

TALKING POINT

Nat King Cole

"Dignity and humility marked Nat King Cole even when his records and night clubs engagements were bringing in millions. He weathered success just as calmly as he took the blows and insults sometimes hurled at him because of his colour."

- Los Angeles Herald-Examiner, Feb. 18, 1965.

"Nature gave him the gift of song which work and self-discipline converted into a nation's prized treasure... Hard as it is to accept the notion that 'death is a debt we all must pay', it is doubly hard when the victim is someone as young and talented as Nat King Cole."

- New York Post.

From this eastern part of Africa, we join the world of musicians and music lovers in mourning the death of this famous American Negro singer and pianist and band leader. Cole started from 25 dollars a week as the pianist in his trio to 10,000 dollars a week as a singer of great renown. He sold 50,000,000 copies of his recordings and was still rated high on the list of recording artists when he finally gave in to an onslaught of lung cancer, dying at the age of 45.

Besides his wife, Cole has left three daughters including three-year-old twins, two adopted children, three brothers and a sister. His mother died in 1955; his father's death preceded his by two weeks.

Nat King Cole was born of a Baptist minister in Montgomery, Alabama. At the age of 4 he was taken to Chicago. His mother was the only music teacher he ever had and he played "Yes we have no Bananas" at the age of 4. Cole went to California with a musical show, "Shuffle Along" which went bankrupt in 1937. He married a dancer and divorced in 1946.

After the show had collapsed in 1937, Cole played piano, as he put it, "in almost every beer joint from San Diego to Bakersfield," until he landed a job for his jazz quartet in Hollywood. The drummer failed to turn up for the performance, and so the Nat King Cole Trio was formed whose fame was to resound the world over. On the guitar was Oscar Moore and on string bass Wesley Prince. They created a style of their own that set generations swinging.

A bar customer is said to have once ordered Cole to sing a song. "We do not sing," Nat said. The manager whispered to Nat that the customer was a great spender and was therefore valuable to the bar. This is how the satin-husky voice was born, a voice that was to compel millions of listeners to hang on the singer's lips while the instrumentalists wove a magic web round them with their cool style.

Cole's own composition, "Straighten up and Fly Right" gave the trio a kick-off in 1943 and he was on his way to the stars.

He married again in 1947, this time to Maria Ellington, a vocalist in the Duke Ellington Band - but not a relation to Duke. His recording of the haunting "Nature Boy" was then the rage in the popular-music world.

Nat King Cole appeared in several films. His night-club appearances were innumerable, and he had engagements in Europe, Latin America and Australia. Each of three successive yearly shows in Las Vegas earned him 500,000 dollars.

When he bought a mansion in a fashionable part of Los Angeles, the white community became alarmed and sticky. One offered to buy him out at the purchase price plus half so as to remove his black presence. Nat declined the offer. The sour property owners sent a lawyer to Nat. He told Nat, "We do not want undesirable people coming in here." "Neither do I," Nat replied with a smile, "and if I see any undesirable people coming in, I'll be the first to complain."

The government soon caught up with Cole for income tax arrears and decided to attach his house for payment. He worked himself to bleeding-ulcer point in order to pay off the debt at 1,000 dollars a week and keep the house. Half his stomach had to be removed by the surgeons. During a performance in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1956, six white hooligans leapt onto the stage and manhandled the musician. He was saved by the police, apologised to the audience, and continued the performance amidst an unbroken applause of more than 20 minutes.

Before he died, many residents in his area who once were up in arms were bragging about having Nat King Cole for a neighbour. He gave out moneys generously for the Negro civil rights cause and was a life member of the National Council for the Advancement of Coloured People.

These were the fluctuating fortunes of Nat King Cole. City, county and state governments all over U.S. passed resolutions in his honour. The public mourning was the greatest ever accorded to a popular-music entertainer, with nearly 4,000 spectators taking places along the boulevard leading from the church - as early as three hours before the funeral service - while more than 500 were in the church itself.

Nat King Cole's name and that of his trio will remain to honour the front-line position this Negro musician held in American entertainment.

