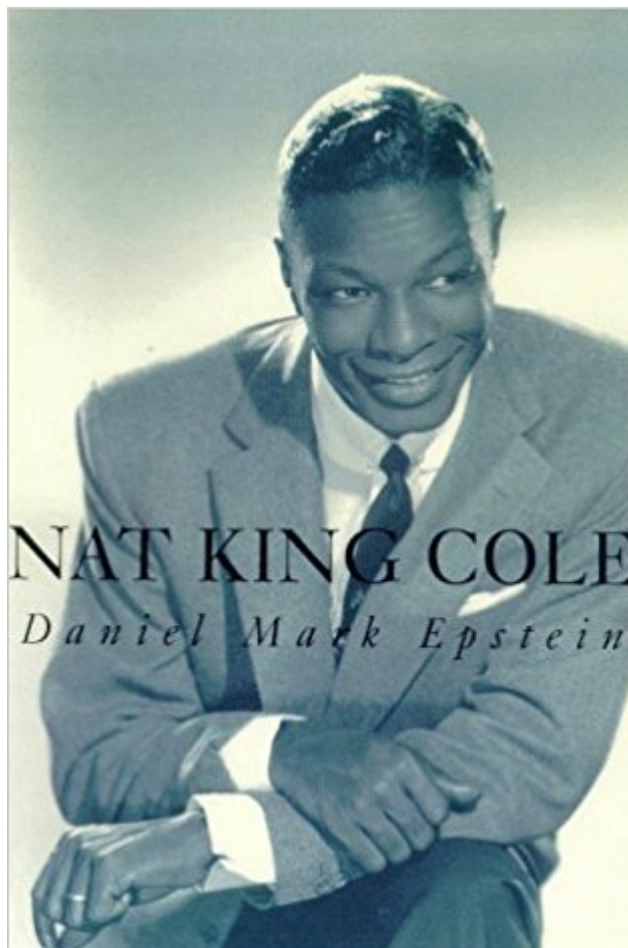


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Nat King Cole



Synopsis

The first major biography of the great jazz pianist and singer, written with the full cooperation of his family. When he died in 1965, at age forty-five, Nat King Cole was already a musical legend. As famous as Frank Sinatra, he had sold more records than anyone but Bing Crosby. Written with the narrative pacing of a novel, this absorbing biography traces Cole's rise to fame, from boy-wonder jazz genius to megastar in a racist society. Daniel Mark Epstein brings Cole and his times to vivid life: his precocious entrance onto the vibrant jazz scene of his hometown, Chicago; the creation of his trio and their rise to fame; the crossover success of such songs as "Straighten Up and Fly Right"; and his years as a pop singer and television star, the first African American to have his own show. Epstein examines Cole's insistence on changing society through his art rather than political activism, the romantic love story of Cole and Maria Ellington, and Cole's famous and influential image of calm, poise, and elegance, which concealed the personal turmoil and anxiety that undermined his health.

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Customer Reviews

Pianist/vocalist Nat King Cole made everything look easy. His warm and haunting tenor voice, suave demeanor, and elegant piano style influenced dozen of singers and instrumentalists, including Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, Oscar Peterson, and Diana Krall. But as Daniel Mark Epstein unveils in this illuminating biography, it took years of dues-paying for Cole to reach superstardom. With prose that reads like Cole's lyrical phrasings, Epstein takes the reader through the eventful

places and spaces of the artist's life: from his birth in Alabama in 1919, his family's turbulent move to Chicago, and his rise as an Earl Hines-influenced teen jazz sensation, to the formation of his famous piano-guitar-bass trio in the '40s. Epstein doesn't shy away from the lows, describing the anguish Cole caused his preacher father, the failed first marriage, tax and health problems, sibling rivalry, and the jealousy that destroyed his combo when Cole made the transition from jazz artist to pop singer. But these are balanced with the highs, like the tremendous success of Cole's vocal hits "Straighten Up And Fly Right" "Route 66," "Mona Lisa," and "The Christmas Song," and his second marriage to Maria Ellington. Epstein also cites Cole's quiet battles on the Civil Rights front. He purchased a home in an exclusive, all white Los Angeles neighborhood; insisted on performing for integrated audiences in the south and heroically survived a vicious racial attack during a Birmingham concert in 1956. "Nat King Cole was not a political philosopher schooled in rhetoric or the dialectics of history," the author writes. "He was a clear thinker with sound instincts and compassion.... Where he had gone--to riches, fame, and honor--he hoped his brothers and sisters would soon follow." By the time he died of lung cancer in 1965, his artistry had left its mark on the 20th century and on everyone who loved him. As Epstein summarizes, "[H]e paid attention to his friends, his children, his sideman, his audiences and most of all his music." --Eugene Holley, Jr.

