

## The Remarkable Nat King Cole Through the All-Encompassing Lens of Will Friedwald

By Marilyn Lester

If Will Friedwald were in a court of law pleading a case for the immense greatness of Nat King Cole, he'd win a unanimous "yes" verdict hands down. In his February 12 presentation, *Straighten Up and Fly Right: The Life And Music of Nat King Cole*, Friedwald offered a tight and cogent presentation, filled with visual goodies, including photos from the Cole Family's personal collection. Nat Cole is a subject he clearly loves and admires, and, who, he says, is his favorite performer. His recently released book about Cole, upon which this program was based, was one he'd wanted to write for many years. It was a labor of love. "Nat brought joy to the world and to me," Friedwald said. "I feel like I owe it to him." Cole was born on March 17, 1919 and died on February 15, 1965, so the book was almost in sync with his centenary, and the program with his death date.

Friedwald has no doubt opened up a lot of eyes to Cole's greatness. I certainly had no idea of the immensity of it. Pianist-singer-songwriter Cole jam-packed quite a bit into his 45 short years on Earth. In Friedwald's opinion, Cole, with Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra, had the greatest influence on how the Great American Songbook was presented and sung. In the 1950s, Cole sold more records than anyone, even Sinatra, with whom he was close. He was the first performing artist to move from night

clubs to filling concert halls, and ultimately, stadiums. At a late 1940s benefit for the Harlem YMCA, he filled



Nat King Cole with Sombrero

the Savoy Ballroom with a remarkable 5,000 people. By 1959 he was the top earning attraction at the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas. So, is it any wonder that King Cole was so tremendously popular? The



Nat King Cole with Frank Sinatra

charismatic singer had a beautiful smile, a winning personality and was a natural on the stage. He was loved and beloved—triumphing over Jim Crow

indignities and racism.

Nat Cole was also very close to Jack Benny and Perry Como. He was embraced by three presidents: Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. He sang at Kennedy's inaugural gala, which was produced by Sinatra, who made sure to include three other people of color: Ella Fitzgerald, Harry Belafonte and Mahalia Jackson. Later, in Los Angeles, Kennedy surprised Cole by spontaneously showing up at his house for the coming-out cotillion of one of his daughters. "It was a huge statement," observed Friedwald.

In matters of racial discrimination Cole maintained his composure and his dignity. In his first film appearance, in 1943, in which he sang and played piano, he was made to appear dressed as a railroad porter. During this time Blacks were cast in white films in subordinate roles, reflected in their costuming. For Cole, that turn was the first and last. In subsequent film appearance he was dressed in a tuxedo or other form of "white apparel." In 1948, Cole purchased a home (through a proxy) in the all-white Hancock Park section of Los Angeles; the transaction was legal and aboveboard. Some residents were glad to welcome the Cole family, but others not so much. No crosses burned on his lawn, but other indignities were perpetrated. He stood his ground. Cole's career suffered the indignity of racism at several turns. In Birmingham,

Alabama in the early 1950, members of an ultra-right white supremacy group, the White Citizens Council, breached the



## President's Message...

Linda Amiel Burns, President

Warm Greetings to our APSS Members, Family, Friends and Fans:

It is wonderful that the American Popular Song Society is thriving and continuing through this pandemic. Our Zoom meetings continue to be valuable, lively, and well-attended.

Of course, we all hope eventually to resume our live programs, but I feel that this unusual season has been very successful, and I am grateful that we are still up and running.

Many thanks to the one and only Will Friedwald for his remarkable program on Nat King Cole last month. I hadn't realized how much this great singer/musician accomplished in his short life and this program made me an even bigger fan. If you missed it, please enjoy reading the lead story in this month's issue. You will also find information on how to purchase Will's terrific book.

