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## MUSIC REVIEW

# 'Hittin' the Ramp: The Early Years (1936-1943)' by Nat King Cole Review: A Master of the Keys

Before he built a formidable career as a singer, Cole was a great jazz pianist; a new set reminds us of his virtuosity.



Nat King Cole in 1945 PHOTO: CAPITOL RECORDS PHOTO ARCHIVE

*By Martin Johnson*

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**Suave, debonair** and almost impossibly refined, Nat King Cole possessed a voice to match his looks and demeanor; it was a warm, precise baritone, and those virtues made him one of the most popular and important singers in 20th-century music. Yet before he built a formidable career as a singer, Cole (1919-1965) was a great jazz pianist—a

pivotal musician of his era. He is the bridge between such giants of the instrument as Earl "Fatha" Hines and Teddy Wilson and the postwar era's Oscar Peterson and Ahmad Jamal.

Cole's piano virtuosity is a major feature of "Hittin' the Ramp: The Early Years (1936-1943)," a new boxed set of seven compact discs or 10 LPs from Resonance Records. Most of the 183 tracks present Cole's extraordinary trio featuring guitarist Oscar Moore and bassist Wesley Prince or Johnny Miller, an ensemble that set the template for many of the drummer-free outfits that followed.



Cole, who dropped out of high school in his native Chicago, began his career early; while still a teenager he was leading his trio in Los Angeles. He often recorded for transcription services, companies that made recordings specifically for radio broadcast, and "Hittin' the Ramp" is a comprehensive collection of these, many of which have been out of print for decades. The music is a far cry from the lush balladry of his signature hits

"Unforgettable" and "Mona Lisa." Instead, the trio performs jump blues and jivey shuffles with enthusiastic creativity. It's easy to imagine Cole and his bandmates eagerly putting their spin on every song they can get their hands on. They perform popular songs of earlier eras like "Sheik of Araby" and "Swanee River," emerging jazz classics like "Caravan" and "Body and Soul," and even nursery rhymes like "Three Blind Mice." Each tune is rearranged—and in some cases all but reinvented—boosted by virtuosic solos and exhilarating interplay. It is this spirit that makes the set

enjoyable throughout; there's an unmistakable sense of master musicians spreading their wings.

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This collection is a showcase not only for Cole's piano but for Moore's guitar. Moore (1916-1981)—a brilliant musician who rarely worked in any other setting and retired from the business at an early age—contributes bluesy accents and biting solos to these tunes, often offsetting Cole's droll brilliance. His style is also a link between early guitar greats like Eddie Durham, Eddie Lang and Charlie Christian and such later ones as Wes Montgomery, Grant Green and Kenny Burrell. One of the essays in the 56-page booklet

included in the set is a well-deserved appreciation of Moore.



Wesley Prince, Nat King Cole and Oscar Moore, circa 1938 PHOTO: MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

The Cole ensemble was originally formed as a quartet, but the drummer didn't show up at a gig, and Cole decided that he liked the rhythmic freedom offered by the trio. That makes it all the more intriguing to hear Cole when paired with other masters like saxophonists Lester Young and Dexter Gordon or trumpeter Harry "Sweets" Edison. Cole alternates between deferential accompaniment and pushing the music forward with subtle inflections.

There's more than seven hours of music in this box, and though it yields significant pleasure digested as a whole, it inspires curatorial approaches toward the repertoire. One could build a playlist around the trio's inventive takes on classic tunes, or could compile the numbers that have a late-night, basement-jam-session aura, such as "King

Cole Blues,” “Jivin’ With the Notes” and “Trompin’.” And there are several performances that hint at the stardom to come. Vocal numbers like “Sweet Lorraine,” “My Lips Remember Your Kisses” and “Let’s Pretend” show Cole’s distinctive croon taking shape. In addition, there are two versions of another Cole staple, “Straighten Up and Fly Right,” each somewhat different from the more popular version recorded later in his career.

“Hittin’ the Ramp” is an apt title for this box. In the years that followed, Cole’s stardom rose. In 1946, he began hosting “King Cole Trio Time,” a radio show. Then, in November 1956—near the peak of his fame—“The Nat King Cole Show” had its television debut on NBC, the first such program with a black host. The variety series lasted only a year, however, due to a lack of national sponsorships.

Cole’s work has been frequently repackaged. There are boxes capturing many phases of his career and many of his dozens of hits. “Hittin’ the Ramp” rises above the pack. With its authoritative presentation and comprehensive discography featuring many rarities and previously unreleased tracks, it stands as an apt prequel to the 1991 release “The Complete Capitol Recordings of the Nat King Cole Trio,” one of the gold standards in historical recordings. This box highlights a restless, creative soul in his earliest recordings.

—*Mr. Johnson writes about jazz for the Journal.*

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