

## King Cole

### Part Two

Nat sings about partying in *Bring Another Drink*. Or he gives you, in inversion, the same message as *Nature Boy* in *You're Nobody Till Somebody Loves You*. He gives you advice, again, on your life, in *It Only Happens Once* and still more friendly third-person counsel in *It Is Better to Be by Yourself*. Or, with Cole Porter, he asks *What Is This Thing Called Love?* And, in just case any white man should frown at even the hint of a relationship here says, "You took my heart, and threw it away." Just as she should have, you damned . . .

Or he looks at the girl, but won't move on her, in *But She's My Buddy's Chick*. When he dares to have a moment of uppity vanity, he loses the girl to another in *The Best Man*. This theme recurs in *You're Looking at Me*. After he asks, "Who had the girls turning handsprings? Crazy to love him, claimed he . . . Where is the boy who was certain his charms couldn't fail? Who woke to find his dream shattered? You're looking at me." (Good song, by the way; like *Route 66*, it is one of Bobby Troup's little jewels.) The singer gets his comeuppance, again, for sexual vanity. Translate that to: that's what happens when you forget your *place*. In these songs, the singer is always defeated; thus he poses no threat.

*Don't Hurt the Girl* is an interesting alloy of *Mona Lisa* compassion toward women and rebuke of *Best Man* male vanity. There are at least three ways to look at this song. It could be the entreaty a decent man (the one in *Mona Lisa*) to a rounder friend. Or it might be the internal monologue of one who has commanded more than his share of women and is undergoing a sexual epiphany: "If you hurt that girl, you'll be hurting me." And when you realize it was written by a woman, Margaret Johnson, it takes on still another aspect. As far as I know, no woman has ever recorded it.

There is more pop philosophy in Irving Berlin's *After You Get What You Want, You Don't Want It* and in (this one a duet with Johnny Mercer) *You Can't Make Money Dreaming*, as well as in *Those Things Money Can't Buy*, *If You Stub Your Toe on the Moon*, *Paint Me a Rainbow*. He is outside the story in *A Boy from Texas*, *a Girl from Tennessee*, and in (of all the improbable songs for Cole) *Mule Train*. He paints an American landscape in *Moonlight in Vermont*, another in *'Tis Autumn*, the naturalist, once again standing

outside the experience. He tells you how to drive across this America in Bobby Troup's *Route 66*. That song became such a part of the culture that when I moved to California in 1974, and had determined the main highway on the map, I hardly ever had to look at it again after Chicago: I just ran the Nat Cole record in my head and aimed for the cities it specified. I doubt that I'm the only person who ever did that.

In his annotation to the Mosaic boxed set, Will Friedwald tries to explain Cole's predilection for silly songs with this:

"The answer is in Cole's miraculous capacity for melody. His limitless tool kit of methods of playing, singing and arranging songs for his unusually-instrumented triumverate (sic) took him at once into high art and lowbrow comedy. Like Henry VIII goose-quilling his own motets, this king of the realm doubled as his own court jester. At their greatest, the King Cole Trio distilled the avant-garde technique of a Lester Young or a Bud Powell with the restrained, dignified piety of fellow Capitol recording artist Daffy Duck."

Incidentally, these notes, which are not without value, suffer from the terminal cutes. Friedwald refers to the trio at one point as the KC3, begins a sentence with "Said interest," calls a guitarist a "plectarist," and so forth. At least he doesn't call a piano an eighty-eight or have Cole tickling the ivories. Nonetheless, there may even be some point to his thought that Cole provided his own comedy relief.

But I think a more important factor is an instinctive avoidance of direct sexual provocation. Frank Sinatra, with whom Cole had a slightly uncomfortable (I am told privately) friendship, might flaunt an overt male sexuality, but Cole didn't dare. Not if he wanted to be a success, and indeed not if he wanted to stay alive, as his Alabama attackers made clear. It is widely held that Sidney Poitier was the first black matinee idol, and black actors all give him obeisance, as indeed they should. But beyond Poitier, they should look back to Nat Cole, the first great black romantic male icon in American entertainment.

The best key to any culture is its humor.

During my years in Chicago, I lived almost entirely in a black world. Not just some but most of my friends were black. My best friend of all was the great photographer Ted Williams (he is still one of my friends). From the moment I arrived, Ted was my guide to the city, and particularly to

South Side Chicago. We used to hang out at the Sutherland Lounge, the Club De Lisa, backstage at the Regal Theater, talking to Moms Mabley, Slappy White, Redd Foxx. Sometimes, when he was in town, Art Farmer would hang with us. I heard jokes the white audience didn't dream of.

Redd Foxx said he wanted to be a lifeguard. He wanted to rescue a drowning white man, haul him unconscious to the beach, and — here he cupped his hands around his mouth to make a sepulchral sound — say, “Byeeee, baby!”

This is one that went around in the black community. If you're not familiar with the city, you need to know that Cottage Grove and 63rd is the heart of black Chicago.

