

Nat King Cole Biography Mini-Unit



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A Mini-Unit Study by [Look! We're Learning!](#)

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Nat King Cole was an American jazz singer who became famous during the 1940s. He was born as Nathaniel Adams Coles on March 17, 1919, in Montgomery, Alabama. Nathaniel, who was soon nicknamed “Nat”, was the fourth child of Edward James Coles and Perlina Coles and the older children doted on him.

Black people who lived in Montgomery, Alabama during the 1920s had very few opportunities for work or education, so Mr. and Mrs. Coles decided to move the family up north to Chicago, Illinois when Nat was four years old. Soon after arriving in the city, Mr. Coles, who was a preacher, began serving at one of Chicago’s South Side churches.

All of the Coles children played music at the church, including young Nat, who learned to play the instrument by ear. Nat’s older brother, Eddie, had learned to play several instruments including piano, bass, and tuba. When he began playing professionally with local jazz bands, young Nat often tagged along to watch. During these excursions, Nat got to observe some of the early jazz artists of the era such as Louis Armstrong, Jimmie Noone, and Earl Hines, who was nicknamed “Fatha”.

Nat continued playing the piano and the organ in church, but following his brother’s advice, he began

taking professional lessons so that he could learn to read music. Despite his natural ear for melody, Nat found that learning the technical aspects of piano playing, such as scales and chords, made it possible for him to play any song, which would be essential to a future career in music.



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As Nat's interest in jazz grew, he began to improvise during his performances in his father's church services. On more than one occasion, Nat received a stern talking-to from his father, who did not approve of jazz music. Often, though, Mr. Coles only had to raise an eyebrow at Nat, who would then quickly resume playing in the traditional music style.

In 1935, Nat decided to begin playing jazz music full-time. Eddie helped him put together a new group to play with, called the Solid Swingers. The band got its first recording session with Decca Records under its "Sepia Series" label, which produced music that catered to African-Americans. While the band didn't garner much notice, critics were impressed by Nat's piano playing, which resembled the sound of his idol, Earl Hines.

By the time Nat began touring, he had dropped the “s” from his last name, performing under the name Nat Cole, the “Prince of the Ivories.” Eventually, Nat went on the road with a live production of the musical “Shuffle Along”. When the tour came to an end in Los Angeles, Nat decided to stay in the city with his new wife, Nadine.

Times were hard for the couple, since Nat was unable to book many well-paying gigs. After finally putting together a trio of his own in 1938, the “King Cole Swingers”, Nat began playing at local jazz clubs and venues around the area. Much of the trio’s popularity came about due to its performances on radio broadcast shows.



Image c/o: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

million copies.

The King Cole Swingers got their first recording deal with a new record label, Capitol Records, in 1943. Nat’s first big hit for the label was the song “Straighten Up and Fly Right”, which he wrote based on one of his father’s early sermons. The song was a huge success for Nat and for Capitol Records, selling more than half a

In 1946, Nat paid for the trio's own 15-minute radio broadcast, which was the first time an African-American artist had sponsored a radio show. As Nat's radio popularity grew, he began recording more songs for Capitol, including "Route 66", "Mona Lisa", and his most popular hit "Unforgettable".

In the year 1948, Nat divorced Nadine and married Maria Ellington, a jazz background singer. In 1950, the couple had a daughter, Natalie, who eventually grew up to become a successful jazz singer in her own right. Nat and Maria would go on to have two more daughters and adopt two other children during their marriage.



Image c/o: William P. Gottlieb via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Nat was becoming a wildly successful musician but not everyone wanted to see him do well. When he bought a house in Beverly Hills in 1948, the Ku Klux Klan placed a burning cross in his yard. When he returned to Montgomery, Alabama in 1956 to play a live show, four members of the White Citizens Brigade – a branch of the Ku Klux Klan – rushed the stage and beat him in the middle of the performance.

