OCR AoS2: Nat King Cole's *After Midnight*

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Introduction

'Chestnuts roasting on an open fire...' For many adult listeners, just that line will prompt a surge of nostalgia for a bygone era, with its sweeping violins, clean guitar and Nat King Cole's peerless voice. For today's sixth formers, however, it might not have the same immediate connection, even though timeless classics from Cole's discography will be familiar to them from being piped out at Christmas. Most would recognise 'When I Fall in Love', for example, or 'Unforgettable' — particularly in its remastered 1991 version, where Cole's daughter Natalie overdubs the original in a duet.

Listening to Cole's voice is like putting on a comfy cardigan and slippers. It immediately relaxes you and smoothes out the creases of the day. He was a crooner when crooning was at its peak in the 1950s, and was as popular as Frank Sinatra, Perry Como or Dean Martin. But there is so much more to him as an artist, which is why OCR have picked him for their A level AoS2, Popular Song: Blues, Jazz, Swing and Big Band (for first assessment in 2020).

Nat King Cole pioneered the jazz trio, first gaining attention for his skills as a pianist, before becoming a mainstream recording artist for Capitol Records and selling over 50 million copies of his records during his career alone. He was the first African American to host a prime-time TV show, and made several stands for black civil rights.

This resource explores the breadth of his artistry and his influence, as well as appraising the four songs OCR have selected from his album *After Midnight*.

Cole's first big hit, 'Straighten Up and Fly Right' (1944), was based on a motto from one of his father's sermons.

Biography

Childhood and early influences

Nathaniel Adams Coles (he changed his name to Cole later, for phonetic reasons) was born in 1917, although exactly when remains unclear, as his family was poor and did not obtain a birth certificate. His father was a baptist minister and soon little Nat was recruited into playing in the gospel band at church. His mother had taught him the basics, but he was quick to explore for himself, performing in public for the first time aged just four. He was also schooled in classical piano and learned how to play different jazz styles. As a teenager, he sneaked into the back of clubs and venues to listen to groups play, and was particularly struck by the elegant style of Earl 'Fatha' Hines.

School did not hold much interest for him, and Nat left aged 15 to start touring in a band with his brother, Eddie, who played bass and sang. By 1935 he had formed his own group, the King Cole Swingsters, which was meant to be a four-piece until Lee Young, the drummer, failed to turn up for an important launch gig at the Swannee Inn in Los Angeles. Cole felt the sound benefited from the clarity of not having drums. That was how his standard trio format of piano, bass and guitar took shape. It was to remain that combination whenever he recorded as a trio.

What's in a name?

There are two stories surrounding Cole's 'coronation' as Nat King Cole. The most popular is that Nat and his brother were inspired by the nursery rhyme with its first line, 'Old King Cole was a merry old soul.' Another anecdote is that a female fan at one of his early concerts shouted out that he should be called 'King', since there was a 'Duke' Ellington and a 'Count' Basie. Either way, the nickname stuck.

Playing in a trio, however, was uncommon and uncommercial at a time when swing bands ruled the roost. A swing band would typically number 17 players or more, and would easily fill the stage. Venues and promoters were understandably dubious about Cole's ability to command the crowd with just him and two other players. But Cole persisted and, after a few initial albums recorded for Davis and Schwegler and then Decca, his trio hit the no. 1 on the American R&B billboard in 1941 with 'That Ain't Right', and held the top spot for 12 weeks in 1945.

The Cole trio first recorded for Capitol Records in 1943 (on the album *Harvest of Hits*), and from then on Cole was almost exclusively contracted to them. Capitol worked him hard, with tours around the States and then to Latin America and the Far East. His success grew accordingly, and by 1950 he was a household name.

Jazz or pop?

Cole started in the world of jazz, and aficionados cite his trio albums from the 1940s as being classics. On these, Cole mainly stars as the pianist, interspersing the instrumental sound with a few vocal lines. Once recording producers heard his voice — invariably described as 'husky', 'silken' or 'velvety' in any review you will read — they encouraged him to step up to the mic and lead with his singing.

Eventually the trio broke up as Cole got more work as a frontman for swing bands, much to the dismay of his jazz fans who felt he had deserted the scene to sing 'easy listening' pop songs. They preferred to see him knocking out a great solo at the keys rather than perched on a high stool, crooning. What was the pioneer of the jazz piano trio doing singing corny numbers like 'The Christmas Song' or 'Stardust'?