In Alabama, a young black man is accused of looking at a white woman, and is dragged off into the woods by torchlight. As the mob is throwing a rope over a tree limb, he breaks free and runs into the brush. He flees through the night, finally eluding his pursuers. He emerges on a highway and frantically waves his thumb at a motorist. The motorist, who is white, stops. “Help me!” the young man says. “They're gonna lynch me.”

“All right, boy, get in here,” the man says, opening the trunk.

The car proceeds north. The driver stops and again opens the trunk. He says, “You can get out now, boy.”

“Where are we?”

“Tennessee.”

“No no! I ain't safe yet. Let's keep going!”

The same thing happens in Kentucky, and in Indiana. The car reaches Chicago. The man opens the trunk and says, “You can get out now, boy.”

“Where we at?”

The man says, “Cottage Grove and 63rd.”

The young man gets out, dusts himself off, straightens up, and says, “Who you callin' 'boy'?”

Nat Cole came out of that culture, and when he was of a mind to, according to Julius La Rosa (who said Cole could be hilariously funny) he could tell a story in the thickest southern dialect. You can hear the south in his singing. In that very first Capitol release, *All for You*, he drops a final r in: “When you rise yo' eyes . . .” As with many Southerners, black and white alike, the give-away is the tendency to turn t's into d's in certain positions of speech, particularly in the middle of words. Thus “important” comes out “impordant”. You'll hear it in the speech of television interviewer Charlie Rose, who is from North Carolina. And Cole does something else, specific to black southerners: he drops terminal consonants (as the French do), in such words as “just”, in which the t would be omitted. Thus, in the last eight of *Naughty Angelina*, he sings “saddle down and jus' be mine.” On the other hand, he sings very flat a's in such words as “that”. The sound is specific to the mid-west, from Michigan on, but most conspicuously Chicago.

Cole was, as we all are, completely conditioned by his background and rearing and the generation he grew up in. And he was a southerner, a product of a society in which the black male learned the survival skill of avoiding direct confrontation. What is amazing is not that he did this well, but that he did it with such enormous, indeed regal, self-containment. And he was a product of the entertainment business, not of the “art” of jazz, just like Louis Armstrong and Woody Herman, and yes, Guy Lombardo. He was walking through a cultural minefield, passing beyond the age of Tomming. He had the skills of charm that came out of that experience, but he used them with impressive discretion and dignity. A smile was a tool of the trade.

Louis Armstrong made it on the massive smile and what, to me, was an embarrassing public self-humiliation. He did not “make it” as a great artist, he made it as the embodiment of a white racist myth, a grinning clown with a horn. Nor do I mean to criticize him for it; he did what he had to in the age he grew up in. Cab Calloway, who was actually a very good singer, reached his pinnacle in his exaggerated white zoot suit with his hi-de-ho and his (again) toothy grin, a figure the complacent white world could patronize. Even Duke Ellington, one of the major artists in American musical history, wore the white tails and, in his mannered sophistication, still was catering to a white joke. Lionel Hampton grinned and groaned and jumped on the drums and embarrassed the men in his own band, particularly as that personnel grew younger. As late as 1950, when Billy Daniels undertook one of the most erotic of all songs, the Arlen-Mercer *Old Black Magic*, he did it in cap-and-bells, twisting, gyrating, voice cavernous, exaggerating the song to absurdity. It is little remembered that *Alexander's Ragtime Band* bore the title it did because when Irving Berlin wrote it — it came out in 1911 — America wasn't even covert about its racism, as witness the World War I song *When Tony Goes Over the Top (Keep Your Eye on that Fighting Wop)*. As Fido was a name for a dog and Rastus for a shuffling black man, Alexander was a name mockingly used for a black man with pretensions. On the original sheet music of Berlin's song, the band in the picture was black; when the song became a hit, they mysteriously turned white. Not that much had changed by the time of the Billy Daniels recording.

And then there is the career of Louis Jordan and his Tympani Five. The very name Tympani Five, with its sly ostentation, is funny. Dizzy Gillespie's vocal on *School Days* is a close copy of Jordan's, right down to the lyrics and even the phrasing. Woody Herman got *Caldonia* and Ray Charles got *Don't Let the Sun Catch You Crying* from Louis Jordan. Rock historians consider Jordan the fountainhead of rock-and-roll. I don't think the scope of his influence has really been evaluate and somebody should do it while his widow Martha is still around to tell us about him. She lives in Las

(Les: Music, little yes:  
 and cinema, shown by Louis,  
 points) No!

Vegas. Jordan built his success on good-time material such as *Let the Good Times Roll*, *Ain't Nobody Here but Us Chickens*, *Knock Me a Kiss*, *What's the Use of Getting Sober*, *Beans and Corn Bread*, comedy songs that reinforced the stereotype of the black man. But did you ever hear Louis Jordan sing a ballad? He did so extremely well, but he did it very little, and the public didn't embrace him for that dimension of his talent. The point was surely not lost on Cole; the King Cole Trio worked opposite Jordan at the Capitol Lounge in Chicago in 1941. Cole and Jordan were in fact good friends.

