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King Cole

Part Three

It was about this point that Nat advanced the career of a gifted arranger named Nelson Riddle. I have never told this story before, but it is what Nat told me that day in Louisville.

We must have been talking about arrangers. I have always been an admirer of great arranging and orchestration. Somehow Nelson Riddle's name came up, perhaps in conversation about Sinatra.

Nat said, "Frank didn't discover Nelson Riddle. I did." In a corridor at Capitol Records in Hollywood, a young man approached him and said, "Mr. Cole, I'm an arranger, and I'd like to write for you."

Cole, with what I can see in my mind was his manner of unfailing *politesse*, said, "I'd like to hear your work."

"You've already recorded some of it," the young man said, "but it didn't have my name on it." He had been ghosting for someone else.

"What's your name?" Nat asked.

"Nelson Riddle."

"Let's have a talk," Nat said. Nelson worked directly for him after that, and then Frank Sinatra signed with Capitol and his career blossomed again, never to fade until he died; and Nelson Riddle became known as *his* arranger.

I could feel that the friendship between Sinatra and Nat Cole was an uncomfortable one, even though Cole named Frank as his favorite singer in a Leonard Feather survey,, and finally (in his soft way) said something a little testy. He said, "Do you want to know the difference between Frank and me? The band swings Frank. I swing the band."

Every musician to whom I have ever told that seems to raise his eyebrows a little and say, "That's *right*!"

But while Sinatra, from the time he joined Capitol, set about recording the very finest songs in the American "popular" (to my mind, classic) repertoire, Cole continued to do a lot of bad songs. Not that Sinatra didn't do a certain amount of trash — eventually including *My Way* and *Strangers in the Night* — but the vast body of his work at Capitol and, later, Reprise, comprises the truly great songs. Nat Cole left no such legacy.

He seemed to have a perpetual hunger for hits. Sinatra had comparatively few real *hits*. His records sold big, but Cole's sales were massive, as he found one commercial hit after another, up to and including such junk as *Those Lazy Hazy Crazy Days of Summer*. It was a repertoire much closer to Perry Como's than Sinatra's.

Rumor in the business always had it that Nat's hunger for hits was the consequence of Maria's hunger for money. Epstein says, "Of course, she loved money and luxury and security, but who doesn't?"

There is an astonishing passage on page 294 of Epstein's book:

"Carol Cole remembers the day her father telephoned Capitol and the receptionist answered brightly, 'Capitol Records, Home of Elvis!' And Nat said, trying to hide his astonishment, 'Excuse me?' He *had* built the tower, but at the moment Elvis was more important than he."

First: Nat *and* Peggy Lee built that tower.

Second: Anyone with an even rudimentary knowledge of popular music in America knows that, excepting the early sides he made for Sun Records, Elvis Presley's entire body of recorded work was for RCA Victor. What Nat really heard that day — and I got the story from both Johnny Mercer and Paul Weston — was "Capitol Records, home of the Beatles."

There is a comparable mistake on page 86 of the book. Speaking of the store Glen Wallichs owned, Music City, Epstein writes: "This was a record store, where Wallichs soon began making his own records — 78 rpm wax cylinders — with a single microphone."

Where did Epstein get that astonishing bit of misinformation?

Aha. On page 49 of the Leslie Gourse book, one finds this: "In music city, which (Wallichs) ran with his brother, the records were 78 rpm cylinders." This is a classic example of the replication of errors, a replication that to some extent underlies Voltaire's statement that history is an agreed-upon fiction.

In fact, the cylinder record went out, as they say, with button shoes — almost at the same time. The first disc records were manufactured in 1894, and by about 1904, cylinder recording had all but ceased. Oliver Read and Walter L. Welch wrote in *From Tinfoil to Stereo: Evolution of the Phonograph:*

"Although musical cylinders were sold by Thomas A. Edison, Inc., until it retired from the field in 1929, the ultimate doom of the cylinder had been sounded with the announcement of the Edison Diamond Disc Phonograph in

1912." Roland Gelatt, in *The Fabulous Phonograph*, cites the Milan recordings of Caruso in 1902 as the first fully satisfactory disc recordings. By 1902, Columbia was marketing its product in both disc and cylinder format. Roland wrote: "Already (1902) a distinction had been drawn between the disc public and the cylinder public: discs were meant for the Main Street parlor, cylinders for the other side of the tracks."

