

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

History: A Cole song and ties to the desert

Tracy Conrad Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
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The sheet music for the tune “Straighten Up and Fly Right” says “Words and Music by Nat King Cole and Irving Mills.” But the story of the tune is much more complicated and features some of the biggest names in the music business, all with ties to the desert.

“Straighten Up and Fly Right” is also the title to a scholarly new book by Will Friedwald about the life and work of Nat King Cole. Friedwald is an expert on jazz and the American Songbook. He’s a prolific writer having contributed to The Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Village Voice, Newsday, The New York Observer, The New York Sun, Vanity Fair and countless other publications. Friedwald is jazz cognoscenti and has produced a book worthy of this most worthy subject.

“Straighten Up and Fly Right” is a swinging tune that is joyful while instructing the listener on deeper truths, spelled out in the slang of jazz.

*The buzzard took the monkey for a ride in the air
The monkey thought that ev’rything was on the square*

*The buzzard tried to throw the monkey off his back
The monkey grabbed his neck and said, “Now, listen, Jack*

Straighten up and fly right, straighten up and fly right

Straighten up and fly right, cool down papa, don’t you blow your top

Friedwald notes, “The tune was catchy, and the harmonies were solid — after all, it was based, like hundreds of other jazz originals, on the chord changes of “I Got Rhythm.” The story the song tells is an “Aesopian fable of power and trust” and resonated perfectly with the world at war in 1943: learn to cooperate and live harmoniously or face universal annihilation.

*Ain’t no use in divin’. What’s the use of jivin’?
Straighten up and fly right, cool down papa, don’t you blow your top*

*The buzzard told the monkey, “You are choking me
Release your hold and I will set you free”*

The monkey looked the buzzard right dead in the eye and said

*“Your story’s so touching, but it sounds just like a lie”
Straighten up and fly right, straighten up and stay right*

Straighten up and fly right, cool down papa, don’t you blow your top

The tune would be the very first big hit for Cole and his trio, and that success was directly due to music publisher Irving Mills.

Friedwald quotes an interview in 1959 where Cole explained, “In 1943, things were pretty rough. So, I took



Nat King Cole is seen at a young age in this undated photograph. COURTESY OF PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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some songs I had written to the music publishers to see if I could sell one. I sold ‘Straighten Up and Fly Right’ for fifty dollars, outright, no royalties.” Cole also agreed to let his buyer, Irving Mills put his name on the tune as co-writer. Cole sometimes explained further saying he needed to pay his hotel bill and fifty bucks would cover it.

Friedwald describes the sale as Cole’s “deal with the devil.” Mills could make the song a hit, but at the steep price of the credit and all the future royalties.

But Friedwald is careful to point out that Cole knew what he was doing, having made the calculation that Mills would make the tune a hit and the band’s star would rise with it. Mills almost immediately got the song placed on the most popular radio program in the

country, “The Kraft Music Hall” starring desert denizen Bing Crosby. The radio show was sometimes even broadcast from Palm Springs, in order to accommodate Crosby’s penchant for golf.

Mills’ publicity machine circulated notices to the newspapers, “a very catchy number recently composed by Nat Cole, head of the King Cole Trio...is fast catching on. Recently Bing Crosby featured the number...” Multiple groups soon recorded it or sang it live on the radio.

Mills then placed the tune in a feature motion picture, the unfortunately-titled “Here Comes Elmer,” and in an unrivaled feat got the Cole trio into the movie to perform it. The song was well on its way before Cole even got a chance to make a record of it.

Johnny Mercer, singer and songwriter, lived in the Mesa in Palm Springs and was a co-founder of Capitol Records. He’d been courting Cole for Capitol as they crossed paths in Los Angeles at Cole’s lounge gigs. “The record finally got made in November 1943. Nat King Cole, Oscar Moore and Johnny Miller faced the microphone for Capitol for the first time.”

The recording of “Straighten Up and Fly Right” was cut in that first session and was a major across-the-board national hit. Friedwald assesses, “Say what you like about Irving Mills, but he was a devil who delivered...Thanks to the combination of Capitol and Mills, Cole’s song became a late swing-era anthem.”

Mercer’s pursuit of Cole was astute and would pay countless dividends including funding the new Capitol headquarters in Hollywood (designed by Welton Beckett). The now iconic circular building was nicknamed, “the house that Nat built” as Cole charted popular tunes in astonishing numbers making for astronomical sales from then on. Cole would never again have to sell a song in order to pay a fifty-dollar hotel bill.

Irving Mills is often credited with launching the careers of Duke Ellington, Hoagy Carmichael and Cab Calloway, but his involvement with Cole is not as widely known.

Mills published some of the most important songs of the 20th century, “Stardust,” “Stormy Weather,” “Mood Indigo,” “Minnie the Moocher,” “Sophisticated Lady,” “Sweet Lorraine,” “Smile” and the obvious observation of the entire era of music, “It Don’t Mean a Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing.” Mills spent some seven decades in the music business and retired to a palatial home in Canyon Country Club in Palm Springs.

Cole also owned a house in Palm Springs, on Rose Avenue, and would create and record some of the biggest hits of the 20th century.

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