly and worst of all the ear-piercingly shrill Chris Matthews, go on the air about the latest *idée fixe* and try to drown each other out. These aren't talk shows; they're shout shows. With MSNBC, CNBC, CNN, CNN Headline, and Fox News, we have five full-time news channels, plus sports channels. In the small hours of the morning, ABC and CBS go to full-time news, giving us a total of seven news channels. Add to that the regular network evening news programs of ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS, and all the local coverage, which often incorporates national news feeds. As Bobby Scott used to say, "Where can I get some information?" There were once seven daily newspapers in New York City; there are now three. And all the television coverage doesn't give you in a week as much news as a single daily issue of the Christian Science Monitor. As television news coverage proliferates, the number of newspapers is going to continue to shrink, with even the want-ads drifting away to the Internet.

While television was devoting countless hours of each day (and then repeating earlier broadcasts) to the Elián Gonzales matter in Miami, Vladimir Putin, the new premier of Russia, announced that the Dumas had approved the Start Two treaty, and he and the Dumas would also approve Start Three if the United States would forego building a missile-defense system. The two treaties would drastically reduce nuclear arms in Russia and the United States, contributing materially to the possibility (remote though it is, for other reasons) of the survival of our species on this planet. This major development got perfunctory coverage; the TV industry had more important things to do. Dianne Sawyer had to do her long interview with Elian, Dan Rather his interview with the boy's father.

All the while, there is no particular onus on TV (or any other) journalists to be accurate. Rush Limbaugh and Matt Drudge, if you want to call them journalists and I don't, and any of the talk show hosts bear no responsibility whatsoever for accuracy. The April 2000 issue of *Brill's Content* analyzes the irresponsible coverage of the Richard Jewell incident. Jewell is the man who was accused of the 1996 Atlanta Olympics bombing. He was pilloried on TV and in the print press, virtually convicted, only to be proved innocent.

American libel law is notoriously weak. You have to prove malice and intent, as well as prove that what was published caused actual damage to the litigant. And so journalists (Dan Rather among them) get away with psychological murder, and do it regularly. The law holds that a publisher is not responsible for what it prints. A book manuscript may be drenched in inaccuracies; the publisher is in no way responsible to check for them. A few publications (the *New Yorker* is one) employ fact checkers. But that is rare.

These thoughts came to mind when I was called on by the *Globe and Mail* in Toronto to review a new book on Nat Cole. The book is saturated in error and inaccuracy. This troubled me only the more because of the way errors and lies replicate themselves in future writing. A small example: somewhere, a long time ago, some writer said Woody Herman's full name was Woodrow Wilson Herman. It wasn't. It was Woodrow Charles Herman. But the error keeps on being repeated. A large example: Bessie Smith did not bleed to death outside a white hospital that denied her admission. To the contrary, very much to the contrary. A

white physician, happening on the automobile accident in which her arm was torn off, drove her immediately to a black hospital. She was dead of blood loss (there was no plasma in those days) when they arrived. And as many persons have noted, among them Lionel Hampton's nephew, who was with her, nobody would have even considered taking a black woman to a white hospital in 1937 Mississippi. But the myth of the death of Bessie Smith (Edward Albee even wrote a play with that title; Alan Lomax goes on repeating it,) keeps on keeping on, often thrown up as a symbol of the treatment of blacks in white America. White America has enough racial sins on its soul without inventing any.

By the way, the Bessie Smith story was sent on its way by John Hammond, who wrote it, completely without corroboration, in *Down Beat* in 1937. Journalistic irresponsibility is not new; but I think it's getting worse, and so do many of my friends. As one of them, John Walsh, with whom I worked in Louisville in the mid-1950s, said to me on the phone: "I'm glad I'm not in it any more."

Now, I have been trying to sell a certain idea for several years. It has become practical in the age of the computer.

Some university should set up in its jazz program a compendium of horrors in jazz journalism historiography that future historians could consult. No writer is infallible, and as hard as one may try to avoid them, errors slip into our articles and books, if only because of the fallible memories of eye-witnesses. Incidentally, I always appreciate it when a reader corrects an error in the Jazzletter. This prevents its turning up in one of my books.

If anyone should set up a program such as the one I propose, I'll contribute a few of my own errors. You could, for example, set up a file on Woody. A future writer would look at it, and find all the errors in past writings about him, and avoid them, including ascribing the wrong name.

The logical center for this would be the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers. Each year, updated diskettes of these errors could be sent off to other institutions, such as Tulane, Stanford, North Texas, and the Berklee College of Music, each of which in turn would feed other discovered errors back to this central program.