In the 1950s, though, it was the high-profile work with jazz outfits such as the Nelson Riddle and Pete Rugolo orchestras that made Cole his fame.

As an example of this crooning style, students could watch 'Stardust' from his 1957 album *Love Is the Thing* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=sfzA_IeaKzo**). Cole is perfectly coiffed, standing in a blazer with a pocket square, one hand perched in a trouser pocket. The first line of the song sets the tone, delivered against a backdrop of shimmering tremolo violins:

And now the purple dusk of twilight time
Steals across the meadow of my heart...

Purple writing indeed. But if you listen closely, even here Cole shows his jazz sensibilities with the perfect placement of every phrase. Very rarely do the words fall on the beat. This is standard practice for any crooner, but Cole's rhythm has a particular musicality.

Cole continued to record one hit after another, but his success took an inevitable toll on his health, and his chain-smoking precipitated the decline. In one interview, he commended cigarettes as essential to his 'husky' tone and encouraged other singers to cultivate the habit.

He died tragically young, aged just 45, of lung cancer.

Influence and impact

By 1956, Cole's popularity was such that he was offered his own TV show (*The Nat King Cole Show*) that aired at prime time and featured the top acts of the day, including Peggy Lee, Count Basie and Tony Bennett. It only lasted a year, however, and Cole suspected a racial element to the network's reluctance to continue its sponsorship. That didn't stop him from pursuing some opportunities to star on the silver screen, however — mainly in bit parts, but with one starring role in the 1958 film *St Louis Blues*.

The very same year as the TV show aired, he was attacked by white supremacists during a mixed-race performance in Alabama. Cole's ability to reach across boundaries was clearly threatening to segregationists.

Cole asserted his civil rights where possible, suing hotels that did not admit him (even at the height of his fame), and moving into an all-white neighbourhood despite the disapproval of those peering through their net curtains. He stopped short, though, of becoming a mouthpiece for African American rights and avoided getting embroiled in the wider politics of the movement. This disappointed activists who would have welcomed his engagement for the cause, and who criticised him for not making the most of his influence.

Cole's musical influence, however, was undisputed. Oscar Peterson said he learned much by observing Cole's piano solos, and many singers, including modern balladeers such as Diana Krall and Jamie Cullum, have cited him as a major influence. Qualities that are often recalled are Cole's clear enunciation, the smoothness of his vocal tone, his deft self-accompaniment and the melodiousness of his piano solos.

All of these are on brilliant display in *After Midnight*, a trio album that features some of Cole's favourite collaborators.

After Midnight: a classic album?

When it came out in 1956, *After Midnight* was not an immediate success. Listeners had grown used to hearing Cole with a big band, and the sound of the trio seemed stripped back, lacking the veneer they had come to expect. It has since become a classic and a stand-out album in Cole's distinguished discography. It was re-released on CD in 1987 with five extra tracks taken from the original recording session.

After Midnight features many of Cole's favourite numbers, including 'Sweet Lorraine' and 'Route 66'. He is joined by guest artist on each of the tracks, 'just as visiting musicians might drop by at a club after midnight and play a tune with the group', as the writer of the original liner notes puts it (**http://albumlinernotes.com/Complete_After_Midnight.html**). The same liner notes open in a memorable way:

***After Midnight* is the witching hour of music - the time when the old songs bring back the old memories and the time when musicians play the tunes they like and settle into what they like to call 'a good groove'.**

The album is billed as a trio release, though all the tracks feature a quintet: Cole's core quartet and a guest.

Album-naming and trainspotting

Jazz fans are very particular about naming the contributors to any album, as well as the basic information around the recording label and the year of its first and subsequent releases. It is the equivalent of knowing the date of composition, opus number and key centre of a piece of classical music. Such information-hoarding can reach an obsessive level for some in the jazz community. In keeping with this 'house style', students could be encouraged to remember the main players on Cole's key albums, along with their first release dates.

Each track was recorded 'as live', with no stitching together of edits in post-production. The guest artists were all at the top of their game, mainly from the world of swing. Most had won awards or played under Ellington or Basie. By this stage Cole only collaborated with the highest calibre of musicians.