Blacks had been confined in American entertainment to clown roles, even the women. In the movies, they were always silly, light-headed, and obsequious. Billie Holiday was cast as a maid. Railway porters could all break into perfect harmony. All black men were shiftless or cowardly or both. A picture I completely detest is *Cabin in the Sky* for its embodiment of every image of the darky a racist society harbored: all its characters, the gambler, the slut, the slickster, the pious wife, are embodiments of white bias.

The picture came out in 1943, just when Nat Cole's career was really taking off. The social and moral climate of the period should be kept in mind in considering his life and work.

Cole began to emerge (more than a decade before Denzel Washington was born) as the first black male romantic idol in America. I think that's important to note: not just a "sex symbol," Cole was a *romantic* figure. He too grinned, sitting nonchalantly sideways at the piano (a manner of presentation he got from Earl Hines), doing so with enormous dignified charm, singing *Ke-Mo-Ki-Mo* and *Straighten Up and Fly Right* and *Nature Boy* and other songs designed to keep any ofay bastard from thinking the singer was after his sexual property. A respect for the territorial boundaries of possession is in many of the songs. In *That's My Girl*, it's "She looks just like an angel / but she's human just the same. / So I'm not taking chances, / I won't tell her address or even her name." Then there's, "But she's my buddy's chick . . ." I promise, honest, I won't go after your girl, even if I am handsome and more talented than you can dream. There was a sense of discreet sexual territoriality in many of those songs.

Is this a fanciful exegesis? I don't think so. A performer's selection of material is — and this is inevitable — a Rorschach of his or her own personality, just as the judgments of a critic constitute an unwitting and even unwilling self-portrait.

And the general tenor of the show-business times should also be kept in mind. In the years before World War II, the singers clowned (Al Jolson) and the clowns sang (Eddie Cantor, Fanny Brice, Jimmy Durante). The styles of singing (Sophie Tucker) and acting alike (Lionel Barrymore) were

largely declamatory. The contained introspection of Frank Sinatra and Peggy Lee and, later, in film, Clift and Brando and Dean, lay in the future. Cole came at the transition point, and the playful clowning deflected the fire of white resentment. Whether he ever gave this one conscious thought, I have no idea. But whether by plan or visceral intuition, this is how he handled his burgeoning stardom.

One other factor, I think, should be considered. To a large extent black performers accepted as a given that you had to have *your* white man, running interference, taking care of the business, dealing with the white world, bailing you out when the white society closed in on you. Louis Armstrong had his Joe Glaser, a Chicago quasi-gangster, and he needed him, since gangsters controlled the nightclubs. Duke Ellington had Joe Glaser's Associated Booking as well as Irving Mills, whom he allowed to put his name as co-writer on Ellington tunes that Mills had nothing to do with. Even Oscar Peterson followed the pattern: he acquired Norman Granz who, in Jazz at the Philharmonic, ran what Lester Young (Bobby Scott told me) called a flying plantation.

To be sure, Cole sang romantic ballads in those early trio days, a few of them. But he did so in the context of a certain general tom-foolery. The out-in-front repertoire was playful, even childlike; humourous, ingratiating and unthreatening.

And he acquired Carlos Gastel.

Anyone who read *Down Beat* in the middle 1940s knew the name Carlos Gastel. Probably no other peripheral figure in jazz and popular music, not even John Hammond, had such high visibility. Gastel's photo was often in the magazine and in *The Capitol*, the odd little pocket-sized hand-out publicity magazine that Dave Dexter edited for that company, available free in record stores throughout America. Gastel would be seen standing beside such of his clients as Sonny Dunham and Stan Kenton, even back when both were struggling, Dunham to go under, Kenton to become a major success.

According to Peggy Lee, who also became one of his clients, he was called The Honduran. He was born in Honduras of a Honduran father and a German mother, but he had gone to a California military academy and was at ease and at home in the United States and in show business. Six-foot-two and 250 pounds, he was a jolly, joking, partying man with a taste for jazz, liquor, and women. He reminded disc jockey and later producer Gene Norman of Fat Stuff in the *Smilin' Jack* comic strip, the pudgy figure whose buttons were always popping off his shirt.

Nat pursued Gastel, who was six years his senior (that is a lot when you're in your early twenties) to be his manager, and Gastel eventually acquiesced. Gastel negotiated in 1943 Nat's deal with Capitol, getting him a seven-year contract and the highest (at that time) royalty rate, 5 percent. And if Daniel Mark Epstein, in his biography, is correct, Gastel in

No

three weeks got the King Cole Trio's asking price up from \$225 a week to \$800.