Thomas A. Edison, who was a stubborn man, continued to make both cylinder and disc recordings, but his company retired entirely from the record business in 1929. (My thanks to James T. Maher, the patron saint of everyone who writes about popular music and jazz in America, for researching the subject for me.)

I called Leslie Gourse about this odd error in her book, replicated by Epstein. "I wonder where I got that?" she said. Ten years after you write a book, it is hard to remember who told you what. She will try to have the error corrected in the new edition of her Cole biography.

Daniel Mark Epstein is at his most embarrassing when he dissertates, with unshakable aplomb, on technical matters of music. He talks about a flatted third chord. Other than a minor chord, I haven't the slightest idea what he's talking about, and neither apparently has he. He talks about "Hebraic minor chords." Is he trying to tell us the Jews have invented a minor chord that contains something other than a root, flat third, and fifth? And Epstein almost drools over Cole's use of triplets, failing, apparently, to understand, that 12/8 is the essence of jazz melody-making. (He should try McCoy Tyner.) Epstein surrounds commonplace musical terms like "pedal point" and "tenths" with quotation marks as if they are esoteric argot. One gets the feeling that he consulted people with at least a smattering of knowledge, took notes, and passed their commentary off as his own without really understanding it. He sounds like the dialogue in that French "jazz" movie, *Round Midnight*, which makes you think that director and writer Bertrand Tavernier followed some jazz musicians around, writing down what they said without grasping it and using it in dialogue. .

Marvin Cain, who went on to become president of Famous Music and is now retired, was unable to finish reading the book. I called him to check some of its "facts."

"It's bullshit," he said, not being a man given to evasion. "He talked to a lot of people who hardly even knew Nat."

On July 18, 1952, Cole went into the studio with a group that included John Collins, guitar, Charlie Harris, bass, Jack Costanzo, Latin percussion, and Bunny Shawker, drums. They made an instrumental album of standards, which was issued as a ten-inch LP called *Penthouse Serenade*.

In his notes to the Mosaic boxed set, Will Friedwald, with his usual wall-eyed perception, writes "There's nothing wrong with good cocktail piano, and as the ritzy Rainbow Room-type decor on the original cover implies, this is just about the cocktail-iest, lacking nothing except tinkly glasses and inebriated sophisticates trying to remember the words."

It is one of the finest albums Cole ever made. I acquired it in Montreal as soon as it was issued. I listened to it so much that it lies deep in my subconscious. I keep a tape of it in my car, even today. I know every note, every chord of it. Donald Byrd said to me many years ago, "After all my years in this business, I have concluded that the hardest thing to do is play straight melody and get some feeling into it." Listen to Bill Evans playing *Danny Boy* and you will know exactly what he means. And thus it is with *Penthouse Serenade.* It is a gentle, loving, introspective, beautiful examination of the tunes, and all the glories of Cole's piano-playing are on display. That old question, "What album would you take to a desert island with you if you could choose only one?" elicits from me without hesitation: "Nat Cole's *Penthouse Serenade.*" And I have taken it with me, to desert islands of the mind, and into dark nights of the heart. It is a masterpiece, a crown of jewels in the history of jazz, and because of its directness and deceptive simplicity it is *terribly* overlooked.

Steve McQueen said once in an interview that there was nothing hard about movie acting. He was probably right. The movie industry has always taken in men and women who have achieved fame in fields other than drama, including swimmers (Esther Williams, Buster Crabbe, Johnny Weissmuller), a skater (Sonja Henie), football players, dancers, and above all singers: Bing Crosby, Rudy Vallee, Dick Powell, Tony Martin, Frank Sinatra, Dick Haymes, Elvis Presley, Pat Boone, Doris Day among them. That makes a certain amount of sense: a singer's job is to put over the emotional content of words. And some of those singers, particularly Sinatra and Dick Powell, turned into remarkably good actors. Nat Cole aspired to follow their example.