The journalistic torture of Richard Jewell is documented in detail in the April issue of *Brill's Content*, an important magazine that specializes in the errors and misbehavior of the press, particularly television journalism. I strongly recommend it. Its address is 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York NY 10020.

The finest newspaper in America, and possibly the world (I haven't read all the newspapers in the world, but I've read a lot), is the *Christian Science Monitor.* It is not, as many of those unfamiliar with it might think, a religious newspaper, nor even one written by Christian Scientists. Daniel Schorr, for example, is a regular contributor. It is simply the fairest, most disinterested, open, thoughtful, intelligent newspaper in America. I marvel at the scope and thoroughness and clarity of each issue. It is published five days a week, contains virtually no advertising, and has no bloated Sunday edition. If you try it for a few weeks, you may want never to do without it again. Its subscription number, for both the U.S. and Canada, is 800 456-2220.

A final point. The reasons *these* issues of the *Jazzletter* are late is that, with the advances in computer technology and the Internet as a means of research, I simply had to block out some time to take a couple of college courses. For those who might be interested:

I had been working in WordPerfect 5.1, and had delayed the transition from DOS as long as I could. WP 5.1 is not easily compatible with Windows 95 and 98 and the the Internet, and since I am in constant communication with publishers and friends, I simply had to make the switch. To do that, it seemed the course of least resistance to switch to Microsoft Word at the same time. That's one of the college courses I took.

Microsoft Word stinks. Even the instructor from whom I was learning it confided that she didn't like it. It is clumsy, much inferior to old WP 5.1, though it will do a lot of fancy tricks that I don't need. It doesn't even have a Reveal Codes method. I asked around among computer whizzes, and was told that many persons are using WordPerfect 7, and even prefer it to WordPerfect 8. So I made the switch again, for a while experimenting with both, and found WordPerfect 7 far superior to Word. I began to understand the reason for some of the rumble against Bill Gates.

Windows 98, I am told, is only marginally better than 95. Both are flawed, prone to freezing up. Word 2000 is now on the market, and experts have advised me to avoid it completely until the bugs are out of it, which could take years.

I am digesting all that I have learned in recent months, and hope to get caught up soon. But the change had to be made. As in the past, my apologies to all.

And now to the subject of Nat Cole. And two books about him.

King Cole

Part One

In April, 1956, Nat Cole came to Louisville.

This was only days after a quintet of white supremacists had tried to abduct him from a stage in Birmingham, Alabama. The head of the White Citizens Council had issued an edict that "Negro music appeals to the base in man, bringing out animalism and vulgarity," and they acted on it, oblivious

of course to the animalism, vulgarity and base in themselves.

What the five men planned to do with Cole had their abduction succeeded remains unknown, but a friendly entreaty somewhere on a back-country road that he foreswear singing "Negro" music is hardly among the possibilities.

Cole was touring with the Ted Heath band from Britain. Two performances were planned for the evening of Tuesday, April 10, in the Birmingham Municipal Auditorium. One was for a white audience, the other for a black. That is the way things were in the South. I don't think it was that way in Louisville, though. Louisville had drawn up plans for the integration of its schools even before the Supreme Court ruled that segregated education was illegal. Black friends I made in the Louisville music world told me the town was comparatively enlightened, more liberal than other Southern cities, and by then Cole was able to book a room at the Seelbach, one of the city's two good hotels. I interviewed Cole over lunch in his room at that hotel.

The men clambered up onto that stage in Birmingham. One of them took a punch at Cole, knocking him back against a piano bench, which shattered as he fell over it. The police subdued his assailants, but he had a swollen lip as he limped off-stage. The audience begged him to come back, that they might apologize for what had happened. He did so. Then the mayor came to his dressing room, and added to the apology.

But the performance for the white audience was suspended, and Cole sang only briefly for the black audience that came to the auditorium later that evening. He went home to Chicago, presumably to settle his nerves. The reporters were ready for him; in the case of some of the members of the black press, you might say they were lying in ambush.

He said, "I was a guinea pig for some hoodlums who thought they could hurt me and frighten me and keep other Negro entertainers from performing in the South. But what they did has backfired on them, because thousands of white people in the audience could see how terrible it is for an innocent man to be subjected to such barbaric treatment."

Then, when a reporter asked him if he would again perform for segregated audiences in the South, he said:

"Sure I will. I'm not a political figure or some controversial person. I'm just an entertainer, and it's my job to perform for them. If I stop because of some state law, I'm deserting the people who are important to me. In my way I may be helping to bring harmony between people through music."