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On the Stage

African Theatre Company performed The Prodigal Son, a musical drama in three parts in Jericho Hall (Saturday 6 March at 8 pm); Pumwani Hall (Sunday 7 March at 3.30pm) and at Eastleigh Community Centre (Saturday 13th March at 8 pm). This play was originally written in English by Bob Leshoi, a South African refugee now studying for a senior degree in theatre arts at the University of Illinois, U.S.A. It was translated into Swahili and adapted to local conditions. Negro spirituals, East African "pop" music, African folk music were used. The performance undoubtedly surpassed the company's debut last July, even although the audiences this year was thin, except at Eastleigh. The company will take this play to several other places during the coming months; the first will possibly be the University College, Nairobi.

Chemchemi is encouraged to keep on its educational mission. We are creating an audience and must grow with it. The sense of drama is not alien to Africans. From this point of view we are not bringing an entirely new form of entertainment. Yes, the techniques are new, but not the basic medium through which we represent life in a public place. Our audiences generally do not know that it is encouraging to the actors to clap hands between acts or spontaneously when an impressive actor moves them. But does it necessarily mean that the play is "beyond"

them? It does not. A gasp, a click of the tongue, a sigh, a laugh, are some of the gestures that are used to express their emotions. And then we have to consider the social conventions of the people who make up the audiences. A large number of people think that to clap hands is to show approval not of the quality of the acting but of the real-life part represented in the play. They would, for example, be chary of applauding after the Prodigal Son's acting, lest they be understood to be approving the loose living such a character would indulge in in real life. Our people have always been cut off from theatre in town. In the meantime, other and more obviously exciting mass media have stepped in: sound radio and T.V. (for all the trash they dish out), cheap trashy films, all for which they need only walk to the nearest community centre.

And so the battle for the people's minds continues: who will win? A cultural centre in Africa cannot, like a commercial art gallery in developed countries, afford to cater only for the elite. It has to be a functional institution and serve the needs of adult or extra-mural education while stimulating the creative talents in all people. This is what determines the content and style of our theatre, and the functions of our art gallery and music. We are, for example, no longer going to exhibit merely for the sake of attracting viewers to our gallery. What we put on must serve as an educational medium for those who paint and sculpt in the studio. Those who want "culture" to dress up for can find other institutions for the purpose! East Africa, more than any other part of Africa, with the exception of French-speaking West Africa, teems with such institutions.

Red Robin Players

On February 5th this theatre group performed King Solomon's Judgement at Chemchemi Creative Centre - a play written by Anda Amir, an outstanding Hebrew poetess working at the Israeli Embassy in Nairobi. She has been directing the group which is based at Eastleigh Community Centre. She had already been instructing the Red Robin Players in acting when the Director of Chemchemi directed them to produce The Return of Motalane, which was acted in a crowded hall at Eastleigh Community Centre last August. The Chemchemi performance was a symbolic event, for on that day Mrs. Amir presented Chemchemi with the Red Robin Players. From now onwards they will be directed by Chemchemi Creative Centre and will act as our branch at Eastleigh. For this we are most grateful to her. We are also grateful to the Rev. Joedd Miller, warden of Eastleigh Community Centre, for having made it possible for a dramatic group to take root and grow at his centre, and for the organizational work he put in right from the ground floor.

Music

Chemchemi Music Makers are doing gratifyingly well in their adaptation of African Music. They gave another good performance during the first intermission of The Prodigal Son production. They are preparing for a concert at the moment.

Art

The exhibition now on in the gallery is of Peter Clarke's (South African coloured painter) lithographs, lino-cuts, drawings and etchings. It will last till April 14.

Forthcoming Exhibitions

April 15 - Francis Musango and Mordecai Buluma (Ugandan painters in a two-man show.

June 15 - Contemporary Indian art, specially being available to Chemchemi by Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi.

Maendeleo ya Wanawake

This organization has been permitted, at its request, to occupy part of Chemchemi studio for its handweaving activity. Soon its loom will be turning and work proceeding. Part of the studio will remain for the painters. We are happy to be able to accommodate the weaving group. Mrs. Jael Mbogo, president of Maendeleo and Miss Sonya Belin the spinning and weaving instructress, have already shown us some of the articles they have begun to make, using home-grown cotton, and they show a high standard of workmanship. We will exhibit the articles as soon as enough have been turned out.

Writers' Workshop

We have just ended one writers' workshop at Chemchemi and one at the Girls' High School in Machakos. These workshops were attended by 24 and 25 participants respectively - very encouraging numbers indeed. The Director conducted both, giving weekly talks on the short-story for 6 weeks.