But his position was not unlike that of Billy Eckstine. Eckstine first came to the attention of "the kids" — one of whom was me — when he recorded with the Earl Hines band. One of the tunes was *Jelly Jelly*, one of the most notoriously sexual of songs once you knew what "jelly" meant, with the line "jelly stays on my mind." We didn't know, not the white kids anyway. But he made his place in jazz history with an illustrious and seminal bebop band of his own, which had Dizzy Gillespie, Fats Navarro, Miles Davis, Kenny Dorham, Gene Ammons, Dexter Gordon, Budd Johnson, Lucky Thompson, Frank Wess, Charlie Parker, Leo Parker, Tommy Potter, and Art Blakey in its personnel. It lasted only three years. Eckstine surrendered to the inevitable, and folded it to continue as a solo singer. With his striking good looks and rich baritone, he became a hit on the

newly-formed MGM label, with which he signed 1947.

But he said later, not without bitterness, that it was obvious to him that the movies were closed to him because of his color. His appeal to women made many white men uncomfortable. He said that given the attitude of movie-theater owners in the South, no studio would take a chance on putting him in a picture as a romantic lead. In case you haven't noticed, to this day television commercials remain segregated. The one black man in a crowd at a party, what Oscar Peterson calls the TTS, standing for Token Television Spook, always has a black wife. And the movies have treated the very idea of a black man and white woman rarely and cautiously, as witness *Love Field*. Indeed, the idea of a relationship between a white and an Indian, though such marriages were common in the west, was taboo for years, finally starting to crumble with *Broken Arrow* in 1950. Eckstine's career was confined to records and night clubs. And Nat Cole would soon find there were limitations to his career too.

In 1953, he appeared on a 1953 Lux Video Theater in a role supporting Dick Haymes. He played, logically enough, a piano player. He played a small role in a film called *Small Town Girl*, and then appeared in a 1955 short about himself called *The Nat King Cole Story*. He stirred no critical acclaim. Leslie Gourse wrote: "He seemed to be too polite and shy to try to emote or plumb the emotional depths of the character he was portraying." That is true of his singing, too. It is dramatic depth that makes Sinatra's singing so compelling; it is not drama but sheer musicality that makes Cole's singing mesmerizing. His daughter is the better dramatic lyric reader.

He appeared as a member of the French Foreign Legion in Indochina in *China Gate*, which starred Gene Barry and Angie Dickinson. I thought he was rather good in it. Then he was cast as W.C. Handy in *St. Louis Blues*. Marvin Cane visited him on the set. Nat told him he found movie-making frustrating, since he was not in control, as he was in a recording studio. Marvin said, "Well, you're in the movie business."

Nat said, "Yeah, but what the hell am I doing here?"

Marvin said, "You're becoming a movie star."

The film was bad at the root. The script was poor, and far from factual. Bosley Crowther wrote in the *New York Times*, "Mr. Cole simply lumbers through the role of a harassed jazz composer, looking dumb and uncomfortable."

"Cole," Leslie Gourse wrote, "always provided an exquisite relief and lift for the films the films in which he sang — *Blue Gardenia*, for one. Sometimes his singing was the only bright moment in a film. Throughout *Cat Ballou* in 1965, he and Stubby Kay augmented the amusing story . . ."

Ultimately, the movies were to prove a deep disappointment, but not so bitter a one as his television experience. Meanwhile, his stardom as a singer just kept growing: he drew an audience of 60,000 in a football stadium.

Dinah Shore wanted to have Nat as a guest on her television show. Chevrolet, her sponsor, would not allow it: they wouldn't have her standing next to a black man. Similarly, Bell Telephone didn't want Herb Ellis and Ella Fitzgerald on camera together in its television show. Norman Granz, her manager, battled them and they agreed to let them appear together. The technicians put so much gel on the lens that you couldn't recognize Ellis.