He was excoriated for saying it. Tavern operators in Harlem took his records out of their juke boxes. The argument raged on, and Cole was hurt by it. He had refused to play for a segregated audience in Kansas City in 1944, but this was forgotten in the turmoil over the statements he made about the Montgomery incident. After a few days off, he rejoined the tour with the Ted Heath band, which moved on to Louisville, and it was at this time that I met him

Though I could wrestle with these events intellectually, they were as alien to me as any I might find in the doings of the inhabitants of another planet. Nat Cole was one of my heroes, and when he came to Louisville that April day, I was only eleven months out of Canada, still in a lingering cultural shock at seeing, on the day of my arrival to live in this other country, the plaques saying *colored* and *white* on the doors of men's rooms in the Louisville and Nashville Railway station.

In love with jazz since a time before I knew what you called this kind of music, I could not conceive of a society in which Negroes were viewed as inferior. To me, they were not only equal, but maybe even superior, maybe even gods! Among my heroes at an early and formative age were Count Basie and J.C. Higginbotham and Edmund Hall and Coleman Hawkins and Jimmie Lunceford and Duke Ellington and Ray Nance and Lionel Hampton and Sy Oliver and Benny Carter. Negro men were, to me, people from whom you shyly solicited autographs, and when I was twelve I did a lot of that. If I had any racial prejudices, they were these: I was certain that Canadians could not play jazz; and I wasn't entirely sure that even white Americans could play it, though I was very big on Jack Teagarden. Such is the power of prejudgment.

Ironically, Nat Cole is remembered by the general public only as a singer, though he was one of the greatest pianists in jazz history, and one of the most influential.

Horace Silver once told me that when he first played the Newport Jazz Festival, impresario George Wein stood offstage calling out, "Earl Fatha Hines, Earl Fatha Hines!" This baffled Horace, since he had never listened to Hines. But later, he said, he realized that he had listened a lot to Nat Cole, and *he* had listened to Hines.

And that Cole assuredly did, in Chicago, when he was growing up. He would stand outside the Grand Terrace Ballroom listening to Hines, absorbing all he could.

Hines is a headwater of jazz piano, perhaps one should say *the* headwater, because of the influence he had on pianists who were themselves immensely influential, no one more so than Teddy Wilson, Bud Powell, and Bill Evans.

Who was this Nat Cole?

There have been four (to the best of my knowledge) biographies on Cole, including *Unforgettable: The Life and Mystique of Nat King Cole*, by Leslie Gourse (1991, St. Martin's Press). The latest is *Nat King Cole*, by Daniel Mark Epstein (1999, Farrar Strauss and Giroux). The dust jacket publicity says, vaguely, that Epstein is "the author of many books of poetry, stories, and essays," but all I can find in the Santa Barbara library is an anthology of poetry of which he was co-editor and a biography of Aimee Semple MacPherson. That he is unknown in the world (or worlds) of popular

music and jazz is not necessarily significant. I had never heard of Professor Philip Furia, either, when Oxford University Press published his *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley*, one of the best books on lyrics and lyricists I've ever encountered. And indeed, there may be all sorts of "unknown" souls Out There who are more qualified to write on these subjects than some of those who are established practitioners of this dubious art.

But the Epstein book is riddled with errors, and for reasons I have already stated, these things worry me because of their tendency to replicate themselves in future writings. For this reason, not malice, I must draw attention to some of these errors.

The Leslie Gourse book, product of more careful research and much greater musical knowledge is, fortunately, coming out in December in a new edition, published by Cooper Square Press.

The assault in Alabama must have been only the more bitter to Cole since he was born there, in Montgomery, on March 17, 1917. He was, however, culturally and emotionally a son of Chicago. Nathaniel Adams Coles was born of Perlina and Edward Coles, a wholesale grocer with a yearning to be a clergyman. Nat's brothers were Eddie, Isaac, called Ike, and Freddy. There were also two sisters, Eddie Mae, who died when Nat was young, and Evelyn. The youngest in the family, Lionel Frederick, called Freddy, was born in Chicago in 1931.

"Eddie was born in Montgomery," Freddy told me. "Nat and my sister Evelyn were born in Montgomery. My brother Ike and I were born in Chicago."

Edward Coles moved his family to the South Side of Chicago, where he established himself as a Baptist pastor, in 1923. The mother was highly musical, and Nat was playing organ in his father's church by the time he was twelve. Epstein delivers himself of this: "The Coleses' arrival in Chicago was crucial, providential. It coincided with the greatest gathering of musical genius America has ever known." So much for the big-band era and its principals, the rise of bebop in the 1940s, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell, Charlie Parker, Phil Woods, Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Max Roach, Gerry Mulligan, Gil Evans, and others of abilities ranging from brilliance to genius. Epstein is full of that sort of pontifical utterance on a subject he knows little about. He writes of Duke Ellington, "With his looks he might have acted on the stage." In that age? Where? After Artie Shaw quit the music business, Count Basie tried to talk him into coming back into it, and Artie said, "Why don't *you* quit?" Basie said, "To become what? A janitor?"

