

Saving Nat “King” Cole

A media historian suggests an intriguing reason NBC never gave up on Cole’s doomed 1957 TV variety show. **By Bob Pondillo**

The unfolding of history might be compared to unfurling a length of fabric. Sometimes the material comes in whole bolts, other times it’s a patchwork of holes with thin strands connecting to still more holes—sort of like your grandmother’s doilies. It’s within these holes that we often find history’s most baffling mysteries, beguiling because there is little if any documentation that can confirm or deny a satisfying conclusion. Filling in the gaps requires historians to work much like detectives, reinterpreting existing eras for motives that could possibly explain what animated unusual behavior in historic actors. The following then, is an unabashed detective yarn, one of clues, gap filling and deductions set in New York City during the great Cold War of last century. Its central characters: a black man, a white man and a new technology—television. At stake: the way TV would be used to help a nation and a world “see” a different 1950s America.

My story begins at the end of World War II against the backdrop of extreme race hatred and division in the United States. Segregation was a contumacious institution in

postwar America. Unyielding in the South in the late 1940s and 1950s, poll taxes, racial discrimination, and a half-century of “separate but equal” ideology haunted the era. Even in the North rabid strains of racism thrived from the 1930s to 1960s. Shameful discrimination by city zoning boards as well as by homeowners, real estate agents and lending institutions resulted in *de facto* residential apartheid. This discrimination produced segregated neighborhoods, schools, public recreational facilities and private shopping areas. Segregation in the “tolerant” Northwest was not much better. In some Spokane restaurants, “No Colored Patronage Solicited” notices were displayed and a racist suggestion posted at the Idaho border read: “Nigger, Read This Sign and Run.” In virtually all regions of the nation after World War II white people could still call an adult black man “boy.” This turbulent postwar period saw the lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till for whistling at a white woman and the rise of so-called Southern White Citizens Councils—the KKK in suits—to oppose *Brown v. Board of Education* and keep Jim Crow intact. It was the



decade that President Eisenhower sent federal troops with loaded rifles and unsheathed bayonets to Little Rock ensuring that nine black teens could walk to school without harm from seething white mobs. Commercial TV was introduced to America in these racially unstable times. Many saw television as both godsend and plague

and it was still unclear if broadcasting images of black Americans into white middle-class homes would work to soften racial hatred or reproduce and strengthen it.

After the war, America also felt the stirrings of a determined black middle-class especially in Chicago, New York and other large urban centers.

Enrollment for African-American college students was up by 1000 percent and black unemployment fell to 4 percent. *Ebony* magazine crowed about the new purchasing power of African-Americans, noting black consumers outspent their white counterparts in most categories of durable goods. The dawn of the civil rights era was on the horizon as well. Yet despite the rising wind of social change, and the exception of a few acknowledged entertainers and sports figures, black stereotypes remained the order of the day in most popular mass entertainment. Although toned down considerably after the war, variations on the shiftless coon, termagant Mammy, and servile Uncle Tom were still the mainstays of the black TV persona.

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Some, however, longed for commercial television to be different. A few imagined this new video medium could break the stranglehold of American segregation. By May 1950, *Variety*, offering perhaps the overstatement of the decade, carried a headline that read, "Negro Talent Coming into Own on TV Without Using Stereotypes: A Sure Sign That Television is Free of Racial Barriers." A month later *Ebony* echoed the theme, despite profound and lingering postwar dilemmas of cultural stereotyping and racial hatred. That same year Ed Sullivan remarked television helped "the Negro in his fight . . . to win the guarantees [of] his birthright [by taking the civil rights battle] into the living rooms of America's homes where public opinion is formed." Superficially

that may have been the case, and to Sullivan's credit and the occasional consternation of anxious advertisers, he regularly featured African-American musicians, singers, dancers and comedians on his popular variety program. In fact, during television's experimental years—prior to the war and into the early postwar years—black performers *seemed* to make significant inroads toward eliminating the color barrier. Early television's insatiate need for programs and talent meant that African-American entertainers were regularly seen on local and network shows and had not yet been cast as stereotyped caricatures as they were on radio and in movies. Some historians say that TV's breezy attitude toward race before and immediately after the