We are all eagerly looking forward to Nancy McGraw's award-winning presentation on the great Johnny Mercer on Saturday, March 13<sup>th</sup> from 12:00-2:00. The Zoom link is in this Newsletter mailing. I don't want you to miss this remarkable afternoon, as I know it will be as special as Nancy herself is. She has assembled a talented cast, and could there be anything better than spending time listening to the Magic of Mercer?

I hope that you are all well while getting through these trying times. Happily, Winter is almost over and Spring is on its way.

Sending good wishes, and looking forward to seeing you on March 13<sup>th</sup>.

*Linda*

Linda Amiel Burns, President  
The American Popular Song Society ❤️



Condolences to Linda on the passing of her cousin Joseph Robert Amiel pictured here (l) with Linda and her brother Joseph J. Amiel (r).

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stage and physically assaulted him. He was given a variety show in the 1956-57 television season. It was hugely popular, but beyond the regional sponsor, Rheingold Beer, no national sponsor would take the show on. It was cancelled, to which Cole famously responded, "I guess Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark."

Cole grew up in Chicago within a large, musical family. He was essentially self-taught as both a pianist (he was a devotee of Earl "Fatha" Hines) and vocalist. In his early career, it was jazz that was his medium. He led a band dubbed the "Royal Dukes" and then created what was at the time an innovation in jazz—the small group format. His innovative trio featured guitar player Oscar Moore and bassist Wesley Prince. As the King Cole Trio, they played night clubs, scoring a hit in 1940 with "Sweet Lorraine." Cole began to penetrate the white record market at this time, and went on to have a hit per year during the 40s. In 1946 "For Sentimental Reasons" gave him the distinction of being the first Black artist to have a hit on the mainstream (white) charts.

A highlight of the presentation was a very rare clip from the "We the People" radio show in 1948, of Cole with the creator of "Nature Boy," eden abbez (*sic*). Of the fascinating story of "Nature Boy" and its intriguing author, Friedwald



Cole and Family Go Latin

said, "I could do a whole program." Another back-story to a Nat Cole hit is that of 1949's "Mona Lisa." The recording was arranged by a then unknown Nelson Riddle. Cole brought him back to handle more music, Riddle's career took off and "the rest is history." In 1949, Cole also essentially disbanded the trio, now working with Latin percussion and achieving solo billing as an independent artist.

In the 1950s, Cole began turning out hit after hit, as many as 10 to 12 per year, more than any other contemporary artist,

including Sinatra. With guidance from his manager and close friend, Carlos Castell (who was originally from the Dominican Republic), Cole began to make records in Spanish and Portuguese, successfully penetrating the large international Latin market. Ever eager to broaden his range, particularly with the British invasion of music and a shift in popular tastes, Cole entered the Country music scene from 1962-1964. But by 1963 it was becoming apparent that his chain smoking was catching up to him. Friedwald showed the last photo of Cole ever taken, with two nurses as he entered the hospital where he would die in 1965. His last hit broke when he was in this same hospital growing weaker and weaker. His funeral was huge, with a who's who of Hollywood in attendance.

This reportage of Will Friedwald's excellent program can't really touch the scope of it, nor could Friedwald compress his magnificent book into such a short time. The solution? Why, buy the book, of course. It's called *Straighten Up and Fly Right: The Life And Music of Nat King Cole*—and think about supporting an independent book seller.

The "classic" Trio with Johnny Miller (bass) and Oscar Moore (guitar), stirring "The Frim Fram Sauce," 1945



## Johnny Mercer: First, Last, and Always “Sister Susie, Strut Your Stuff” to “When October Goes”

By Jerry Osterberg

“My Aunt Hatty once said that when I was six months-old she hummed at me and I hummed right back.” By the age of three or four Johnny Mercer was already listening to records. One of the most prolific lyricists in history, Mercer’s hugely successful run lasted more than four decades. His songs had a greater range and took in more of America than those of any other songwriter. Writer and educator Philip Furia, author of biographies of Irving Berlin, Ira Gershwin and Mercer, wrote “He could be hiply urbane in “Satin Doll,” elegantly sensuous in “That Old Black Magic,” down-home folksy in “In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening,” excitedly childlike in “Jeepers Creepers,” and achingly nostalgic in “Days of Wine and Roses.”