At one time, the major record companies, Victor, Decca, and Columbia and their subsidiaries, practiced a fairly rigid segregation. Black artists were confined to what were called "race records" aimed primarily at black audiences. White kids who discovered this music often had to go to record stores in black neighborhoods to find what they wanted. From the day of its inception, Capitol would have nothing to do with such a policy, and it pushed Nat Cole's career for all it was worth. Gradually Cole came to do more and more romantic ballads, and by about 1947, was sometimes standing up from the piano to sing. More and more, he was seen as a romantic figure. And more and more he ventured into the ballads, more and more with full orchestra.

In his 1974 book *The Great American Popular Singers*, the late Henry Pleasants wrote: "To a dedicated jazz musician, jazz critic, or jazz fan, there was more than a suggestion of apostasy about Nat King Cole's career. The more than promising jazz pianist, winner of the *Esquire* gold medal as pianist in 1946, the heir apparent to the mantle of Earl Fatha Hines . . . achieves fame and fortune as a pop singer! That's putting it crassly, to be sure. He was more than that. Even as a pop singer he was an original. No one had ever sung quite like that before. He and Billy Eckstine, three years his senior, were, moreover the first black male singers to hit the top in 'the white time.'"

Henry continued: "According to just about everyone who knew him or ever worked with him, or was otherwise associated with him, he was a born gentleman, just 'one hell of a nice, decent guy.'"

Henry quoted William E. Anderson, the editor of *Stereo Review*:

"A piano, even at its most legato, is a percussion instrument, and my sense of Cole's singing, even at *his* most legato, is of isolated, crystal tones, linked only in the aural imagination of the listener, and not in breathed slurs by the performer."

Henry wrote:

"It was, as I hear it, a light bass-baritone. I infer as much from the richness and warmth of the tone in the area between the low G and the C a fourth above, an area similarly congenial to the mature voices of both Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra. A bass-baritone disposition is further suggested by the fact that the 'passage' in his voice, as he moved up the scale and out of his natural range, would appear to have lain around D-flat or D, a semitone or two below the corresponding ticklish area in a true baritone.

"Nat rarely ventured below that low G, and he had little to show for it when he did. Nor did he have any upward extension to speak of. On the records I have checked he never sings above an E. Both the E-flat and the E, while

secure enough, were consistently uncharacteristic in timbre, not thin and tenuous as the voices of Ethel Waters and Bessie Smith were when they sang beyond the 'passage,' but somehow ill-matched to the rest of the voice and rather conventional in sound, recalling from time to time the sound of the young Bing Crosby in the same area.

"Big, wide-ranging voices are a dime a dozen — better voices than Nat Cole's, or, at least, voices of more lavish endowment. But a lavish vocal endowment does not make a great singer. The trick lies in determining, or sensing, where the gold lies in the vocal ore, and in mining it expertly and appreciatively. Or one can think of the vocal cords as violin strings, of the resonating properties of throat, mouth and head as the violin, and of the breath as a bow. In Nat Cole's case, the strings responded most eloquently to a light bow. The tone coarsened under pressure, or when urged, either upward or downward, beyond the G-D range of an octave and a fifth.

"At his best and most characteristic, Nat Cole was not so much a singer as a whisperer, or, as one might put it, a confider."

One of many peculiar assertions in the Epstein book is this:

"Some say Nat never sang until a drunk demanded it. But this is a whopper, made to strengthen the myth that *all* of Nat's successes were somebody else's idea."

Like everyone in the business, I heard the story of the importunate drunk. I asked Freddy Cole whether it was true.

"Yeah!" Freddy said, and laughed. "It's true. I talked with him about it. In fact, one time in Los Angeles, he drove me by the place where it happened. We were coming home from the ball game or something. It was a little barbecue joint by that time."

Nat said he'd always sung a little. Indeed, this was nothing rare for musicians. Though they seldom did it in public, Cannonball Adderley, Gerry Mulligan, Zoot Sims, and Milt Jackson all sang very nicely, and the older trumpet players almost all sang, partly to rest their chops. And, as Freddy said, "During that time, musicians were taught to learn the words to songs. Because you would know how to play them better, to learn how to improvise better. Jo Jones. Lester Young. They could get up and tell you every lyric."

And Nat told an interviewer, "I was lucky that I could sing a little, so I did, for variety. The vocals caught on." And on another occasion: "To break the monotony, I would sing a few songs here and there between the playing. I noticed thereafter people started requesting more singing and it was just one of those things."

One has a choice of all these versions of how and why Nat Cole came to be known as a singer. Perhaps they are all to some extent true, including the one Epstein calls "a whopper," and that drunk fades in the distance as one of the minor

heroes of jazz history. Perhaps he reinforced for Nat Cole what he already knew he would have to do. If he was to get work, he would have to sing, like so many pianists before and after him, including Sarah Vaughan, Carmen McRae, Jeri Southern, Shirley Horne, Audrey Morris, Dave McKay, Bob Dorough, Dave Frishberg, and Diana Krall, for the simple reason that a pianist who sings gets more work. And besides, a lot of them like to do it.