war was due in large part to early television's absence of significant audience and the accompanying social, political and economic pressures—not enough people were watching to incite controversy, especially in Southern markets. But television was being groomed primarily as an advertising medium in the U.S. And as millions of television sets invaded new suburban homes and more and more Americans consumed network TV, sponsorship, along with the many social restrictions it brought, increased. Fear and race discrimination by sponsors, abetted by the commercial broadcast business's need for operating revenue from ad sales, could not be ignored. While it's true there were many experimental "sustaining" (or sponsor-less) programs at that time, if such programs didn't eventually attract *some* advertiser interest, these shows would be coldly and unceremoniously dropped. In

the 1950s, three mutually inclusive criteria were needed for a commercial television show's success: it had to draw an audience, it had to attract sponsors, and it *had* to make money for the network—ideas that hold to this day. That formula was broken by one extraordinary program, *The Nat "King" Cole Show*.

Nat Cole compared his 1956 foray into commercial television to Jackie Robinson's breaking major league baseball's color line nine years earlier. "I was the pioneer, the test case . . ." Cole told *Ebony* magazine, "After a trailblazing year that shattered the old bugaboos about Negroes on TV . . . [the advertising agencies and sponsors] who dictate what Americans see and hear didn't want to play ball." The record shows Cole's statements, while poignant, are only partially correct. Although many consider him the undisputed premier black recording artist of his generation, Cole was not the first African-American entertainer to emcee his own network television variety show. That honor fell to former singing waiter and master showman Billy Daniels, who hosted his own 15-minute Sunday night network program on ABC-TV for 13 weeks in 1952. But Nat Cole's was the first TV show starring a highly visible, internationally-known African American performer whose program was heavily, one might even say obsessively, promoted by a major network.

Actually Nat Cole had two shows on NBC-TV; the second program, and the one most remembered, ran initially as a summer replacement, then moved to the fall line-up. But a previous,

rather anemic 15-minute "sustaining" offering preceded that one. For eight months Cole's first quarter-hour show was broadcast Monday nights at 7:30, right after NBC-TV's nightly news. Cole's program generated little advertising interest, and despite the era's tense racial climate it's arguable that a single national sponsor did not emerge because Cole's initial ratings were simply not competitive. In 1956, Nielsen ranked the earlier *Nat "King" Cole Show* 116th in viewer popularity. The program averaged less than 20 percent of the viewing audience, and was even beaten by a documentary-travelogue on ABC-TV. Strangely, after its first dismal cycle, NBC-TV did not cancel the underperforming show. Instead it expanded Cole's program to a full 30-minute variety offering, increased its production budget, and experimented with it in prime time (10 p.m., Tuesday nights) over the summer of 1957. Many major performers of the era, among them Mel Torme, Peggy Lee, Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald and Tony Bennett performed as guest stars on the show, being paid minimum fees (as a gesture of support to Cole) just to increase the viewing audience and entice sponsorship. NBC-TV continually lost more than \$20,000 a week on the show, but the network persisted in keeping it on the air. Why? Because one man stood behind it: RCA President, General David Sarnoff.

Cole biographer Daniel Mark Epstein wrote that Sarnoff was so moved by Nat Cole and Harry Bellafonte's performance on one show that "the General called in his vice president in charge of advertising and said to him, 'I want that show to be sponsored or heads will roll.'" By summer's end *The*

Nat "King" Cole Show was the number one variety show in New York City. In Los Angeles it had landed in the top ten and pulled within three Trendex rating points of CBS-TV's *The \$64,000 Dollar Question*, a show that ranked fourth among all programs of the 1956-57 season. Yet despite that success national sponsors could not be found for Cole's show. Undaunted, Sarnoff and his sales team next devised a "cooperative sponsorship" plan wherein NBC-TV sold heavily discounted ad time to local sponsors from coast-to-coast, patching together an ersatz eight-market network. Such was still not enough to meet the costs of production and make a profit. After a total of 64 weeks on the air, with the network sustaining losses between \$400,000 and \$1-million, Sarnoff would still not cancel the show. Instead NBC-TV planned to move it to a less expensive, thus less commercially desirable, time slot. "They offered me a new time," Cole told the *New York Times*, "but I decided not to take it," later adding, "There won't be [television] shows starring Negroes for a while." How prescient that comment; it wasn't until 1966 that another Black performer, Sammy Davis, Jr., hosted a network TV musical variety show, and not until 1968 that an African-American woman starred in her own television sitcom, NBC-TV's *Julia*. In it singer Diahann Carroll played the title role of a widowed nurse in a show that boasted a black and white cast—the first integrated television show since Ethel Waters starred as the "colored maid" to a dysfunctional white family in the 1950 sitcom *Beulah*.

