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The Musical Journey of Nat “King” Cole

Falling in love with someone is truly a magical feeling. Your head is up in the clouds, your body cannot hold still, and everyday the sun seems to shine brighter and brighter just for you. Sharing these feelings with someone can be quite difficult in words, but by putting these words into a song, one can capture the sensation of being in love. Nat King Cole not only sang love songs, but also sang about the spirit of America. The song “*Route 66*” captures the phenomenon of the American automobile. For a man with a rich, husky voice, careful enunciation, and soothing piano playing, Nat King Cole’s music was always easy to one’s ear.

Nathaniel Adams Cole was born on March 17, in Montgomery, AL. The year that he was born lays a mystery, but some searchers believe that Cole was born in 1919. Cole’s mother taught him how to play the family piano. By the time he was a teenager, Nat King Cole could play anything from Bach to Rachmaninoff. On Sundays, he would often play the organ in his father’s church. While attending Phillips High School, Cole organized a jazz band that played local gigs for \$1.50 a night. Surprisingly, Cole never sang in his band. He would play his piano in the background, keeping the rhythm to their music. Until one night in 1937, Nat King Cole’s famous breathy singing style was heard for the first time.

A drunken customer at the Swanee Inn begged Cole to sing “Sweet Lorraine.” In that moment Nat King Cole arrived as a singer. The next night the club owner Lewis urged Cole to wear a gold paper crown while performing his newly formed trio, dubbing the name King Cole Trio. The trio began to attract jazz enthusiasts from all over and was soon scoring gigs at the hottest venues in their town. They then toured the country in 1941, but upon their return to California, the trio hired managers Carlos Gastel and Al Jarvis, disc jockeys, to start recording for Capitol Records Company. The King Cole Trio’s first and biggest national hit was “*Straighten Up and Fly Right*,” (1943-44) featuring solo singing by Nat King Cole.

In the early ‘40’s, the King Cole Trio was in high demand, dominating airwaves with hits like “*Get Your Kicks on Route 66*,” “*The Christmas Song*,” and a breathtaking recording of “*Nature Boy*.” Hit after hit the Trio crossed over into the pop charts. Selling over three million copies made Nat King Cole the most successful African American recording artist of his time, second to Frank Sinatra.

So, what were his songs about? Well let’s take a look. In the song *Route 66*, the lyrics capture the American spirit for their love of the automobile. As highways were being paved and people traveling to and from, the love of the sites and sounds of America began to form into songs:

“If you ever plan to motor west,
 Travel my way; take the highway that is best.
 Get your kicks on route sixty-six.

It winds from Chicago to LA,
More than two thousand miles all the way.
Get your kicks on route sixty-six.

Now you go through Saint Looney
Joplin, Missouri,
And Oklahoma City is mighty pretty.
You see Amarillo,
Gallup, New Mexico,
Flagstaff, Arizona.
Don't forget Winona,
Kingman, Barstow, San Bernardino."

This song is just one of the examples of Nat King Cole's ability to propel an audience with human emotion. Though, Nat King Cole did not write some of the lyrics, but with his voice, he made the songs come life giving it a great feeling.

As Cole's era was ending so was his health. He suffered from health problems his entire life and in 1953, after collapsing during a jazz concert at Carnegie Hall, he went under a serious operation for his stomach ulcers. A heavy smoker, Nat King Cole passed away to lung cancer on February 15, 1965, at the age of 47.

After his death, Cole continues to appeal to audience of all ages. Jazz fans continue to treasure his recording of the 30's and 40's and pop artists' look to his songs for inspiration. Nat King Cole's daughter, Natalie, eventually followed in her father's musical footsteps and developed a successful career in R& B and jazz-based pop. Earning several Grammy awards for her 1991 LP *Unforgettable with Love*, this featured an electronically manipulated duet with her late father. Natalie continues to keep her father's music alive by singing to an audience of a new generation. In a culture that is forever changing, the music of Nat King Cole will forever live on. His music is a feeling that tugs at one's heart and provides a landscape in one's mind a beautiful life can be. Cole's personal sound was always a classic one and his sound will never fade away.