The main quartet are:

- Nat Cole, piano and vocals
- John Collins, guitar
- Charlie Harris, bass
- Lee Young, drums

Guest musicians are:

- Harry 'Sweets' Edison, trumpet
- Willie Smith, alto sax
- Juan Tizol, trombone
- 'Stuff' Smith, violin
- Jack Costanzo, percussion

OCR's prescribed tracks and commentary

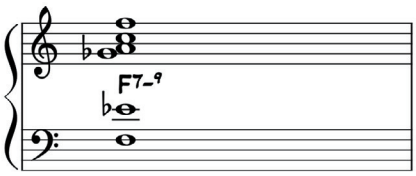
'Caravan'

'Caravan' was co-written by the trombonist on this track, Juan Tizol, and the great bandleader Duke Ellington. The original (**https://open.spotify.com/track/3KQpegHr3KPJObA3AIq3Jc?si=QLHzhh3GQ3S1s9QS28s1BA**) opts for a medium swing tempo. The standard has been covered and recorded by at least 350 artists, and is given a super-charged version in the 2014 film *Whiplash* (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZY-Ytrw2co**), which would be a good way of drawing students in.

'Caravan' summons an image of Arab traders crossing the Sahara with their precious goods laden on camels. The lyrics speak of lovers journeying under the stars, her sleeping on his shoulder as he hopes for this memory to live on in their dreams.

Its exotic, Arab sound comes through combining:

- a busy, Afro-latin rhythm on the bongos.
- a silky, chromatic melody.
- a minor 9th chord:



The track opens with a three-note groove high on the double bass, C-E flat-F. It sounds as if the F should be the target note and therefore the downbeat, but this is soon upset by the percussion, which puts the 'one' on the C.

Tizol outlines an F7 chord on the tenor range of his trombone, immediately introducing the soft, vibrato-rich sound that will define this track. Cole soon enters with the first line, which he characteristically places just behind the beat.

The melody in the verse snakes its way around the minor 9th (G flat), 11th (B flat) and 7th (E flat) before a chromatic descent to the words 'that shines upon our caravan'. Students could try soloing over the groove using a B flat harmonic minor scale starting on F – or F Phrygian dominant, to use its other modal name.

The texture is spare, with the electric guitar (clean sound, with plenty of treble) laying the chords on the downbeat. As ever, Cole's voice sounds completely unforced and natural. There are no gimmicks or affectation, just a beautifully clear delivery of the line.

To the words of the bridge, 'This is so exciting', the bass and drums kick into a swing beat, double-time, and Cole starts comping on the piano with bright chords. Having been static during the verse (F7min9 – Bbm), the harmonies now shift pace as well, moving through a cycle of 5ths:

Bb7m9 – Eb7add9
Ab7 – Dbmaj7

In typical jazz comping style, Cole puts in some 'approach' chords to the above, arriving on them either from above or below.

A single vocal verse follows, rounded off by the three-note off-beat riff in unison. The trombone plays the melody twice through, punctuated by Cole rocking between Bbm and E flat. Cole sparkles in a brief solo over the bridge chords above, bouncing on the top B flat before rippling through some broken-chord ideas.

After this solo, the comping is now more energised and accented. A brief reprise of the verse follows, then the song fades to a close, over in under three minutes. So much textural variety has been achieved in so little time.

'It's Only a Paper Moon'

This song started life as a ditty from the little-remembered Broadway play *The Great Magoo*. It was written by Harold Arlen in 1933, and subsequent versions by Cole, Ella Fitzgerald (**https://open.spotify.com/track/373yGkNo74RZgmQgTiR8xK?si=ijI-EeWoQ-6sepiX5D8zrA**) and Benny Goodman (**https://open.spotify.com/track/1sua8x5CoiuHzCjGiVxB95?si=PMQgBbPgQAugwdVGraTOew**) ensured it became a standard in the American Songbook. Needless to say, their versions make for great comparative listening.

Cole leans towards the mid-tempo swing taken by Goodman and his big band, which fits the devil-may-care quality of the song. Everything in this life is superficial and make-believe, say the lyrics, and the only thing that matters is whether you believe in each other.

The song follows a standard ABA structure. Cole's introduction has a rock 'n' roll riff on the electric guitar over a pedal C in the bass, which then 'walks' on the beat in classic swing style.

The melody features jaunty leaps up the octave and 7th, and is mostly syncopated. The verse harmonies are the standard pattern of I-VI-ii-V in F, passing to the subdominant (B flat) in the final line. A diminished chord on F sharp substitutes for VI (D), and that chromatic movement (F-F sharp-G) is echoed in the chorus (B flat-Bdim-F/C).