Epstein writes: "Though Nat has not begun to discover his singing talent, when he first tries to sing he will sound a lot like Eddie."

Freddy Cole has enunciation similar to Nat's, not only in singing but in speech as well. It is a distinct family resemblance. Leslie Gourse, in her book, gets it right, saying, "Ike thought with pride that all the brothers sounded as alike in the expressive qualities of their voices as the Kennedy brothers, even though Eddie had a gravelly tone to his singing voice, and Ike's voice was deeper and huskier than Nat's." For sibling vocal similarities, one might also mention Jim and Don Ameche; Bing and Bob Crosby; James Arness and Peter Graves; Bob and Ray Eberly (or Eberle); and Betty and Marion Hutton.

What Gourse doesn't say, and nobody has dared say, is that Nat Cole had an African voice, as does Freddy, as surely as Tony Bennett, Ben Gazzara, Peter Rodino, Brenda Vaccaro, Aldo Ray, Julius La Rosa, and many others have Italian voices. Not all Italians have that husky, woody sound, any more than all Swedes are blue-eyed and blond, but many do. There are oriental voices, both Chinese and Japanese, and they are slightly different. But both are light and high. We may have superb Japanese violinists, but I doubt that our opera companies are likely to recruit many Oriental bassos. And many Americans have African voices, airy, soft, sometimes fibrous in timbre. You hear the sound as surely in actor Danny Glover's voice as in that of Nat or Freddy Cole. The African and Italian are among the most attractive vocal sounds in my experience, which may in part be why blacks and Italians have so predominated in American popular music in the post-Morton Downy-Buddy Clark period. And while we are on the subject, Nat Cole had African hands, with long, supple, graceful fingers that almost seem to have been designed for the piano. Oscar Peterson has similar hands.

But where did the Cole brothers get their clear enunciation? "I guess we got it from our father," Freddy told me in 1990. "My dad insisted that you enunciate. I remember one time I came in from school, trying to be hip and slurring words. That was a no-no.

"Even my older brother, Eddie, spoke that way. Eddie was a fantastic musician. In fact, Nat was in his band — Eddie Cole and the Solid Swingers."

Where did the music come from in that family?

"From my mother. She was choir director in my dad's church. She had great musical feel. Good piano player. She just had a knack for touching the right gospel song in church. She was an extraordinary musician. If she were judged by today's standards, she'd be right up there among the tops.

"She had an Uncle Fess. I understand he was a musician. His name was Adams. That was my mother's maiden name. So I guess our musical genes came from my mother's side of the family.

"My father's full name was Edward James Coles. He used to be at a church in Chicago called True Light Baptist

Church over at Forty-fifth and Federal. We moved from there, when Ike and I were very young, out to Waukegan, and this is where we grew up. I was respectful of my father. We all were."

"Were you a very close family?"

"Relatively close. We didn't get a chance to see each other that much. Living in different parts of the country, and everybody traveling. When Nat was in and out of New York, I used to see him quite often."

"Did you all play in your father's church?"

"Nat and my sister Evelyn did, but Ike and I never played in the church. We all played piano. Eddie also played bass. All of us had piano lessons, but I was the only one who went to university. I went to Roosevelt University for a while. I left there and went to Juilliard and then to the New England Conservatory. I was in music ed. I lack six hours of a master's."

Nat Cole first learned piano from his mother, then studied with Milton Hinton's mother. Milton was not interested in the piano, to his mother's chagrin, and so she sent him to another teacher to learn violin, according to the Leslie Gourse book. Nat studied music at Wendell Phillips High School, whose name was changed to DuSable High School in 1936. There he came under the influence of Captain Walter Dyett, who had played violin and banjo in Erskine Tate's Vendome Theater Orchestra, conducted the all-black Eighth Regiment Army Band, and then established a jazz program at Wendell Phillips long before the high-school and college jazz education movement was born. His name is legend in the annals of Chicago jazz, his students having included John Young, Gene Ammons, Johnny Griffin, Ray Nance, Von Freeman, Julian Priester, Joseph Jarman, Pat Patrick, Clifford Jordan, Eddie Harris, Bo Diddley (on violin), Wilbur Ware, Victor Sproles, Dorothy Donegan, Wilbur Campbell, Walter Perkins, Dinah Washington, Johnny Hartman, and Richard Davis, who said, "Maybe you weren't afraid of the cops, but you were afraid of Captain Dyett." Walter Dyett staged a Hi-Jinks Show every spring to buy instruments for the band because the school board declined to do so. The measure of the man is the quantity and caliber of the musicians he turned out. Nat Cole thus was shaped by the disciplines of two severe men, his father and Walter Dyett.