Dulcet-toned Nat King Cole is remembered best today for ballads such as "Mona Lisa" and "Unforgettable," perhaps less so for his skills as a preeminent jazz pianist and composer. This respectful biography depicts a multitalented musician who, whether contending with racism, with black leaders criticizing his lack of activism or with jazz critics who believed he had "sold out," maintained an implacable, dignified demeanor. Born Nathaniel Coles, he grew up in Chicago in the 1920s, when Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton and Gatekeeper Earl Hines were helping to turn that city into a virtual mecca of jazz. Cole moved to Los Angeles in 1937, paying his dues as a struggling musician and eventually forming the original King Cole Trio. The fledgling Capitol Records recognized the commerce in Cole's liquid voice (a voice created in part, according to Epstein, by Cole's heavy cigarette habit) and exquisite style, making him a star as he and his trio moved away from jazz and embraced the pop ballads the public craved. At the height of his popularity, Cole became the first African-American to host his own television show, which, while a ratings success, fell victim to prejudice as it failed to secure a national sponsor. By the time Cole died in 1965 of lung cancer, he had become one of America's best-loved entertainers. Epstein (Sister Aimee) writes gracefully and possesses admirable musical knowledge; yet his sympathetic narrative is oddly flat. Whether because, as Epstein writes, Cole "was a master of the art of concealment" or because his

personality differed little from his calm, genial and sophisticated facade, the portrait of Cole that emerges is less vibrant than his music. The man himself retains a regal distance. (Nov.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

The author does a great job in analyzing Nat's vocal and piano techniques, and the book is also great on musical details of the 30s and 40s, and the details about the early Trio years are really great. But when the book gets to the 50s and 60s, there is very little about Nat's music from these years. We get a bit on 'After Midnight' and 'Cole Espanol'....and that's it!!! I am stunned that the author (who obviously knows a lot about music history) barely mentions Nelson Riddle, and does not even mention Gordon Jenkins, at all! OK, Jenkins is mentioned once, at the very end, among the names of attendees at Nat's funeral! But that's all! As for the 3 legendary masterpieces Jenkins and Nat made together ('Love is the Thing' 'The Very Thought of You' and 'Where Did Everyone Go?'), this book does not even give them one single mention! I couldn't wait to get to that point in the book that covers those years, because I love those recordings so much. Needless to say, it was very disappointing, and a shocking oversight, to find that these classic recordings did not even get covered at all. However, the book is the best bio available about one of the most important artists of the 20th century, so I guess Nat's fans will just have to make do with this book, over 15 years old now. I hope someone else (like Will Friedwald, maybe?) is working on a definitive bio that does justice to his mature masterpieces.

This is a beautifully written bio by a stylish writer with poetry and plays on his resume. There are enough facts and figures to please most, but this is not some dry reference book. It's moving and memorable all the way through. The only regret is the lack of even a basic discography. Also, Freddy Cole is only mentioned in passing several times and unlike many other family members was apparently not interviewed by the author--it would have been nice to get some insights from Nat's younger brother and fellow singer. Finally, the text is remarkably free of typos (for a change), except for the fact that the song "Sweet Lorraine" is mentioned several times and is misspelled with just one "r" every time.

Daniel Mark Epstein is an excellent writer. He somehow puts you in the shoes of his subject and paints a picture of the place and time of the South Side of Chicago that leaves little to the imagination. When he writes of the jazz greats of that era playing their music it is pure poetry which one might expect from a poet. It is obvious that he has a thorough understanding, not only of Nat

King Cole, but also of the music. Highly recommend to anyone who is a fan of Cole and music of that period.

An exceptionally well-written and entertaining biography by a poet with a real grasp of music and Nat Cole's amazing contributions. It's a must-read for anyone interested in the evolution of jazz and the American Songbook. Like Frank, when Nat did a song it became one of our great standards. Epstein really "gets it."

I enjoyed this book very much. I got into Nat King Cole's music when I was in my mid-teens (late '70s-early '80s) because I am a fan of Natalie's as well...There was a lot of info in the book that I did not know, so it was very enlightening to read something so detailed about Nat's life. He was not portrayed as a saint or a martyr, but merely as a man who had his faults, just like any other man. And you still end up liking him. I gave it four stars because I had problems with how Epstein interpreted several of Nat's songs, which I think had more to do with his personal opinion of them than what they actually meant (re: the "Nature Boy" and "Straighten Up and Fly Right" stories), and little errors that should have been caught during the final edit (like the one about "Capitol Records, the home of Elvis Presley" - hello, ELVIS NEVER RECORDED FOR CAPITOL). But for the most part, this book lets you get to know Nat Cole as he really was...Highly recommended.

I found this book to be revealing and enlightening about one of my favorite singers. Nat King Cole had a voice like no other before or since. With his calm demeanor you'd never think that he endured so much hell in his life. No wonder he smoked as much as he did. This book is one of the best I've ever read about the life of Nat Cole, but like some of the previous reviewers, I found little errors, too. I also felt that it had a strong sympathetic bent towards Nat's widow Maria, as if she were the heroine of the story. That isn't any wonder; this book was written in full cooperation with the Cole family, so I'm sure Mrs. Cole would have had to come out of it looking good, or she wouldn't have cooperated. Also Epstein says that shortly before Cole died, that he and his wife reconciled after Nat's torrid love affair with a twenty year old chorus girl. According to many other sources, though, they never did reconcile their differences. But this is what Maria Cole wanted people to believe. But still this book is very interesting. It reads like a juicy novel, but it's better, because it's a true story. It's engaging and will definitely hold your attention. You will feel like you knew the man personally. For anyone who loves Nat and his music, this book is a must.

Great book ,great deal on as usual

I love Nat King Cole's music; it is always so regal and calming. I also like Nat's calm and cool demeanor; he was a class act despite the silly racism he and many other notable African Americans had to face during his time. He is a star that many young Africa American male entertainers can learn from, strength, courage, and class under fire.

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