But late in 1965, Carlos Gastel negotiated a deal to have Cole star in his own TV series on NBC. The show went on the air in November, 1956, a sustaining fifteen-minute broadcast at 7:30 p.m. The advertising salesmen were unenthusiastic, even though Cole was perfect for television. Like Perry Como, a huge success in the medium, he was effective precisely because his projected personality was quiet, warm, and intimate. By 1957, the show was the most successful in television. But still the advertisers held back. The show was expanded to a half hour. Cole delivered himself of a widely-quoted epigram: "Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark." His guest stars included Mel Tormé, Tony Martin, Peggy Lee, Ella Fitzgerald, Harry Belafonte, Julius La Rosa, and more, and they appeared for scale — or rather, for *him*.

I asked La Rosa about that appearance. "Nat couldn't have been nicer," Julie said. "As a thank you, he gave me a lovely white sweater with blue trimming which I treasured until it almost fell apart. He was such a gentle man. Nelson Riddle was the orchestra leader. Peggy Lee was the other guest! I was performing with three giants I'd paid to see just a few years before! And they made me feel like I belonged, which of course I didn't really."

Throughout 1957, NBC kept the show on the air. Though its ratings steadily improved; the sponsors it needed did not materialize. After losing nearly half a million dollars on the show, NBC decided to move it to the deadly slot of 7 p.m. on Saturday. Cole declined to make the move.

Steve Allen tells me that NBC some years ago needed storage space in its New Jersey facility and destroyed the kinescopes of some of its classic shows, including many of his own *Tonight* shows with precious footage on Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk, and others of the jazz musicians whose cause he was forever pushing. About a third of his shows survive, and there are thirty segments of *The Nat King Cole Show*, parts of which are seen on TV from time to time. One of the things you noticed is Cole's remarkable grace of movement. He was a natural for television.

In his statement to the *New York Times* announcing the end of the show, Cole said, "There won't be shows starring Negroes soon."

Julius La Rosa offered a footnote to this tale: "By the

way, I recall that on a Dinah Shore show, Ella Fitzgerald was the other guest. At one point I put my arms over Dinah's and Ella's shoulders. I got mail denouncing me for putting my arm around 'that nigger.' Incredible, no? And that was in the mid-fifties."

The snubs continued. Cole had sung for President Eisenhower, and was invited to sing for the Queen of England during a pending European tour (and he would soon sing at the inauguration of his friend John F. Kennedy) but the Masonic Auditorium in San Francisco wouldn't let him perform there, its manager telling the press: "No assumption on the man's color. We just don't want the class of people Cole attracts." Though the Civic Auditorium was available to him, Cole canceled San Francisco entirely.

He made a "concept" album called *Wild Is Love*, songs about a man's search for love, or more precisely, sex. Some of his associates, including Lee Young, didn't like it. Gradually the album evolved into an idea for a Broadway show. Capitol Records put up $75,000, and Cole put at least $75,000 of his money into it. The show, with an interracial cast that included Barbara McNair, opened in Denver October 17, 1960, to bad reviews. It moved on to San Francisco, where it got even worse reviews. Cole was determined to get it to Broadway, in one form or another, but eventually it went down, taking a great deal of his money with it.

Daniel Mark Epstein takes a wallowing interest in Cole's sex life, indeed in seemingly everyone's sex life. What is his *problem*? His fascination with the quantity of women that a major male star is able to attract infuses the whole book. He says, "As the chief spokesman for romantic love in the early 1960, it was inevitable that Cole would sample some of what he was selling." And he quotes a press agent who traveled with Cole: "Nat was very discreet. He was not the sort of guy who would say, arriving in a city, 'Hey, let's get some girls and have a party.'"

That's right. Arriving in Louisville, he spent the day with me.

But the most distasteful material in the book concerns Nat's last love affair. It was with a young Swedish chorus girl he had met doing a review called *Sights and Sounds* that he did in 1963, hoping still to get to Broadway. Epstein calls her a "dreamy delight." He says she had "the spiritual look of a dream in the twilight between sleep and waking."