During the course of his lifetime, Mercer wrote more than one-thousand songs, collaborated with two-hundred composers, including Jerome Kern, Richard Whiting, Harold Arlen, Harry Warren, Gordon Jenkins, Jimmy Van Heusen, Hoagy Carmichael, David Raksin, Arthur Schwartz, Andre Previn, and Henry Mancini, and earned 18 Oscar nominations between 1938 and 1969. He won the top prize four times: “On the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe,” “In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening,” “Moon River,” and “Days of Wine and Roses.” The latter two songs, both written with Henry Mancini, also won Grammy Awards for Song of the Year. Oscar Hammerstein II, who won the Academy Award in 1942 for “The Last Time I Saw Paris,” written with Jerome Kern, sent a telegram to Mercer which read “Johnny, you was robbed.” The losing song was “Blues in the Night.”

John Herndon Mercer was born in Savannah, Georgia on November 18, 1909. Following college, he moved to New York City, completely infatuated

with music of every kind. He wrote his first song “Sister Susie, Strut Your Stuff” while still in school. Songs that Mercer especially loved – jazz and blues – were



booming in Harlem and on Broadway. He arrived with a song written for Eddie Cantor which the star turned down. But, Cantor, impressed by the young man’s obvious talent, encouraged him to keep trying. He soon wrote “Out of Breath and Scared to Death of You,” which was used in the *Garrick Gaities*.

Mercer began his career as a singer and songwriter for Paul Whiteman. Apprenticed with Yip Harburg, he



learned a lot from the extraordinarily gifted lyricist. It was around this time he also met Hoagy Carmichael, who asked him to write the words for a song he had composed some years earlier. The result was “Lazy Bones.” A recording by Ted Lewis was among the five most popular

songs of 1933. It was recorded by a countless number of artists, from Paul Robeson to the Supremes to Nellie McKay. For the next twenty years, Mercer songs dominated the charts. In one 12-month period stretching from March 1945 to March 1946, he had four number one hits as an artist: “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive,”

“Candy” (with Jo Stafford), “On the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe,” and “Personality.”

Mercer accepted an offer to go to Hollywood in 1937, where he collaborated with Richard Whiting at RKO, writing over twenty songs, including “Too Marvelous for Words,” “Hurray for Hollywood,” and “Have You Got Any Castles, Baby?” Following Whiting’s death, Mercer teamed up with Harry Warren at Warner Brothers. Two of the most successful of their forty songs were “Jeepers Creepers,” and “You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby.” Perhaps because Mercer wrote lyrics with so many different composers, his songs were most often identified with him rather than the composer.

The World War II era was a productive period for Mercer: “That Old Black Magic,” “This Time the Dreams on Me,” “Accentuate the Positive,” “Come Rain or Come Shine,” and “Hit the Road to Dreamland,” all written with Harold Arlen. Mercer and Carmichael reunited for “Skylark” and “How Little We Know.” It was during this time that Mercer and Glenn Wallichs, a former radio repairman, and owner of Music City, a large record store in Hollywood, concluded that the West Coast needed a major record company comparable to the long established Decca, RCA, and Columbia, which dominated the East Coast. Mercer went to Buddy DeSylva, a songwriter and producer, who agreed to put up all the capital to start the new company. Initially known as Liberty

Records, Capitol Records was formed on April 8, 1942 thanks to DeSylva's \$25,000 investment. Two months later, the first recording was released: "I Found a New Baby" by the Paul Whiteman band. Although it wasn't a hit, the next two were: "Cow-Cow Boogie" by Ella Mae Morse and the Freddie Slack Orchestra, and Mercer's own recording of "Strip Polka."

