

# “Straighten Up and Fly Right”—Nat “King” Cole (1943)

Added to the National Registry: 2005

Essay by Cary O’Dell



*Nat “King” Cole*



*Original label*

“Straighten Up and Fly Right” is more than just good advice, it’s also part of America’s national musical history.

Practically the epitome of swing, “Straighten Up and Fly Right” was the breakthrough hit for Nat “King” Cole, then performing as part of the King Cole Trio (which, originally, included Oscar Moore and Wesley Prince). And while the ditty might tell a silly story of a bird and a monkey, it is the song’s infectious rhythm, fun-to-sing lyrics and twinkling extended piano instrumental that has made it a generation-hopping favorite. The song has proved to have a surprising cross-genre appeal as well: jazz combos love it as do country swing ensembles and big band enthusiasts.

“Straighten Up and Fly Right” was written by Cole. He committed the tune and lyrics to paper in a hotel room in Omaha, Nebraska, in the winter of 1943. It was based upon a playful story Cole’s pastor father would sometimes tell from the pulpit. It’s an Aesop or Disney-worthy tale of a monkey who climbs on top of a buzzard for a free flight. In the end though, neither species quite gets what they bargained for. The final lessons imparted in the song and the story are two fold: 1) never expect a free ride; and 2) never underestimate the person you are trying to take advantage of.

These are not the only interpretations of the song however. Some, as David Mark Epstein does in his excellent 1999 biography of Nat “King” Cole, see the tune as racial metaphor with the buzzard as the white man with the black man represented by the monkey. In this analysis, the American black man is, quite literally, getting taken for a ride. Additionally, as the phrase “monkey on your back” was already in usage as code for drug or alcohol addiction, another reading of the song transforms the story into an anti-drug parable.

In any event, once “Straighten Up” was written, Cole immediately began to include it in his nightly performances with his band. While playing in Los Angeles, and in need of cash, Cole sold the song to song publisher Irving Mills. Mills’s extensive (some might say exploitative) contract with Cole earned him, and not the song’s author, all of the song’s royalties as well as a co-writer’s credit! (A later lawsuit brought by Cole against Mills went nowhere.)

Under any ownership, “Straighten Up and Fly Right” was one of the numbers put down when the King Cole Trio had their first Capitol Records recording session in November 1943. (Earlier the group had recorded some sides for Decca.) Based upon the success the Trio had had with “Straighten Up” on the road, the guys were optimistic that this song more than any other in their repertoire would be a winner.

And they were right.

Already featured in the Republic Pictures film “Here Comes Elmer,” starring Dale Evans and Gloria Stuart, upon its release, the song would go on to sell half a million copies and become a favorite of American troops serving overseas. It would also launch the superstardom of Cole.

Nathan Adams Coles (originally with an “s” at the end of his last name) was born in 1919 in Montgomery, Alabama. His mother directed the church choir and instructed all her children in music. By the time young Nate was 12, he was playing the organ in his father’s church, the same year he began his formal music studies. After the family moved to Chicago, Cole formed his own small band and began playing one-nighters for \$1.50 a performance. By 1936, he was part of a touring review called “Shuffle Along.” In 1937, while in Hollywood, Cole formed his own trio with Moore and Prince. As the Trio began to play out, Cole was eventually talked into singing and proved to have a melodious, romantic voice, perfect for numbers like “Sweet Lorraine.”

By the time Cole and company came to Capitol, Cole was the group’s designated singer.

After the success of “Straighten Up and Fly Right,” the Trio continued to have hits. Some of their oeuvre included “For Sentimental Reasons,” “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” “The Christmas Song,” “Mona Lisa,” “A Blossom Fell,” “Nature Boy,” and, of course, “Unforgettable.” The group proved so successful for Capitol Records that the impressive, landmark, circular tower Capitol eventually erected as its headquarters in LA is often referred to as “The House That Nat Built.”

In 1946, the Trio could be heard on radio in a summer replacement series. They played Carnegie Hall for the time in 1947 and toured Europe in 1950. From 1956 to 1957, Cole hosted his own primetime NBC-TV variety show, the first African-American artist ever to do so.

Though his television effort was not a lasting success, it did little to dampen his nightclub and recording career. Later Cole hits included “Send for Me,” “Looking Back,” and “Ramblin’ Rose.” He was still charting one year prior to his death from lung cancer when his song “I Don’t Want to See Tomorrow” made it to #34 in 1964.

That was not, however, Cole’s final trip up the charts. In 1991, Cole’s eldest daughter, Natalie Cole, “dueted” with her father on a remake of her father’s 1952 hit “Unforgettable” by singing along with his legendary track. Their rendition went all the way to #14 on the pop charts and would go on to win the Grammy for Record of the Year.

As mentioned above, since entering the lexicon, “Straighten Up and Fly Right” has been adopted and adapted to a variety of styles and endeavors. The song lends itself well to scat and other vocal inflections and, hence, many a jazz singer has taken it on. Meanwhile, its fun lyrics and melody even makes it a kid-friendly sing-along.

Since Cole’s original rendition, other performers have recorded “Straighten Up and Fly Right.” In 1944, Patty, Maxene and LaVerne--better known as the Andrews Sisters--had a hit with it. Later, country acts Neal McCoy, Bob Wills and Lyle Lovett would record it. As would British crooner Robbie Williams and jazz chanteuse Diane Krall. And Linda Ronstadt covered it as part of her exploration of the Great American Songbook in the 1980s. Quite memorably, Ella Fitzgerald and Natalie Cole performed an impromptu version of the song at the 1990 Grammy Awards.

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