Leslie Gourse mentions this relationship in her book, too. "But," Leslie told me, "she asked that I not use her name, and I didn't."

Epstein has no such discretion: he names her. And he says, "Anyway, there were plenty of opportunities for (her) to get Cole alone in a room as the show toured the country late in 1963. And by early spring of 1964, what started as a diversion for Cole, the reliable balm of erotic adventure, had begun to spin out of control and become an obsession. He really loved this girl, who was so different from his wife in every way, so gentle, so simple, so *undemanding.* (She) was funny and she had quiet courage; she had made the great crossover from culture to culture, language to language. And who knows what other changes and challenges she might have the strength of character to endure? In the unreal erotic world of their hours alone together Cole was able to imagine a future free of all that weighted him down—the expectations of his children, parents, the press, his public, his people, who looked to him for leadership, wanted him to be a saint; above all he imagined freedom from his wife, who seemed to him, in his befuddlement, to be the warden of this prison, his life."

Where did Epstein get *that* "information"? From a ouija board?

Cole by then had lung cancer, and it was progressing rapidly. He played the Copacabana in New York. Epstein says Maria did what "any proud, furious wife with five children and some cash does when her husband is thinking of leaving her for another woman," she put a private detective on the case, and they came away from the girl's apartment "with enough billets-doux and mementos to fry King Cole in the divorce courts, if Maria took a fancy to do it. In California, she and the kids would get everything he had."

Cole at last was hospitalized for cobalt treatments in Los Angeles. Of Maria, Epstein writes: "As magnificent as she had been in love, in devotion, in fighting for her husband's career and their rights to happiness, now she was no less magnificent."

In other words, despite all his gratuitous flattery of her through the book, he paints her as an absolute barracuda. She blocked his calls at the hospital's telephone switchboard, he says, to make sure the girl could not call the dying man. She compiled a list of everyone she thought might have abetted Nat's love affair, and made sure they were never able to speak to their dying friend, no matter what consolation that might have given him. And then she pulled a master stroke.

Do you remember the harrowing passage at the end of Orwell's *1984*, wherein the authorities, to destroy the imprisoned Winston Smith's love for the girl, resort to the thing that is his greatest phobic fear: a rat? They bring one in a cage, prepared to loose the rat on his eye. He realizes that must not only say he no longer loved the girl, he must *stop* loving her. And he does.

Maria Cole got a call from the girl, telling her that she loved Nat and Nat loved her, and asking Maria to give him a divorce. Pathetic.

Cole was by now spending his days in a hospital rocking chair. The mail from well-wishers poured in. So did the flowers. "Maria," Epstein writes, "came marching down the corridor of the North Wing on the sixth floor of St. John's

Hospital, burst into her husband's room, and lit into him as if the two of them were in their twenties.".

She demanded the girl's phone number. She dialed it, and handed Nat the phone, and made him tell the girl, in his feeble voice, that it was over between them.

Nat Cole's left lung was removed on January 25. He died on the morning of February 15, 1965.

Freddy Cole told me that Nat's death was devastating to him. He said, "Prior to that, two weeks before, my dad died with complications of a heart ailment. So we were all in state of shock for a long while.

"I haven't smoked now in many years, and I don't think about cigarets. I quit before Nat died. I was at the hospital in Santa Monica. I'd been coughing and had a bronchial condition, and Nat said, 'Man, you ought to quit smoking.' And I said I would.

"Later on, I picked Natalie up from the airport. She was coming home from school. She was twelve or thirteen years old. I lit a cigaret, and she said, 'I thought you told Daddy you were going to stop smoking.' So I said, 'Okay,' and threw the cigaret out the window. I haven't smoked since."

Eighteen years later, in 1993, Roger Kellaway was sitting at the piano in Studio One at Western in Los Angles, prior to a record date with that same Natalie Cole, charts by Marty Parch. She was now forty-three years old.