Freddy said: "Nat was a very accomplished musician. He could read music like . . . " A snap of the fingers.

There is more than ample evidence in his playing that Nat Cole had solid classical discipline.

"I recall that one of Nat's teachers was a man named Professor Fry," Freddy told me. "He and my brother Eddie both studied with him." Gourse says in her book that Nat studied everything from Bach to Rachmaninoff "with a teacher named Professor Thomas." Her book unfortunately is without footnotes and source attributions.

But Nat certainly studied the "legitimate" repertoire with somebody: his tone and touch were not the least of the evidence. The ease and elegance with which he played lines in thirds is another: he really had that fingering down, as in the polished and scrupulously rehearsed passage he would later use in *Embraceable You*. He would quote classical pieces in his recordings, such as *In the Hall of the Mountain King*, which he always played in block chords in *Body and Soul*, and he recorded a version of MacDowell's *To a Wild Rose* and Rachmaninoff's *Prelude in C-sharp Minor*, although such things were simply in the air in the 1930s, heard on "light classical" network radio shows, *The Voice of Firestone, The Cities Service Hour, The Bell Telephone Hour*, and many others, some of them originating in Chicago. He had a taste, it would seem, for the kind of salon piano pieces popular at the time, and it is highly probable that he listened to Lee Sims, who played "on the radio" in Chicago and whose work inspired, among others, Art Tatum. I strongly suspect Lee Sims had some influence on Nat Cole too.

But the biggest influence, both by the evidence in his playing and his own statements, was Earl Hines, then in his famous sojourn at the Grand Terrace. In 1957, Nat told Jack Tynan, west coast editor of *Down Beat*, "That was the driving force that appealed to me. I first heard Hines in Chicago when I was a kid. He was regarded as the Louis Armstrong of piano players. His was a new, revolutionary kind of playing, because he broke away from the Eastern style. He broke the barrier of what we called stride piano where the left hand kept up in a steady, striding pattern. I latched onto that new Hines style. Guess I still show that influence to this day."

Epstein has comedian Timmie Rogers quoting Cole as saying that he loved the Hines tune *Rosetta* but couldn't play it unless he got his hands on the sheet music. I find it hard to believe that Cole, with ears like his, would have to have a lead sheet to work that tune out, even if it isn't I VI II V.

Epstein is susceptible to the most awful cliches: "whose career was taking off like a rocket . . . it drove him crazy when . . . burning the candle at both ends . . . in the wee hours of the morning . . . were not about to set the world on fire . . . grinning like the cat that swallowed the canary." These alternate with perfervid poeticisms: "The gift of Hines's piano to an orchestra was a matter of atmosphere, musical weather. His speed and dynamic control enabled him to surround the ensemble, lay green grass under it, spread a clear sky over it with sunshine or stars, or blow like a hurricane through an out-chorus. The delicate high descants of his piano could make a light spring rainstorm; then he would descend in bass decrescendos to violent thunder." Hold that tiger! I don't know how you decrescendo into thunder, of course. Epstein refers to "an octave trill." There is no such thing; a trill is "a musical ornament consisting of

the rapid alternation of a given note with the diatonic second above it." (*Harvard Dictionary of Music.*) There is such a thing as an octave roll, liberally used in blues piano. But no trill.

Epstein is big on the word "descant," which I have never heard used in jazz. He says of Nat's playing of *Rosetta*, "Like a burst of sunbeams from a dark sky came the high-octave notes of the first measure, and nobody could keep from smiling. The kid was playing a lovely, happy melody that was not *Rosetta*, and yet it was, too, a perfect descant . . . to Hines's famous tune." Thinking I must have missed something along the way, I looked up "descant" in some of my reference books, one of which said it "was used from the 12th century on as a general term for all forms of polyphony. It replaced the still earlier diaphony or organum in which a second or more parts progressed with the principal or subject by similar motion, and by permitting the contrary motion, paved the way for the development of counterpoint." At another point, Epstein refers to "locked-hand countermelodies." That would certainly be an interesting trick.

