



## Back In Time

by Tony Beckwith  
tony@tonybeckwith.com

### Unforgettable

I've been listening to *Unforgettable*, Natalie Cole's album of duets sung with her father. The title track takes me back many years. They all do.

I remember exactly where I was when I heard over the radio that Nat King Cole had died. The beach in Uruguay; the hot sand; the sudden shock of sadness. February 15, 1965. I thought: so soon? Will there be no more songs like, "Mona Lisa, Mona Lisa, men have named you . . .?" How could we survive without that soothing, melodious voice? Why would we want to?

It was already a sad time for me. I would be leaving within a month—leaving Uruguay, the only country I had ever really known, a place I loved in ways that would take years to fully understand. A small group of us were on the beach that day, friends who had spent the summer together and were now about to be scattered to the winds. We sat still on our towels, listening to the radio and feeling the sadness and a deep sense of loss.

He was born in Montgomery, Alabama in 1917. Early in his career, Nat played the piano in a jazz trio. One night, a well-tipped nightclub *aficionado* insisted on hearing Nat sing a particular song, unwittingly nudging the piano man on to his life's work. It sounds like the plot for one of those old black & white movies about rising rock stars. Especially the scene where the wandering talent scout just happens to be in the audience.

In 1959, a few months before Fidel Castro's revolution, Nat decided to try his luck singing in Spanish. He went to Cuba to record some of the most famous romantic *boleros* of the time. In spite of Nat's amazing brand of Spanish, the album "*Cole español*" was an instant megahit in every Hispanic market. He later went to Brazil to record in Spanish and Portuguese. His third *español* album was recorded in Mexico in 1961. He came to Uruguay on tour and everybody went wild over him. We loved his outrageously phonetic Spanish and his hopelessly gringo vowels and we all began talking

like that amongst ourselves, and saying *Curumba!* the way Nat King Cole did. Radio stations pieced together snatches of lyrics from his songs to create elaborate "interviews" they claimed to have had with *Na-kin-col* himself, tapping into popular culture and humour to entertain their listeners. They asked questions like: "Will you be staying with us for a long time, Sr. Cole?" and then played him singing one of his signature songs at the time—*quizás, quizás, quizás*. Some of the vignettes were very funny and they all made him seem more like one of us. He was a real, live American star but he seemed to fit right in—we all thought he was grand.

The liner notes on Natalie's CD contain a few gems. And there is a marvelous photo of her father chatting to Louis Armstrong in a studio, with Ella Fitzgerald sitting nearby. Nat's 1963 version of *That Sunday That Summer* went to the top of the pop charts alongside the Beatles' *I Want To Hold Your Hand*. The line, *Straighten Up And Fly Right* (1943) came from one of his preacher father's sermons about a buzzard that took a monkey for a ride in the air. About *Non Dimenticar* (1958) Natalie says, "... as with all his foreign recordings, Nat learned the lyrics phonetically." But we already knew that.

The original version of *Unforgettable* was recorded in 1951. It was the first full teaming of Nat King Cole and arranger Nelson Riddle. In her live shows, Natalie began singing this song as a duet—with her father's voice on tape—and the idea evolved into the recording I've been enjoying today. As I listen to this music I am once again on the beach that February day in Portezuelo, listening to back-to-back Nat King Cole songs on the radio.

*That's why darling  
it's incredible  
that someone so unforgettable  
should find me so  
unforgettable too*

Who could forget a voice like that?