

# An Unforgettable Life: Three Reasons Nat “King” Cole Needs a Biopic

The staggering success of 2015’s “Straight Outta Compton,” 2018’s “Bohemian Rhapsody,” and 2019’s “Rocketman” have [spawned the production](#) of a half dozen biopics about Aretha Franklin, Celine Dion, Leonard Bernstein, and Elvis Presley among others. But one music figure needs to be added to the list: Nathaniel Adams Coles, aka Nat “King” Cole. The masterful entertainer would have celebrated his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2019. Though he has been the subject of documentaries, Cole’s story has never enchanted a cinema. Thus, his short but consequential life deserves a cinematic retelling to younger audiences for these three reasons:

## 1. Cole Revolutionized Jazz

Before his silken vocals soothed stereotypes, Nat Cole rose to fame as a piano player, leading the innovative jazz small-group, “The King Cole Trio.” Cole’s playing style, which synthesized blues and jazz, had a profound impact on others. [Ray Charles](#) named Cole one of “the three greats” among pianists, saying he “ate, drank, and slept Nat King Cole.” Cole’s trio introduced a new sound to the jazz world, and famed bandleaders such as Oscar Peterson and Vince Guaraldi [replicated Cole’s ensemble](#) of piano, upright bass, and guitar in their own jazz trios. In addition to jazz experts and musicians, Cole’s piano work received plaudits from America’s musical laymen, including winning subscriber polls by [Esquire](#), [Metronome](#), and [Down Beat](#) magazines for best pianist.

## 2. Cole May Be Popular Music's Greatest Singer

Remarkably, Cole never received vocal training. Yet his consistent ranking among such masters of song as Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra gives him an eminence scarcely granted to an entertainer.

Just one listen to Cole's interpretation of Hoagy Carmichael's ["Stardust"](#) reveals his magnificent gifts as a balladeer. His soothing vocals cradle Gordon Jenkins' subdued, yet succulent strings, and beckon the listener to join him on this melodic, celestial journey. He hits every note with marksman-like precision, creating a vocalized carbon copy of Carmichael's leadsheet. His ballad interpretations – ["When I Fall in Love,"](#) ["The Very Thought of You,"](#) ["Mona Lisa,"](#) ["Unforgettable,"](#) and legions of others – are breathtaking.

Though ballads made him famous, Cole also mastered every mood of song from [up-tempo "swingers"](#) to [despondent "torch songs,"](#) proving his voice as one of popular music's most versatile. Even marred by lung cancer, Cole's voice gave listeners one final glimpse of its sublimity when, against his doctor's wishes, he stepped into the recording studio and gave music fans his parting gift, [L-O-V-E.](#)

Cole's biographer [Daniel Mark Epstein](#) put it best: "Nat King Cole's voice is really one of the great gifts of nature." Indeed it was, as he famously sung, "unforgettable in every way."

## 3. He Broke Racial Barriers

Cole was a trailblazer in many ways for the African American community of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. His trio earned its own [syndicated radio program](#) in 1946 called "King Cole Trio Time"

– the first radio program sponsored by a black performing artist. A bigger media breakthrough came ten years later when [“The Nat King Cole Show”](#) debuted on NBC in 1956, making Cole the first black performing artist to host a nationally televised weekly variety program. This unprecedented exposure of a black entertainer caused Cole to later christen himself [“the Jackie Robinson of television.”](#)

When the Coles purchased a mansion in Beverly Hills, residents immediately tried to entice the family of [“undesirables”](#) to move out of the all-white neighborhood. Despite his neighbors leaving [burning crosses](#) and [racist signs](#) on his lawn, [exploding his rose bushes](#), and [poisoning his beloved dog](#), Nat remained resolute that he and his family had every right to live in the neighborhood. Instead of retaliating an eye for an eye, the Coles turned the other cheek and won over their neighbors. Nat King Cole epitomized class and so transformed the neighborhood’s climate that the [residents named their post office](#) in his honor. In essence, Nat Cole became one of the civil rights movement’s unsung, but most influential heroes.

Cole’s life left an indelible mark on American society through his courage and poise amidst the tempestuous race relations of his time. In a world where the most common options in a conflict are fight or flight, Cole’s example teaches us a third way – one in which fortitude is maintained, but not manifested through violent retaliation. Instead of backing down, playing victim, or avenging his aggressors with destructive acts of his own, Cole pursued a path of non-violence while also standing up to his neighbors through refusal to move.

Would we earn the respect many of us crave by following Cole’s example in dealing with adversaries?

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