I never heard of the "myth" that everything Nat did was somebody else's idea. But once Epstein raises the subject, even though he refutes it, it becomes a bell that cannot be unrung, and he himself strengthens it by his narration of events involving Carlos Gastel and Cole's second wife, Maria, particularly the latter. He even gives her credit for Nat's enunciation. He begins his acknowledgments:

"I am most grateful to Maria Cole for encouraging me to write this book and for her patience and courage in answering countless difficult questions during many hours of interviews. Through Mrs. Cole's kindness I was able to interview Nat Cole's friends and relatives, and his attending physician . . . about the details of his last months. I owe a debt of gratitude to Carole Cole and Natalie Cole, who were so generous with their time and detailed memory of the Cole household; and to Charlotte Sullivan, their dear aunt, who witnessed and understood so much." Notice the fawning tone. An unctuous servility to Maria Cole informs the book, which makes Epstein's portrait of her only the more devastating. In trying to paint it pretty, he lets ugly stuff come through, and some of it is very ugly indeed. What he presents is an unintentionally corrosive picture of a willful, manipulative, ambitious woman with social affectations and a high taste for money. Two more points. That paragraph would leave you to conclude that Epstein interviewed all Nat's relatives. He didn't. He didn't interview one of the most important witnesses of all, Freddy Cole. And he certainly didn't interview Peggy Lee or Jo Stafford. As for the "detailed memory," Carole Cole was (apparently) responsible for the most ludicrous blooper in the book, of which more in a moment.

By the middle-1940s, when Cole was making more money in a week than he had in a year in the early days, his marriage to Nadine was wearing thin. He was approaching thirty, she her fortieth birthday. A ten-year gap of that kind may seem insignificant in earlier years, but not later: a woman at forty is entering middle age and maybe menopause, and she is aware of it; a man hasn't even reached his maturity. She is worrying about age and time when he doesn't even want to think about it. And Cole was always away from home, constantly traveling, with opportunities presented by other women everywhere he went. Leslie Gourse doesn't make much of this in her book; Epstein makes a great deal of it.

Neither bothers to examine this phenomenon, which has existed since time immemorial: the sexual flocking, without any trace of pride or dignity, of women around men of celebrity. Leaving aside entirely the lives of actors and athletes, we may note that Liszt gathered great garlands of some of the fairest flowers of Europe, Boston ladies unhitched Offenbach's horses and pulled his carriage through the streets, Paganini plowed through more than his fair share of women, Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley had herds of girls, they were all around the late Yves Montand, Glenn Miller bought his beautiful belted camel-hair topcoats in triplicate because the girls tore pieces from them when he got caught in crowds, Lady Iris Mountbatten is reputed (reliably) to have balled the whole Count Basie band, a girl who similarly collected the entire Woody Herman band was known as Mattress Annie to its members, and the rock era gave rise to a new term: *groupie*. No similar lemming-like behavior has ever been observed in the behavior of men toward famous movie stars or singers.

'Twas ever thus, but these *divertissements* of Nat Cole seem to give Epstein little *frissons* of amazement and delight. These activities were well under way by 1946, and Cole's marriage with Nadine seemed by now only a formality.

He met Marie Hawkins Ellington in May, 1946, during an engagement the trio played at the Zanzibar club in New York. She was born in Boston on August 1, 1922, the second of three sisters, all of them beautiful. Their father was a mail carrier, a good job for a black American in those days. Their aunt, in Epstein's words, was "one of the more distinguished and successful women in America." She founded the Palmer Memorial Institute in Sedalia, North Carolina, a black prep school. Marie and her sister Charlotte spent winters with their aunt, known as Aunt Lottie, in a large house with nurses, two bathrooms, and a telephone. She tells Epstein: "We never plaited our own pigtails until I was thirteen." Eleanor Roosevelt and Langston Hughes, among others, visited their home. They lived on a high social scale, but young black girls and boys still were not normally allowed to try on clothes in stores, were forced to sit in a special balcony at the movie theater, and could not go to restaurants. Epstein says: "Reading the movie magazines and dreaming in the theater's darkness, (Marie) longed to be rich, famous, to have a career in show business."

In 1943 she married a fighter pilot of the all-black 332<sup>nd</sup> Squadron, a young lieutenant named Neal Spurgeon Ellington, who flew against the Germans in Italy. Her sister Charlotte gave a recording of Marie's voice to Freddie Guy, who gave it to Billy Strayhorn, who hired her in 1945 to sing with the Duke Ellington band, which she did for a few months. Her husband had survived the war and come home with medals including the Distinguished Flying Cross, only to be killed in a routine flight in Alabama.