Epstein's research is no better than his knowledge. He twice refers to Art Tatum as one-eyed; Tatum was blind in one eye, but the eye was there. He has Glen Gray down as an arranger. He refers to "Johnny Mercer, the brilliant songwriter, singer, and pianist." Johnny didn't play piano. Farther down the page, Epstein says, "A black social club in Georgia voted the white Mercer their 'favorite colored singer on the radio.'"

It wasn't a social club in Georgia. It was the Abraham Lincoln Junior Boys' Club of Chicago, whose members sent him a postcard saying, "Dear Johnny Mercer: We have taken a vote and are pleased to inform you that you have been voted the most successful young colored singer on the air. Sincerely yours, T.A.L.J.B.C of C." Johnny showed me that card.

Nat Cole made his recording debut on the Decca label in 1936, in a band led by his brother Eddie. That year the band played engagements in good Chicago locales, including the Congress Hotel.

Eddie and Nat dropped the s from Coles. Neither Gourse nor Epstein speculates on why. For a strongly subjective reason, I am interested in this, and I think I know why they did it.

Show-business name changes are common, of course, some as radical as Samuel Goldberg to Buddy Clark, others more casual, such as that of Red Norville into Norvo after a critic, giving him his first publicity, misspelled it Norvo. Conrad Kirnon got his name changed for him in Birdland when Pee Wee Marquette, unable to remember and/or pronounce it (possibly because he didn't get a payoff), introduced him repeatedly as Connie Kay. But I think the Coles case is different. A name ending with an s, such as Hines, Walters, Williams, Ames, Reeves, Coles, is an eternal and infernal bloody nuisance to its wearer for these reasons:

English grammatical practice is inconsistent about the possessive form of such names. The possessive form of plural nouns is an apostrophe, as in boys' night out. But is a name with an s on the end singular or plural? Should the possessive be Hines' or Hines's, Coles' or Coles's? The plural, applied to a family, is logically Reeveses and Leeses and Coleses. And if you do use the s in the singular possessive, as in Coles's, then you should (for the sake of grammatical consistency) use it on the plural, which would give you something like "in the Coleses's family life." And that sounds *really* weird. You are made particularly aware of the problem when your name starts appearing in print. At one time I considered changing my name to Lee but never did, and I think the Coles boys did the right thing, probably after their names started turning up in the *Chicago Defender.* Eddie was the first to drop the s, Nat followed suit, and eventually Freddy did too.

In October of 1936, Eddie and Nat joined the orchestra in Noble Sissle's *Shuffle Along* which, Epstein says, "was the first all-black show to conquer Broadway." Will Marion Cook's *Clarindy* or *The Origin of the Cakewalk*, which Cook produced with poet Lawrence Dunbar, was presented on Broadway in 1898, when Noble Sissle was nine years old.

Nat Cole at seventeen was already a minor celebrity in South Side Chicago, courting a beautiful dancer named Nadine Robinson, nine years his senior. In January, 1937, while Nat still was in *Shuffle Along*, he and Nadine were married. In May, the show opened in Los Angeles, then collapsed in Long Beach when, apparently, somebody absconded with its payroll. Nat would live the rest of his life in Los Angeles. The first two or three years would be tough ones.

For a time Nat was playing solo piano. He was approached by Bob Lewis, who owned a nightclub called the Swanee Inn. Lewis asked him to organize a small group and bring it into his club. Nat engaged Wesley Prince, a bassist he'd heard with Lionel Hampton, and the Texas-born guitarist Oscar Moore. There are conflicting theories of why he didn't also use drums. One is that Lee Young didn't show up on opening night. This is unlikely. Lee Young was as responsible and punctilious as his brother Lester was elusive. One story is that Lee thought the bandstand was too small for a quartet with drums. In any event, Cole went in with a trio, and if it was not unprecedented, piano-guitar-bass had not evolved to the heights of integration and sophistication he, Moore (later Irving Ashby), and Prince (later Johnny Miller) would take that instrumentation. They stayed at the Swanee Inn for six months, honing their material in the luxury of a secure situation.

In September, 1938, the trio began to make records for Standard Transcriptions. "Transcriptions" were recordings made only for radio broadcast, not for public sale. Johnny Mercer, who had come out to Hollywood from New York to write lyrics for movies, heard the group about that time, and, given Mercer's life-long taste for great pianists, it is little wonder that he was enthralled by Cole.