Instead of responding to these events with anger, Nat believed that it was best to win audiences over by continuing to perform his music. Nat was hesitant to get involved in politics and he routinely played at events where the audiences were separated based on race. However, he eventually joined the NAACP, became active in the Civil Rights Movement, and assisted in planning the 1963 March on Washington.



Image c/o: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Nat made history by becoming the first African-American to host a television show. NBC premiered *The Nat King Cole Show* in the year 1956. During the show's one-year run, several musical artists appeared on the program, including Ella Fitzgerald, Harry Belafonte, and Peggy Lee.

After the show ended, Nat continued performing in such cities as Las Vegas and Havana, as well as recording occasional television specials. However, at the height of his stardom, he was stricken with lung cancer. Nat died on February 15, 1965, at the age of forty-five. By the end of his career, Nat King Cole had sold more than nine million records. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in the year 2000.

Questions for Review:

1. In what city was Nat King Cole born?

2. What was Nat's birth name?

3. Why did the Coles family decide to move to Chicago?

4. Who helped Nat become interested in jazz music?

5. Name three early jazz artists who influenced Nat.

6. Where was the first place Nat began playing the piano?

7. What was the name of Nat's first jazz group?

8. In what year did Nat assemble his own jazz trio?

9. What was the name of Nat's first big hit?

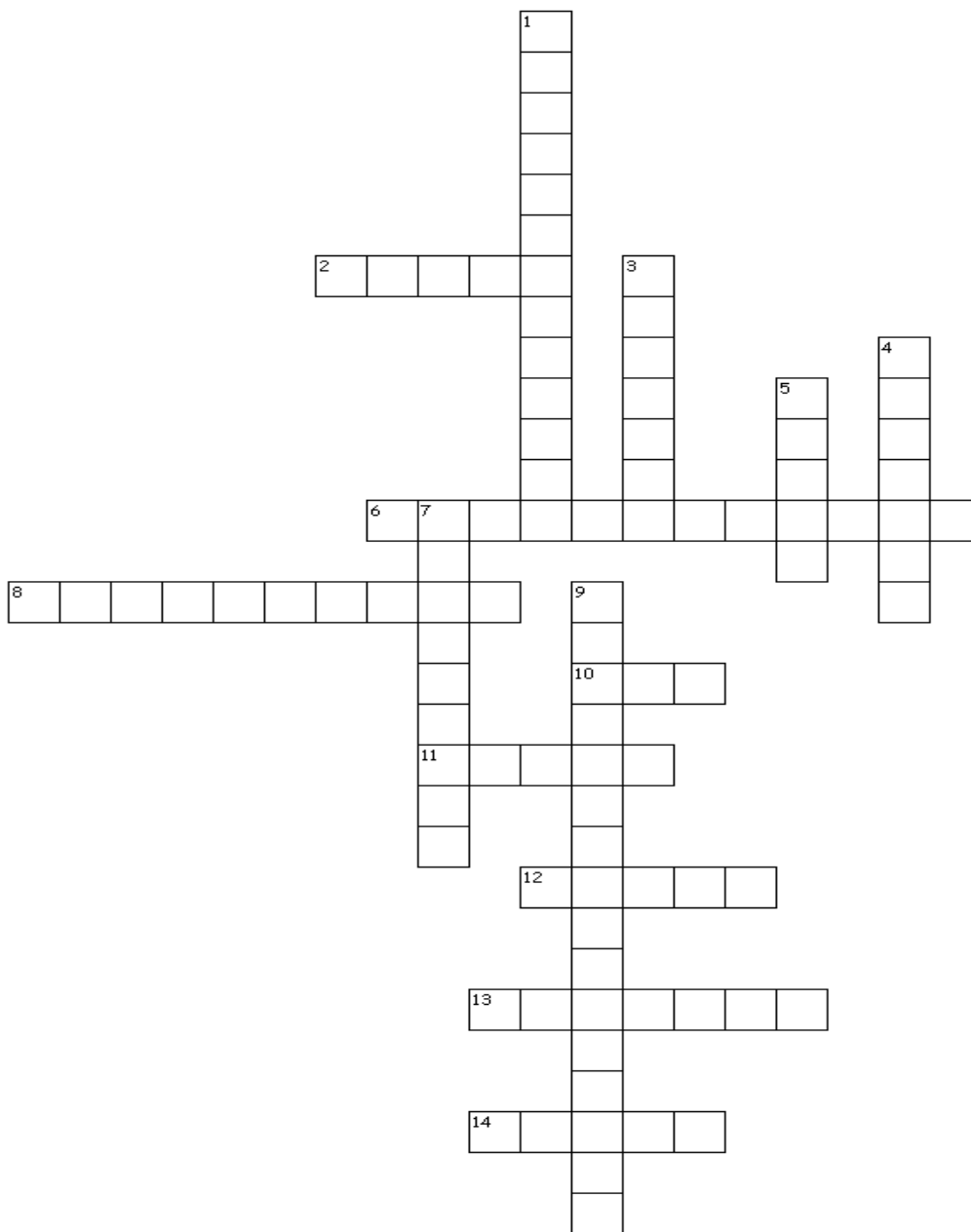
10. What happened when Nat returned to Montgomery to play a show in 1956?