Because Mercer had an ear for good songs and singers, he decided who sang which songs. Early on, he recruited Margaret Whiting, Jo Stafford, the Pied Pipers, Peggy Lee, Bobby Sherwood, Martha Tilton, and briefly, Billie Holiday, who recorded "Trav'lin Light," under the pseudonym "Lady Day." Mercer's greatest discovery came about when he went to hear the King Cole Trio. He succeeded in persuading Nat King Cole to sing as well as play the piano and to make a vocal recording of "Straighten Up and Fly Right," a song written by Cole in 1937.

As a popular vocalist, Mercer performed his own songs and some written by other songwriters such as Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern. His included "G.I. Jive," "Jamboree Jones," "One For my Baby," "Any Place I Hang My Hat is Home" "Day In Day Out" and "Fools Rush In." Many of Mercer's biggest hits were collaborations with other artists: Jo Stafford, "Candy;" Bing Crosby, "Mister Meadowlark;" Margaret Whiting, "Baby, It's Cold Outside;" and the Nat King Cole Trio, "Harmony" and "Save the Bones for Henry Jones."

By the end of the 1950's, rock and roll and television had seized the world of popular music, starting as early as 1956 for Elvis Presley. His songs "Don't Be Cruel" and "Hound Dog" sold the most records that year. Kay Starr bravely faced the onslaught with "Rock and Roll Waltz," while future disc jockey Jim Lowe offered up "Green Door," both of which did well. By 1958, the battle had

been won by rock and roll; Danny & The Juniors on top with "At the Hop" followed closely by "The Purple People Eater," although Perry Como hung on with "Catch a Falling Star" and Frank Sinatra with "All the Way."

Mercer did have one hit during the rock and roll era, *Bernardine*, sung by Pat Boone in a 1957 film.

It was the one and only time Mercer attempted to enter the genre, not that he didn't keep busy. Mercer collaborated with Gene DePaul for *L'il Abner* on Broadway and the film *Seven Brides for*



*Seven Brothers*.

Beyond that, he was back on radio, broadcasting for CBS five times per week.

Mercer began the decade with "Autumn Leaves" and Broadway's *Top Banana*, ended it with *L'il Abner*, which turned in 693 performances, the lyrics to Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's "Satin Doll," and appearances on TV variety shows (Bing Crosby, Dinah Shore, Perry Como, and Andy Williams). The 1960's were kind to Mercer. He made an album with Bobby Darin, *Two of a Kind*, which featured a terrific duet of "Bob White." Darin, already a teen idol via "Splish Splash, and raised on the American Songbook, had to have been

thrilled to work with such a long-established legend. Mercer was also back on Broadway in 1964 with a comedy, *Foxy*, starring Bert Lahr.

But, the true watershed moment for Mercer was when he teamed up with Henry Mancini in 1961, an association which yielded two Oscar winning songs back to back: "Moon River" and "Days of Wine and Roses." The team penned two additional Academy Award nominees: "Charade" and "The Sweetheart Tree," and another which was not nominated: "Whistling Away the

Dark." Mercer's last nomination came in 1972 for "Life Is What You Make It," written with Marvin Hamlisch. For *The Good Companion*, which opened in London in 1974, Mercer teamed with Andre Previn. There were at least two young composers who came close to collaborating with Mercer: Paul McCartney and Barry Manilow. McCartney expressed genuine interest, but in spite of Margaret Whiting's advocating, Mercer gently turned down the offer, possibly because his wife Ginger was ill at the time. There was no doubt, on the other hand, that Mercer wanted to work with Manilow. Following Mercer's death in 1976, Ginger gave several of her husband's lyrics to Manilow and asked him to finish them. Of

the dozen or so lyrics he composed the music for, "When October Goes," a hit for Manilow in 1984, became a jazz standard.

Once asked how it was possible for one person to write so many great songs, he answered "When you get a tune like "One for My Baby," and you find the right mood, it's the luckiest thing that can happen to a lyric writer. I've always written what I think I want to do, and the way I want it to be." Margaret Whiting, a friend and protégé of Johnny Mercer, wrote: "He was a poet, a spinner of dreams, and he touched everyone with his songs."