Cole uses tetrachords mainly – minor 7ths, 6ths or diminished chords – and avoids anything harmonically more complex, allowing a carefree 'feel' and space for the solos. Notice how much space he gives in his comping, never clouding the vocal line. Sometimes he plays in unison off-beats with the bass for emphasis, for example the pushed beats under 'Without your love' in the B section.

Having just added a few single-note comments over the verse, Harry 'Sweets' Edison takes the first solo on trumpet, keeping his Harmon mute in for that buzzy, jazzy tone. The solo is mainly about timing and uses the F minor blues scale. John Collins picks up the solo on guitar over the middle eight, with some more arpeggiated ideas. Edison finishes with the final, A2 section.

Cole solos over the whole structure, again keeping it simple but effective. He eventually trades two-bar solos with Edison, who urge each other higher with each sentence. The riff from the introduction is reprised and the band sews it all neatly up with a version of the 'Ellington' ending (**www.youtube.com/watch?v=_noekgS44EQ**).

'Blame It on my Youth'

This is a beautiful slow ballad from the American Songbook, written in 1934 and first recorded by the Dorsey Brothers and then Bing Crosby. Arguably the most famous version, however, is by Cole, and it has continued to inspire jazz artists across the generations, including a cover by Jamie Cullum on his first album, 2004's *Twentysomething*.

The song is about the naivety of youth and a young person's sure-fire optimism in a new relationship – and disillusionment when it fails. It's bittersweet, and the slow tempo allows for both reflection and melancholy.

Cole gives a gentle introduction on the piano, mainly 6th chords with a tasteful G7#11 on the final pivot into the verse. The brushes on the kit and the steady pizzicato on the bass (mostly on the root or 5th of the chord) set a gentle pulse and hushed tone. Cole sounds particularly rich in the middle register of the verse, and each phrase is answered by muted trombone, whose line is eventually extended into a chromatic countermelody.

The piano takes up this countermelodic role in the next half of the verse. The melodic shaping is exquisite in the tune to this song, as it peaks right on the final word of the final line, drawing the listener in one sweep from beginning to end.

Tizol repeats the verse melody, with Cole embroidering it as the guitar plays down-strokes on the beat with the bass. As Cole takes off on a short solo, it's interesting how his 'time-feel' (a jazz concept around how the playing relates to the beat) subtly switches up a gear. His phrasing is immaculate and he uses interesting intervallic jumps to create a colourful line, while keeping it all understated. Everybody is so tonally blended on this track that nothing sticks out.

Cole reprises the words one last time, and the trombone brings the song to close by passing through some flat keys (E flat and A flat, substitute harmonies) before settling back to C major.

'When I Grow Too Old to Dream'

This track immediately follows the one above on the LP, moving the listener from a slow to mid-tempo swing. It started life in 1934 as a blues waltz, but many covers change it to a 4/4 swing.

'Stuff' Smith sets the song going on his close-miked violin – he is credited as being the first violinist to use electric amplification on the instrument. His style recalls the 'hot jazz' sound of the 1920s, and he often partnered with legendary violinist Stéphane Grappelli on recordings. Here, though, he is happy to provide a laid-back commentary to the vocal line. The piece is in D flat, an awkward key for a string player, which makes Smith's nonchalant playing all the more impressive.

Smith uses double-stopping to give occasional heft, and plenty of glissandos throughout to bend the tone. This is matched by Cole with some vocal bends of his own — 'So kiss me' (0:45) is the most drawn-out one, but once you listen closely, a lot of the notes have bluesy inflections, and he seems to relish the 'gravel' of his bass register.

Smith has a large soloing role on this track, sharing some of the limelight with guitar for variety. In the last verse, he does some typical 'horn'-style stabs behind Cole's voice to accentuate the swing rhythm. The last four bars (a standard ii-V-I cadence) get repeated twice to provide a neat tag-line to conclude, again with an 'Ellington' ending (see above).

The 'horn' section in jazz parlance includes the typical line-up of saxes and brass in a swing band.

Conclusion

The album *After Midnight* represents Cole at the peak of his appeal, bringing together his jazz technique at the keyboard and his inimitable vocal delivery. Jazz fans were delighted to hear him in this small-ensemble format again, while the songs still had a wide reach for the pop market.

Cole remained busy recording until his untimely death just under a decade later, even though rock 'n' roll began to dent his high listings on the billboards. For many, *After Midnight* epitomises his style and sound, and is his finest hour.