11. What 1963 civil rights event did Nat help plan?

12. How did Nat make television history?

13. What honor did Nat receive in the year 2000?

Nat King Cole Crossword



Across

- 2. Name of Nat's older brother
- 6. City where Nat bought a house in 1948
- 8. City in which Nat was born
- 10. Network that aired Nat's TV show
- 11. Civil rights organization Nat joined
- 12. First record company Nat recorded with
- 13. City Nat's family moved to when he was four
- 14. How Nat first learned to play the piano

Down

- 1. Nat's most popular song
- 3. Record label Nat signed with
- 4. Name of Nat's daughter
- 5. Name of Nat's second wife
- 7. Jazz artist Nat admired most
- 9. Name of Nat's jazz trio

"Route 66" Copywork

If you ever plan to motor west, travel my way. Take the highway that is best. Get your kicks on Route 66.

It winds from Chicago to
LA, more than two
thousand miles all the
way. Get your kicks on
Route 66.

Questions for Review Answer Key:

1. Montgomery, Alabama
2. Nathaniel Adams Coles
3. Because black families did not have many opportunities in Montgomery, Alabama during the 1920s
4. His older brother, Eddie
5. Louis Armstrong, Jimmie Noone, and Earl Hines
6. At his father's church
7. The Solid Swingers
8. 1938
9. "Straighten Up and Fly Right"
10. He was attacked by four members of the White Citizens Brigade during the performance.
11. The March on Washington
12. He became the first African-American person to host a television show.
13. He was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Nat King Cole Crossword Answer Key:

ACROSS:

- 2. EDDIE
- 6. BEVERLYHILLS
- 8. MONTGOMERY
- 10. NBC
- 11. NAACP
- 12. DECCA
- 13. CHICAGO
- 14. BYEAR

DOWN:

- 1. UNFORGETTABLE
- 3. CAPITOL
- 4. NATALIE
- 5. MARIA
- 7. EARLHINES
- 9. KINGCOLESWINGERS

Bibliography:

*A note to parents – The following books and websites were used in the research for this mini–unit study. However, some of the books listed below are **NOT** children’s books and they feature themes about racism, language, and music that children may not be equipped to handle. Parents are advised to read the books themselves and then choose how to share the information with their children.*

Ruuth, Marianne: Nat King Cole – Singer and Jazz Pianist ©1992
Melrose Square Publishing

Haskins, James; Benson, Kathleen: Nat King Cole ©1984 Stein and
Day, Inc.

Gourse, Leslie: Unforgettable – The Life and Mystique of Nat King Cole
©1991 St. Martin’s Press

Cole, Maria; Robinson, Louie: Nat King Cole – An Intimate Biography
©1971 William Morrow & Company

Epstein, Daniel Mark: Nat King Cole ©1999 Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Wikipedia.org: Nat King Cole

PBS.org: American Masters – Nat King Cole