"I was sitting at the piano, just fiddling around," Roger said. "These hands touched my shoulders and a warmth filled my entire body. I couldn't believe it. I turned around, and it was her. And that's how we first met. She didn't know me at all. But now that I think about it, wasn't that the logical thing for her to do? Because I was the *pianist*.

"It was her *Take a Look* album. We did the verses to three songs on that one session, just she and I. It was so wonderful to work with a singer who knew those kinds of songs, that concept. I was able to breathe with her, without even knowing her. She invited me lunch. I congratulated her on being a singer who *understood* verses, and she said, 'Well of course I do. My dad took me everywhere.' That's as close as I'm going to get to Nat Cole."

I said, "I think she's one of the best singers we have."

"Well I think so too."

Listening to the entire Mosaic collection of Nat Cole was a revelatory experience. Now I wanted Roger to listen to some of it with me. There are few musical experiences that either of us has that we do not in some way share. So I invited him to do some listening with me. I also invited Debbie Denke, a fine pianist and teacher who lives in Santa Barbara. She is the author of a very good book titled *The Aspiring Jazz Pianist*, published by Hal Leonard, accompanied by an illustrative CD, and available through Amazon and Barnes and Noble. She and Roger and I listened to Cole for two or three hours.

We all marveled at Cole's effortless, unceasing swing. He has the most magnificent time of any musician I've ever heard, and Roger Kellaway's own time is a pretty formidable phenomenon.

Roger said. "You are told in the arts that you have to strive to get out of your own way. He doesn't even have to try."

"And there's the gentleness. The tenderness. He has a way of caressing the piano."

I said, "Nat Cole never shouts. Not in his singing, not in his playing, not even in his life."

"That's a good way to put it," Roger said, and, after a few more minutes of listening, "The musicality is just *there*. It's understood. It's an assumption. His playing sparkles. And it seems effortless. It's not filled with ego and the kinds of thing you've heard for the last thirty-five years, especially the more modern angular players, whether it be anger or wherever they think they're coming from emotionally. The push, and the stress in society that's produced that kind of playing. It's not there."

Debbie said, "His singing had a timeless charm — the way he presented his tunes, the way he got the emotion across. There is something so lovable about his voice. And his piano playing really swung. His block chord voicings had a unique sound, a distinct tone. The way he backed himself up as a singer at the piano was so tasteful. The way he would sing and just at the right time, place the right figure to complement his singing. It sounded effortless. I don't see how it could be done better.

"Another thing I've noticed. I've been researching tunes with *Rhythm* changes for some of my students. Nat Cole did a lot of tunes based on *I Got Rhythm*. He seemed to really do a large tribute to Gershwin. *I'm an Errand Boy for Rhythm, Hit that Jive Jack*, the list goes on and on."

I read them some of the 1991 notes, by pianist Dick Katz, for the Mosaic reissue of the Cole Capitol piano records. He wrote: "His deep groove, harmonic awareness, supple phrasing, touch, dynamics, taste, and just plain *delicious* music had a profound effect on . . . Oscar Peterson, Hank Jones, Tommy Flanagan, Al Haig, Bill Evans, Wynton Kelly, Ahmad Jamal, Monty Alexander, and many others, including myself."

"And you," I told Roger.

"But I never heard as much of Nat Cole as I might have wanted. I got his influence through Oscar Peterson, and of course Oscar added all that power." He listened to Nat Cole some more and then said, "When you hear something like this, don't you think to yourself, 'Boy, would I like to hang out with that person!'"

"And I once did," I said. "A long time ago."

I can almost see that room in the Seelbach. I assumed that Nat had sent for room service, rather than going to the restaurant, in order to assure privacy for my interview. And perhaps that had something to do with it.

But long afterwards, it occurred to me that he probably did it because he knew that if he could now get into a Louisville hotel, where no one could see him, he and I would still not be allowed into its restaurant, or any other decent restaurant in town. The voters march in Montgomery, Alabama, had not even happened yet.