The literal bottom line was that Madison Avenue ad agencies and the sponsors they represented would

simply not advertise on what they viewed as a "Negro show." For example, some claimed that Coca-Cola was "the drink of the Negro" and insisted Coke commercials be removed from "all white" television shows. Many other advertisers readily asserted that they couldn't afford to have the public associate theirs as "Negro products." Revlon was convinced African Americans could not sell its line of lipstick to white America. Pillsbury feared a drop in sales if they sponsored an integrated show. In fact, one executive was certain the public would consider Pillsbury's product, as he put it, "nigger flour." Moreover, postwar segregation and racial panic were systemic in America, especially in the South. *Variety* reported most Southern politicians rejected television programs showing blacks and whites "on a purely equal social status." Southern historian Pete Daniel explained the odd logic like this: whites feared integration because it "would allow black males and white females to share the same social space" thereby leading to "interracial orgies" and mongrelized children. Georgia Governor Herman Talmadge threatened a nationwide boycott of companies sponsoring "race mixing" programs so as "to clean up television before the situation becomes more offensive." An unidentified resident of East St. Louis wrote to NBC-TV complaining that he and his friends were "thoroughly disgusted" when they viewed "mixed programs in which whites and Negroes take part," further noting, "Whenever your sponsors . . . find it necessary to put whites and blacks on the same program, it is . . . time to . . . boycott the commercial lines represented by the sponsors." This irrational fear of race

mixing—that a predator black male would not hesitate to rape any and all “irresistible” white females he saw—was a cornerstone of Jim Crow. And defending a Caucasian women’s honor against imagined sexual assault was frequently conflated with white masculine power, jingoistic patriotism, and the abiding horror of invisible, advancing communism, a ubiquitous fear in the culture at the time.

NBC-TV’s internal memos, while not altogether mute on NBC-TV’s Nat Cole experiment, do not frequently mention the show or the controversy swirling around it during 1956-57. There was, however, a letter from a Raleigh, North Carolina woman who insisted she be viewed “as a native Southern Segregationist, first, last, and always,” but adamantly declared Cole should stay on the air. The matron cited newspaper reports that discussed the show’s impending cancellation for lack of commercial sponsorship and snipped, “Were I owner of an industry, I’d be happy to sponsor him,” concluding, “It isn’t fair to whites nor Negroes in any section of the country to deprive them of the enjoyment Nat brings through TV.” This “Segregationists-for-Cole” letter is a good example of how early television promoted a palpable tension in white America, a confusing ambivalence. How could whites adhere to their unspoken doctrine of national racial apartheid, and not at the same time deprive themselves the pleasure of this charming internationally admired black singer? But a dearth of sponsorship was not Cole’s only problem in the South; there were local

racist broadcasters, too. The Cole show was simply never telecast by several NBC-TV southern affiliates.

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Vastly more puzzling was the role General David Sarnoff played in the drama. The reasons for the president of RCA behaving proactively toward the *Nat “King” Cole Show* are shrouded in mystery, but hints are out there. For example, Cole’s biographer suggested Sarnoff found Cole’s considerable talent engaging and, so as not to deprive the American people of such brilliance, backed the show with his considerable power. Sarnoff had only occasionally insinuated himself in day-to-day programming decisions in the past, so any programming fight was inconsistent with the General’s usual behavior. Sarnoff only really understood the business end of broadcasting, he rarely strayed to the creative side. The “special relationship” theory of Blacks and Jews—a notion fraught with controversy—has also been offered. According to this view, postwar liberal Jews sympathized with the plight and oppression of African-Americans because of their similar dispossessed histories, and so became close allies with blacks in their fight for civil rights. While it is true that Sarnoff experienced unmerciful anti-Semitism early in his life and literally fought his way out of New York City’s ghetto tenements, the “special relationship” notion between him and Cole may be only indirectly

applicable if at all. Plainly, it wasn't in the network's best financial interest to back an African-American showman like Cole no matter how talented or how much Sarnoff sympathized with him or his people's plight. First and foremost Sarnoff was a flinty-nosed businessman, a lion of corporate America—his primary allegiance was to RCA's stockholders. Yet he plunged headlong into what manifestly can be described as a crusade to save the Cole show that went past the mere observance of NBC-TV's corporate policy of "integration without identification." Why? The answer may be found in the character of Sarnoff himself.