Before I knew his name, I became captivated by Nat Cole. I first heard him on two Lionel Hampton records, *Central Avenue Breakdown* and *Jack the Bellboy*, on the RCA Victor label. Those old 78 rpm records bore no personnel lists, and certainly nothing resembling liner notes. Somehow I learned that Hampton was playing that fast piano with two fingers, probably the two index fingers or maybe the index finger crossed with the middle finger for strength, for he certainly banged hard on the keyboard. How did he play like that with only two fingers? He was a drummer and vibes player, and he had fast hands, playing piano the way some of the old-time newspaper reporters played typewriter. I had no idea where Central Avenue was. It was of course in the black neighborhood of Los Angeles. The record was made in Los Angles. Hampton was born in Louisville, on April 20, 1908 or 1909, but his family, like Nat Cole's, moved to Chicago when he was a boy. He too was an alumnus of Wendell Phillips High.

When Cole was organizing his trio with Oscar Moore, it was Hampton, apparently, who recommended Wesley Prince on bass. Then Hampton tried to hire the whole trio to go on the road with him. Cole declined the offer, but the trio recorded eight sides with Hampton, seven of which are available on a CD, Bluebird 66039-2, if indeed it hasn't been removed from the list by now. *Central Avenue Breakdown* and *Jack the Bellboy*, recorded May 10, 1940, were among these. What I *felt* and certainly did not understand was that the power and drive of *Breakdown* came from the rich-toned boogie-woogie accompaniment provided by the anonymous Nat Cole. Coming from Chicago, he had no doubt had early exposure to some of the boogie-woogie masters, such as Meade Lux Lewis and Jimmy Yancey, who were born there. *Jack the Bellboy* was presumably named for the Detroit disc jockey Ed Mackenzie who used that monicker. It was fashionable in jazz to flatter disc jockeys (who, as far as I can remember, were not yet called that) by naming tunes for them. The latter number is a show-piece for Hampton's drums, but it is most notable to me now for the strong sense of identity the Cole trio already had, and how superbly Cole played piano.

Dough-Ray-Me, recorded a couple of months later, is a "silly" song with a unison vocal. Except for the presence of drums, it sounds exactly like the King Cole Trio of not-far-off Capitol Records fame. It was just the kind of frivolous, trivial song on which Cole's early fame was built. And Cole's voice, with its distinctive timbre and enunciation, defines the vocal sound as surely as Johnny Hodges colored the Ellington sax-section.

Also on that session, July 17, 1940, was *Jivin' with Jarvis*, a riff tune (and that title is all the lyric there is) named for the Los Angeles disc jockey Al Jarvis. Cole's piano has all the bounce and rhythmic vitality we came to expect of him. On a ballad called *Blue Because of You* Cole plays a solo that defines him as clearly as Bill Evans' solo on George Russell's *All About Rosie* defined him a generation later. Cole's later characteristics are evident in the Hampton sessions, the banged-out low-note punctuations, the insouciant use of triplets, even the right hand melody passages in oriental-sounding parallel fourths, the beautiful touch and technique, and that ultimately indefinable quality: his exquisite taste. It never failed him in his playing, only in his choice of songs.

The 1940 recordings with Hampton are significant for their evidence of how far Cole had evolved, how well he already knew who he was and how he wanted to play. When one hears apologias for some of the less-than-original young lions now in well-publicized prominence, it is instructive to reflect on Nat Cole on those Hampton recordings.

He was twenty-three.

The Nat Cole trio in its early days had recorded for Decca, largely tunes such as *I Like to Riff; That Ain't Right*; *Hit That Jive, Jack*; *Scotchin' with the Soda*, and *Early Morning Blues*. The group built its reputation as it toured to New York, Chicago, Washington, and elsewhere. The first recording strike by the American Federation of Musicians was about to hit the industry, and Johnny Mercer's newly-formed label Capitol acquired some Cole sides from the small Excelsior label, including *Vim Vom Veedle* and *All for You*. It soon signed him to a contract. Other than some of those earlier records and transcriptions, and a few extracurricular dates for Norman Granz later, Cole's entire body of recorded work was for Capitol. The chemistry of Cole-and-Capitol would propel him to a stardom that has not ended, though he has been dead thirty-five years.

The body of that work is among the most significant in American musical history. In 1991, Mosaic, the independent reissue label notable for the reverent quality of its product, acquired all the Capitol records on which Cole played piano and put them out in a boxed set. The arrangement covered such performances with orchestra as *Nature Boy* and *The Christmas Song* on which he played piano, but not those orchestral performances on which he only sang.

This Mosaic set of 18 CDs constitutes some of the most significant jazz documentation we have. Alas, you can't get it. It came out as a limited edition that has long been sold out. With 19 or 20 takes on each CD, the collection contains 347 tracks, including alternate takes. By my count, 64 of these

are instrumentals, mostly by the trio.