She was finishing up a singing engagement at the Club Zanzibar. Nat Cole had been engaged to play a gig there too. She remembered seeing him in the audience, watching her "through the horn-rimmed glasses," Epstein says. "The college kids started wearing glasses like this after the war, wanting to be hip like Nat King Cole." Gee, I thought we did it to look like Dizzy. And I was not aware until long after that Cole wore glasses. He is rarely seen wearing them in photographs. I just looked through a lot of them, and in only one is he wearing them. And he's reading music at the time.

Cole was quite smitten by Marie. According to Gourse, he told a friend, "I've never heard a Negro woman speak so well before." Note the sense of acceptance of one's own inferiority implicit in that remark. *That* is the ultimate rape of the black American.

Soon he was escorting her home to the Dunbar, an exclusive residence in Harlem. Epstein says: "Oscar (Moore) and Johnny (Miller) joked with her that Nat had cut his old friends for *her*, not realizing how serious the joke was. She would be around when they were long gone."

Nat asked her to go on the road with him; by now she knew he was married.

All through the book, Epstein seems enamored of Carlos Gastel. He describes him as a "large, tender-hearted man who got tears in his eyes." He calls him "a great, warm, walruslike man." He calls him a man of integrity. He says that Gastel "was flying back and forth from New York to Los Angeles managing the King Cole Trio, Stan Kenton, Woody Herman, and Peggy Lee. Everybody was making money so fast, they scarcely had time to count it." That gives me pause. Peggy Lee told me, "I have some idea of how much Carlos took me for. I wonder how much he took Nat for."

Various friends, including Woody Herman, tried to talk Nat out of divorcing Nadine. Cole's family had grown fond of her. Oscar Moore and Johnny Miller, making light of it as best they could, urged Cole to forget Maria. He told them:

"If you don't like it, you can quit."

Marie had by now changed her name to Maria. Epstein writes, "Maria had refined taste in clothing. She began to steer Nat toward suits and ties with less flash and more substance, more sartorial elegance. He was an eager pupil. Gently she began to influence his speech, mostly by example. He spoke well but not yet with the crystal clarity of diction that would soon make him a musical story-teller who could never be misunderstood. Cole still had the faintest remnant of a lisp and a bit more of the South Side transplanted Alabama hipster drawl than he needed to play the Radio City Music Hall or the Civic Light Opera in Chicago. It was Maria of Boston who would put the final touches on Nathaniel's famous phrasing."

There is the core of the book: the final and finished Nat

Cole was Maria Cole's creation. This is flaming nonsense. Let's start with the lisp. Doug Ramsey saw an early film of Cole. He said there is no lisp. I called Freddy Cole. He said Nat had no lisp. I called Jo Stafford, who had him known since the early 1940s. She recalled no lisp.

Epstein's justification for saying that Cole had a lisp is in, of all things, Nat's December, 1943, reading of *Sweet Loraine*. He quotes the first eight:

*I just found joy.*

*I'm as happy as a baby boy*

*With another brand-new choo choo choy,*

*When I met my sweet Loraine.*

He writes: "The third line is not a typo. That is the way the young crooner sings it, twice, unable to pronounce the hard letter t. But even the mistake has a boyish charm."

And a mysterious one at that: Cole has no problem in the release with "And to think that I'm the lucky one . . ." *Sweet Loraine* was recorded December 15, 1943. Cole has no trouble with the word "time" in *Vim Vom Veedle*, recorded more than a year earlier, on October 11, 1942, nor with any other t between then and *Sweet Loraine*. All the young fans who rushed to get *Sweet Loraine* took "choy" for a playful affectation, and I think it was. If Epstein had done his homework, he would have discovered that Cole sings "choy" in his 1956 performance of the song in the *After Midnight* album.

At one point Epstein refers to "crazy Dave Tough from Chicago." He'd better hope none of Dave's friends see that. I can see Chubby Jackson going through the ceiling. Dave was a pill head, that's all, not only a remarkable musician but a genuine and unaffected intellectual. And that's the kind of thing that some future writer might take at face value and repeat, along with the assertion that Nat had a lisp and that it took Maria to clean up his enunciation.

Epstein tells us that, even before his divorce from Nadine was final, Maria went about restructuring his life and career. The party, he says, as Oscar, Johnny, and Nat had once known it, was over. He writes:

"And of course a number of old friends, particularly women who had been close to Nadine, simply could not abide the young fiancée. They disliked her cleverness, her haughty accent and fine manners. Out of a sense of loyalty to Nadine, if nothing else, these dropped out of Nat's life, some temporarily and some forever.

"Maria let it be known to Nat and Carlos and anyone else who cared to listen to her in 1947 that Nat King Cole was the star of the Trio, the reason for their spectacular success, and that Oscar and Johnny were making too much money."

One of those who disapproved of the relationship with Maria was Nat's father.

"The fact is," Epstein writes, "that Nat King Cole had

outgrown Oscar Moore, as brilliant as he was, just as he had outgrown his first wife. And it hurt Oscar almost as bad." Bad? How about badly? Are there any copy editors at Farrar, Straus and Giroux? "No doubt Nat understood the extent of the guitarist's contribution to their achievement and their triumph. But now the scene had changed, and business was business.