The privacy was to my advantage, in the end: I had that precious time alone with him, and I stayed the day with him until concert time. I remember being amazed that he would give so much time to me, a no one.

Why would he do that?

"He was that way," Freddy Cole told me. "He'd talk to a lamp-post."

I have spent two months or so now studying his life and his work, sometimes analyzing it at the piano. I have a whole new appreciation of him, and it will never leave me. Devoid of ostentation or pretense, he was truly a genius musician. I idolized him when I was a kid. I guess I still do.

The Epstein book is not only bad and inaccurate history, it amounts to desecration. How could Farrar, Straus and Giroux, with its distinguished literary history, have published this book? The company also published *Lush Life*, David Hajdu's imperfect but quite good biography of Billy Strayhorn. Nat Cole and his work deserved at least its equal.

I was not one of those who questioned Cole's turning to singing. I *loved* his singing. I doubt that I had the courage to tell him I was secretly writing songs. One of my regrets is that I never got to hear him do one of mine. (Freddy did one, though.) I do remember asking him why, in his concert and nightclub performances, he rarely accompanied himself now.

"Because when you sing and play at the same time," he said, "you're dividing your attention. You sing better if you don't play, and you play better if you don't sing."

Maybe. But he was magnificent at self-accompaniment.

I remember saying that I hoped he would not stop recording jazz albums entirely. And he said, "As a matter of fact, I'm thinking about doing one soon."

One of the good things I got out of Epstein's book was the knowledge that after that tour, and that grim experience in Birmingham, he went home to Los Angeles and began to practice. He practiced all through June, and then in July called a session.

"Nat loved to be in the studio," Freddy told me. "He just couldn't sit still. He'd be off for a couple of weeks, and he'd call the guys. That's how that *After Midnight* album came to be made. They were just foolin' around. My favorite in that album is *Blame It on My Youth*. That one and *You're Looking at Me*. *Sometimes I'm Happy* is good too. Stuff Smith and Nat were friends from back in Chicago. I play that album all the time."

So do I. That and *Penthouse Serenade*. I carry them on tape in the car.

The personnel of *After Midnight* comprises Nat, John Collins on guitar, Charlie Harris on bass, and Lee Young on drums. On some tracks, the guest soloist is Stuff Smith on violin, Juan Tizol on trombone, or Willie Smith on alto saxophone.

The King Cole Trio recordings are set pieces. He did the tunes pretty much the same way each time, even to the vocal phrasing. In one trio session, *I Surrender Dear*, he makes exactly the same allusion at the start of the second eight to *Lover Come Back to Me* as he does in a second take that was unissued. But to hear him blowing, one can turn to the *Jazz at the Philharmonic* recording he did for Norman Granz, an album he made with Lester Young, and *After Midnight*.

After that album, he recorded one more jazz session, in New York, on March 22, 1961. Then his piano falls silent.

His life strikes me, taken in sum, as sad, for all its great moments. He was thwarted at so many turns. Certainly his life was not the field of flowers I would have wished for so magnificent a musician, so humane a man. After the Birmingham incident, his deportment prompted the *Chicago Defender* to thunder: "We wonder if Nat Cole shared the humiliation of the hundreds of his Negro fans who had to stand outdoors and wait while whites inside yelled 'Go home, nigger!' and attacked him as he performed. We hope Cole has learned his lesson."

Cole told a reporter, "I'm not mad at a soul." He caught hell for that one.

Thurgood Marshall, who was then chief counsel for the NAACP, said, "All Cole needs to complete his role as an Uncle Tom is a banjo."

It is a detestable, execrable remark. It is beyond our powers to estimate how much Nat Cole did for "racial relations" in the United States by the graciousness of his comportment, the softness of his manner, and the decency of his example. It still shines.

I cannot remember who told me this story:

He was playing the Fontainbleu. A little white girl got away from her parents and toddled onto the stage while he was singing. A kind of hush seized the audience. This was Miami, and Miami was one of the most racist cities in America.

She drew closer to him. Nat had someone bring him a chair. He sat down, took the little girl on his lap, and sang her to sleep.