It is gratifying to report that these two classes were most responsive and challenging, much more so than last year's. The lively interest shown at Machakos is all the more evidence of the self-realization that secondary school pupils are capable of. This class was composed of selected students from Form III and IV from both the girls' and the boys' high schools of Machakos. They never took in the lecturer's words like mere sponges: they questioned and challenged and suggested solutions.

About October next we shall conduct general lectures and discussions connected with writing for those of the participants and others who may want to attend.

A New Chemchemi Branch Formed

A new branch has been formed at the University College, Nairobi, through the initiative of its department of English. It is the Literary and Dramatic Society, the committee of which consists of:

President:	Mr. Muhsin Alidina
Creative Writing:	Miss Rosalind Ndambiri
Music:	Mr. Christopher Wang'ombe
Fine Art:	Miss Farida Premji
Theatre:	Mr. Sherman Leonard
Forum Discussion:	Mr. David Mutua
Chief Communicator:	Mr. E.S. George

The Society is planning to stage John Galsworthy's play "Justice" shortly. Chemchemi African Theatre Company are preparing to perform The Prodigal Son at the College under the sponsorship of the new branch.

From the Director's Diary

The Director of Chemchemi Creative Centre will be away in Israel visiting theatres and observing producers and actors at work, from March 18 - June 18. This trip has been made possible by the Israeli Government in order to help strengthen indigenous theatre in Kenya. Mr. Aminu Abdullahi, the Nigerian Jazz critic who conducted our recent jazz workshop, will act on behalf of the Director.

E. A. CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION - 1964

AWARD OF PRIZES

The E. A. Creative Writing Committee has great pleasure in announcing the following awards for the 1964 Creative writing Competitions. In the English Novel section a Second Prize of Sh. 500/- goes to Rebecca Njau, Principal of Nairobi Girls' Secondary School and wife of the artist Elimo Njau, for her MS Alone With the Fig Tree. In the Luganda Novel, Mr. E. K. Kibirige of Kampala also wins a Second Prize of Sh. 500/- for Mukeera. The Luganda Play competition produced a First Prize winner in Mr. A. S. Bukenya's play Lubalambeera, which was awarded Sh. 800/-. Mr. Bukenya is at Namilyango College in Uganda. The English Poetry section produced the best crop of prize-winners, with a First Prize of Sh. 500/- going to Mr. W. D. Kamera of Arusha for his poem, "The Leaves are Withered". Mr. E. K. Bawuuba, a student at Makerere University College, wins a Second Prize of Sh. 250/- for "Cumbersome Walls in Life," while Mr. K. C. Garg of Zanzibar (with "Reflection" and "This Suffering") and Mr. F. R. Longan of Arusha (for "The Brown Dust of its Wings") each wins a Third Prize of Sh. 100/-. The Committee hopes to arrange publication or performance of most of the ~~coming~~ ^{winning} entries.

Letters of commendation go to Mr. Henry Dugas for his MS novel I Want to Help my Country, to Mr. Godfrey Nyasulu for his Swahili play Wavivu, to Mr. C. G. Matovu for his Luganda play Kikunnunta n'Ebirevu, and to two young competitors in the English Poetry section, Miss Janette Osok of Ngiya Girls' High School, Nyanza, for "The Library Soliloquy", and Mr. John Ssemuwanja, a student at Makerere, for "In the Slum."

Results of the Swahili Novel and Luo (Lwo) Novel competitions will be announced shortly. Final judging of entries for these is still in progress. It was not possible to make any awards this year in the Swahili Play competition, owing to the poor standard of the entries.

The Committee announces that it is generally rather disappointed with the quality of 1964 entries in all sections. There is not as yet a sufficient response from adult writers or from people who are already involved with various literary groups and societies in East Africa, such as Chemchemi in Nairobi and the Writers' Club in Kampala. It is hoped that more response will be won from quarters of this kind in 1965, by channelling more of the Competition publicity through them.

For 1965 the Committee intends to repeat the Novel Competition in Swahili, Luo, English and Luganda, and to add Kikuyu to the accepted languages. The Poetry Competition will also be repeated, with Swahili and Luganda added to the competition languages in this section.

A Radio Play Competition in English, Swahili and Luganda is also being considered. Details of all the 1965 Competitions will be announced soon and competitors will have until 30th November to submit their entries. Meanwhile the Committee wishes to extend its thanks to all those who took part in the Competitions in 1964.

23rd February, 1965.

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