I would be inclined to include among the instrumentals the 12 tracks recorded in September, 1956, and issued in an album called *After Midnight*. Although Cole sings the heads on all the tunes, that album is about blowing, with guest soloists in the personnel, along with one of the most underrated of drummers, Lee Young. And it contains a lot of quietly fervent Cole piano. That album was made when Cole was at the pinnacle of his stardom as a singer.

Cole came under fire from some of the critics for "abandoning" jazz for his hugely lucrative career as a singer. Jazz critics, for the most part, had a certain condescension (shared by a lot of musicians) toward singers. That Cole was one of the most magnificent singers of songs we have ever had seemed to elude the attention of the purists.

But when Cole was coming up in the 1930s, there was no separation of jazz from American popular music: indeed the main repertoire of jazz was the magnificent body of song that grew up simultaneously and partly in tandem with it. Woody Herman (one of Nat's friends) was wont to say, "Jazz *was* the popular music of the land." *Down Beat* was not a jazz magazine; it was a magazine about bands and popular music, the best of which (that of Harold Arlen, for example) was soaked in jazz. *Down Beat* wrote about Guy Lombardo and Freddy Martin and their bands, as well as Basie and Ellington and Herman and Hines. One of the worst things that ever happened to jazz was the definition of it by intellectuals or would-be intellectuals as an "art form." Much good has come of this, but much bad too, with some musicians disdaining the very public that was paying them, and a lot of pretentious posturing.

Another problem was that Nat Cole was not one of the "improvising" singers, that group of them anxious to show how they could (and can) demolish a melody and with it the meaning of lyrics. I am not a fan of scat singing, partly because for the most part only skilled instrumentalists — such as Dizzy Gillespie, Richard Boone, Clark Terry, and Frank Rosolino — have really done it well. If ever a musician had the equipment (the knowledge, the harmonic sense, the inward rhythmic chronometer) to do it superbly, Nat Cole did. And he never indulged in it, reminding me of Mark Twain's definition of a gentleman: "One who knows how to play the accordion but refrains from doing so."

Cole stuck close to melodies, a proclivity he shared with Perry Como. Only singers seem to know how good Como really is. But Cole shared two other qualities with Como. One is a mastery so complete that the singing comes across as lazy. The other is that probably no other really fine singer recorded so many dubious songs as Cole and Como.

In some cases, this seems to be a failure of taste. But in others, there seems to be a subtle, pervasive, historical-social-psychological reason that Cole chose and performed a certain style — if style is the appropriate word — of song. I think that not even Freddy Cole, even if I asked him, could tell me why he picked the songs he did, and so I am left to venture into what I hope is reasonable speculation.

All racism is sexual. It lies in the territorial imperative, it is found in the tale of the rape (from Latin *rapio-rapere*, to seize and carry off) of the Sabine women, the symbol of all such forays into enemy territory and the seizure of women as plunder. Racism consists in, and solely in, this: We have a right to your women; you do not have a right to ours. And in positions of dominance, all races, no exceptions, are racist. As Oscar Peterson's sister Daisy said to me once, "Show me a race that is without racism." It is not one of our more glorious attributes.

This is evident throughout the history of Africans in America. A tee-shirt seen at the Tailhook convention read: Women are property. And, alas, all too many men think that way. In the days of slavery, there wasn't even a question of it. A black man who even looked with what might be construed as lust at a white woman could be, and often was, punished with death. A white man, on the other hand, took black women where and when he pleased. I doubt that even the most ardent sociologist could deduce figures on this matter, but you can count on it that in far the majority of people of "mixed blood" the white "blood" came from the males. Even today, if the white supremacists could have their way, these rules of selective segregation would be reimposed. Nat Cole's family, keep in mind, came from Alabama, and was culturally rooted in southern mores. A black man there knew, without even having to know, that if he ever even thought sexually of a white woman or women, he must never let it be seen.

This is evident in Nat Cole's choice of songs, whether the choice came from subtle conscious perception or ineffable social conditioning. Or both. Thus he sings of *Mona Lisa*, whose subtext could be either a man contemplating the famous painting or a friend expressing his compassion to a misunderstood woman. Another unreal girl-in-a-picture inhabits *Portrait of Jennie*. He sings of *Nature Boy*, a song whose ersatz exoticism conceals an authentic banality, this tale of a mere boy who gives you the oh-wow insight that loving and being loved is where it's at, man. My God that's a dumb song. Cole elicits sweet seasonal memories in *The Christmas Song*, a song by Mel Tormé and Bob Wells whose popularity obscures its excellence. He sings of food in *The Frim Fram Sauce*, which, according to one of the biographies, Lucille Ball adjudged the dirtiest song she had ever heard.

She should have tried *Honeysuckle Rose*.

(To be continued)