## Lucille Ball: How It All Began

By Glen Charlow

Lucille Ball was a television comedienne and film actress, born on August 6, 1911 in Jamestown, New York to Henry Durrell Ball and his wife Desiree. The oldest of the couple's two



children (a brother Fred, was born in 1915), Lucille's childhood was a bit of a hardscrabble affair, one shaped by tragedy and a lack of money.

Ball's father Henry, or "Had" as he was known to his family, was an electrician and not long after his daughter's birth he relocated the family to Montana for work. Then it was off to Michigan, where Had took a job as a telephone lineman with the Michigan Bell Company. Life came undone in February 1915 when Had was struck with typhoid fever and died. For Ball, just three years old at the time, her father's death not only set in motion a series of difficult childhood hurdles, but also served as the young girl's first real significant memory.

"I do remember everything that happened," she said. "Hanging out the window, begging to play with the kids next door who had measles, the doctor coming, my mother weeping. I remember a bird that flew in the window, a picture that fell off the wall."

Desiree, still reeling from her husband's unexpected death and pregnant with Fred, packed up and returned to Jamestown, New York, where she eventually found work in a factory and a new husband, Ed Peterson. Peterson, however, wasn't a fan of kids, especially young ones, and with Desiree's blessing, he moved her to Detroit without his wife's young son or daughter. Fred moved in with Desiree's parents while Lucille was forced to make a new home with Ed's folks. For Ball that meant contending with Peterson's stern mother

who didn't have much money to lavish on her step-granddaughter. The family, Lucille would later recall, lacked enough money even for school pencils.

Finally, at age 11, Lucille reunited with her mother when Desiree and Ed returned to Jamestown. Even then, Ball had an itching to do something big and when she was 15, she convinced her mother to allow her to enroll in a New York City drama school. But despite her longing to make it on the stage, Ball was too nervous to draw much notice.

"I was a tongue-tied teenager, spellbound by the school's star pupil, Bette Davis," said Ball. The school finally wrote her mother. "Lucy's wasting her time and ours. She's too shy and reticent to put her best foot forward."

She remained in New York City, however, and by 1927 Ball, who had started calling herself Montana and later Diane Belmont, found work as a model, first for fashion designer Hattie Carnegie, and then, after overcoming a debilitating bout of rheumatoid arthritis, Chesterfield cigarettes.

In the early 1930s, Ball, who had dyed her chestnut hair blonde, moved to Hollywood to seek out more acting opportunities. Work soon followed, including a stint as one of the 12 "Goldwyn Girls" to promote the 1933 Eddie Cantor flick, *Roman Scandals*. She landed as an extra in the Ritz Brothers film, *The Three Musketeers*, and then in 1937, earned a sizeable part in *Stage Door*, starring Katherine Hepburn and Ginger Rogers.



*Loving*  
**LUCY**

This article originally appeared in the September, 2011 issue of *TIMES SQUARE CHRONICLES*. It is rewritten here with permission from the Publisher of that paper.

Glen Charlow became a major Lucille Ball collector when he moved from Baltimore to New York in 1983 and has since become recognized by many as having one of the largest "Lucy" collections on the East Coast. Some may remember him from A & E's Biography when they did their tribute to Lucille Ball & Desi Arnaz. Many stills and photos of his are in that tribute as well as a few segments of his interview. That biography only aired once, Thanksgiving night, 1994. Now, living back in Baltimore since 2013, Glen occasionally performs his one-man show, *"Loving Lucy: A Tribute To Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz & I Love Lucy"*. He performed this show for us back in June of 2012 when we were the New York Sheet Music Society

Glen Charlow runs a website dedicated to Lucy: [www.LucilleBall.net](http://www.LucilleBall.net)

Read a review of that show:

<http://www.lucilleball.net/cabaret-nysms.html>