"Maria Ellington gave the leader the emotional support needed to do what he was too tenderhearted to do on his own. He informed his sidemen they were welcome to continue to share his good fortune, but with a smaller slice of the pie. Judging from later contracts this amounted to cutting their salaries in half.

"Oscar gave his notice in the late summer of 1947."

And Johnny Miller followed him a few months later. Hey, you know a neat trick you can do when you hit the big time? Cut the salaries of your side men and make an even larger donation to the IRS. And problems with the IRS lay in Nat Cole's future; cutting those salaries can be seen in retrospect as nothing less than stupid, even if Maria Cole wanted it that way. Irving Ashby replaced Moore. How important was Oscar Moore? "I *studied* Oscar Moore," Mundell Lowe says.

On Easter Sunday, Nat and Maria were married in the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York. Adam Clayton Powell, then married to pianist Hazel Scott, performed the ceremony. ("Please don't mention Mr. Powell's name," Hazel said to me in Paris in 1958),

In her book, Leslie Gourse says that Nat's friend Marvin Cane, then a song plugger for the Shapiro Bernstein publishing house, "was aware of the strong color line still in effect in New York. When Nat sang in New York, he still occasionally stayed in the Theresa Hotel in Harlem or at the Capitol Hotel at Fifty-first Street and Eighth Avenue. At one time, he had little choice except for the Harlem YMCA or a Harlem Hotel. The Capitol was in the vanguard of downtown hotels when it came to accepting Negro guests. Cane recognized Nat's position as a black entertainer who was idolized by white audiences . . . . Women of all races screamed and cheered for Nat's singing . . . . Nat insisted on emphasizing his role as an entertainer. Meanwhile, black activists saw the civil rights struggle as the preeminent issue in the country and became angry when Cole shied away from an aggressive stance. Nat had the platform but not the predilection. Virulent criticism of his quiet approach arose in the 1950s."

Marvin wanted the reception to be held at the new Belmont Plaza Hotel on Lexington Avenue in the East 50s. He persuaded the manager that all Harlem was not going to over-run the hotel, and the manager relented, agreeing to the reception. The entire cast of *Stormy Weather* turned up.

And the King Cole Trio was finished. By the dawn of 1948, Nat was doing a stand-up more and more. Henceforth the

billing would be Nat King Cole and the Trio. Indeed the trio days were over even before the wedding in New York. The last true trio session came on November 29, 1947, when he made his recording of the lovely *Lost April*. When he did the song again on December 21, 1948, strings had been added. The next day he recorded *Portrait of Jennie* with strings but that take was never issued. The final version was recorded January 14, 1949.

Until I set myself to listen to all the tracks of the Mosaic boxed set, in sequence, I had not realized that the cut-off from the trio was so sharp. Cole took on Jack Costanzo on bongos, succumbing to an "Afro-Cuban" fashion of the time. His colleagues in the trio objected to the addition. They thought the bongos thickened the texture of the trio and clogged the swing. And I think they were right. When Dizzy Gillespie used Caribbean or Brazilian percussion, he did so in the idiom from which these instruments were drawn. Cole simply added them to the four-four of the trio, and all you get is a sort of tick-pop tick-pop extraneous beat. It is a different story, of course, when he used Lee Young on drums. Young is playing in the jazz idiom, not trying to graft another vocabulary onto it.

There are few small-group recordings of any kind thenceforth. The dates from then on are all orchestral. On March 29, 1949, comes *Lush Life*. And Epstein says that from Billy Strayhorn's *Lush Life*, Cole and arranger Pete Rugolo "forged a masterpiece, an art song fit to be compared with the best of Hugo Wolf and Gustav Mahler." Wow.

He says: "The song's protagonist tells the story of how his frivolous party life was promised meaning — and then nearly rescued — by love, how love failed and disappointed him ultimately. Beginning in carefree cynicism, the song descends into deeper cynicism before ending in pessimistic gloom."

Strayhorn disliked the recording, which Epstein calls "the perfect existential anthem for the jilted lover," missing two important points. Strayhorn was homosexual, a secret kept by his friends until his death, and the song is a poignant evocation of his pain, the saddest homosexual anthem I know other than Noel Coward's *Mad about the Boy*. And it was a masterpiece before Cole ever got hold of it, written when Strayhorn was only nineteen.

Cole was by now probably the biggest male singer in America. Frank Sinatra's career was at its nadir. He lost his Columbia contract and seemed well on his way to being a forgotten man. Cole continued from one triumph to another. But he still couldn't stay in the major hotels of the big cities, and when he played the Thunderbird bird in Las Vegas, he had to reside somewhere else. Sammy Davis Jr. and many others endured similar indignity. Cole sued the Mayfair hotel in Philadelphia, which had refused him a room, and extracted

an apology — but no money — for the effort.

Cole and Maria decided to buy a twelve-room Tudor house in the handsome Hancock Park district of Los Angeles, where there was a restrictive covenant against Jews, Negroes, and anyone else deemed undesirable. They used an agent, who made the down payment in cash. When the true purchaser was revealed, the previous owner of the house and the real estate agent who handled the deal received anonymous threats. Residents of the area formed the Hancock Property Owners Association, whose head told Cole that they would buy back the house from him and give him a profit. In May, 1948, the Supreme Court ruled against restrictive covenants. The Coles took residence in August, 1948. Someone had posted a sign on their lawn. It read *Nigger Heaven*.

Duke Niles, a publicist who was one of Nat's friends, visited the house when it was being renovated. Gourse writes: "At first I didn't think it was me," Cole said. "But I'm getting used to it," he added, pointing to a sweeping staircase, which reflected Maria's flair for living with the best of everything."

Cole's ex-wife, Nadine, sued him for non-payment of alimony. Oscar Moore, who had left the group in 1947, also sued him. Bassist Johnny Miller quit.

Epstein tells us that Cole, who wanted to have a child of his own — he and Maria had adopted her dead sister's four-year-old girl, Carole — took hormone shots. Maria became pregnant. Apparently Cole had never had much body hair. With remarkable lack of taste, Epstein writes: "He made a priceless comment one morning as he emerged from the bathroom grinning. 'I'm a man now, yessir. I knocked up my wife, and I just shaved for the first time,' he announced, proud as a peacock. It would have made a great ad for Gillette." It would? "Whatever the hormone shots had done for his sperm count and his vocal cords, they sure had affected his body hair." As Pogo used to say, Oog.

On February 6, 1950, their daughter Natalie was born. With adopted children, they ultimately had five.

The Internal Revenue Service assessed him for \$146,000 back taxes. If he did owe this money, it doesn't say much for Carlos Gastel's career management. The government seized his house. They could far more easily have filed a lien on his royalties from Capitol Records. Epstein suggests that the neighbors in Hancock Park, many of whom were lawyers, had put the IRS up to this action to get the Coles out of their house. Having examined in detail the extent to which the IRS went in persecuting Woody Herman for a tax bill, even when he was old and very sick and barely able to mount a bandstand, I am inclined to think Epstein is right.

However, there may have been a second motive for the IRS actions. Tax collector Robert A. Riddell personally told the *New York Times* about the seizure of Cole's house,

tending to corroborate something else I found out when researching Woody Herman's life: the IRS *likes* to prosecute famous figures, particularly in the entertainment world, because of the publicity it garners, which intimidates the average taxpayer into shivering docility. And the Cole tax prosecution got them plenty of publicity.

Cole managed to make a settlement with the help of advance money from Capitol Records. In this, I see the fine hand of Johnny Mercer, who was still president of the label.

Cole by now was being castigated by critics for turning away from jazz. Barry Ulanov, once one of his most ardent supporters, was one of them. Frank Stacy interviewed Nat, who told him:

"I know that a lot of you critics think that I've been fluffing off jazz, but I don't think that you've been looking at the problem correctly. I'm even more interested in it now than I ever was. And the trio is going to play plenty of it. Don't you guys think I ever get sick of playing those dog tunes every night? I'll tell you why. You know how long it took the trio to reach a point where we started making a little prize money and found a little success. For years we did nothing but play for musicians and other hip people. And while we played that, we . . . practically starved to death. When we did click, it wasn't on the strength of the good jazz that we played, either. We clicked with pop songs, pretty ballads and novelty stuff. You know that. Wouldn't we have been crazy if we'd turned right around after getting a break and started playing pure jazz again? We would have lost the crowd right away."

He told Stacy that he was planning a tour in which he would have a chance to play a lot of jazz. But the tour, when it materialized, featured his usual pop vocals. And Cole was recording a great deal of crap. Along with such pretty things as *Portrait of Jennie* and *Lost April*, he recorded *The Horse Told Me*, *A Little Yellow Ribbon (In Her Hair)* and *All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth*, *Mule Train*, *Poor Jenny Is A Weepin'*, *Twisted Stockings*, and *The Greatest Inventor of Them All*, a bad imitation of Gospel music, along with purely mediocre material such as *A Little Bit Independent*.

In August, 1950, he recorded what I think is one of his most dreadful records: *Orange Colored Sky*. Accompanying him is the Stan Kenton Orchestra. Woody Herman had an uneasy relationship with Kenton. Bassist Red Kelly once told me: "They didn't trust each other. Woody didn't trust anything that didn't swing. Stan didn't trust anything that did." Veterans of the Kenton band have told me that Stan would *stop* them from swinging. I happened to like Stan personally, but eventually I found the band ponderous, and never more so than in its overblown, gawky accompaniment for Nat Cole and what is a contrived song in the first place.

(To be continued)