David Sarnoff began his career peddling newspapers on New York's tough Lower East Side. A poor Russian-Jewish immigrant, he couldn't speak a lick of English when he arrived in the U.S., steerage class, in 1900, and was later forced to drop out of school to support his family. Sarnoff befriended the legendary Guglielmo Marconi, became his personal messenger boy, and ruthlessly climbed the corporate ladder after American Marconi became the Radio Corporation of America. Sarnoff was there when wireless telegraphy became radio and "chain" broadcasting was the rage, and he frequently sat in awe at the White House watching FDR do fireside chats on NBC Red and NBC Blue. Sarnoff was a fighter, a visionary, an overbearing boss, and a much-hated competitor in the skyrocketing electronics business of the 1920s and 30s. He became energized when he smelled a challenge to his authority, his company, or his country, and *always* did what he had to do to win no matter the cost.

In early 1944, RCA President David

Sarnoff was summoned by his nation to design a massive unified communication system, critical for success of arguably the single most important Allied offensive of World War II—the Normandy Invasion. Sarnoff worked closely with Supreme Commander General Dwight Eisenhower on the project, and was able to pick up the phone to chat with any of the highest-ranking military officials at the Pentagon or around the world. Sarnoff was commissioned a Brigadier General in the U.S. Army three weeks after the D-day victory—a triumph of which he and RCA were unquestionably an essential part. He was so proud of his military commission that until his death he insisted his top NBC managers and staff call him "General."

Four years after Normandy as the Cold War raged, the National Security Agency and the FBI asked Sarnoff and RCA (as well as Western Union and International Telephone and Telegraph) to participate in Operation Shamrock (OS), an illegal scheme to intercept messages sent to and from Russia and Eastern Europe. OS was not terminated until 1973, two years after Sarnoff's death. Sarnoff biographer Ken Bilby writes, "The degree of Sarnoff's personal involvement (in OS) was never established, but . . . his eagerness to employ RCA resources to thwart the nation's enemies was known throughout the company."

Like his close friend (and fellow megalomaniac) J. Edgar Hoover, Sarnoff was a superpatriot bent on protecting his cherished nation from foes seen or unseen, foreign or domestic. Sarnoff's stalwart past actions indicate he would do whatever it took and engage all necessary resources of RCA to defend his adopted homeland. Could it be

then, that saving Nat “King” Cole from cancellation was driven by Sarnoff’s deep and unswerving sense of nation? Quite possibly, yes.

Salvaging Cole became a calculated risk, a political and business test of wills, a kind of John Foster Dulles-like brinksmanship with Madison Avenue. Sarnoff, after all, was a shrewd businessman, unaccustomed to losing money or recklessly putting his network at financial risk. But his actions in the Cole affair indicate otherwise. Unless there was some higher personal value or essential, intrinsic idea that Sarnoff placed above bottom-line network considerations, his actions appear out of character.

The General, an unabashed cold warrior, *had* to be acutely aware of how America’s bigotry and segregation harmed the nation’s image overseas. Historian Mary L. Dudziak pointed out that long-standing American racial hatred, segregation, and lynching were key Soviet postwar propaganda themes used against U.S. claims of Democracy’s “moral superiority” over Communism. Domestic racism was hurting the U.S. in the court of world opinion, therefore another cultural discourse had to be put forward to refute Soviet assertions. Television could provide that oppositional dialogue, and make more credible the American government’s claim of ongoing reform in social and civil rights. Saving Nat Cole’s show from prejudiced business practices and racist Southern White Citizens Councils would make an excellent example of resistance to communist claims, and would have been just the kind of bare-knuckled fight Sarnoff welcomed.

In February 1957, the same month Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus called in his state’s National Guard troops to prevent nine African-American students from attending Little Rock’s Central High School, Nat Cole’s show began its fall run on NBC-TV. And, as the Little Rock incident became the “paradigmatic symbol of race in America” and the Soviet Union ratcheted-up its anti-U.S. rhetoric in Europe, Asia and Africa, *The Nat “King” Cole Show* defiantly sent an opposite message to America and the world. Sarnoff’s sense of purpose was unwavering. Keeping the Cole show on the air may have been the General’s answer to Red propaganda, a way to blunt Mother Russia’s “lies,” and even perhaps a way to change this nation’s hard hearts.

Of course, all this is historicist conjecture. There is not a shred of specific evidence to suggest Sarnoff viewed the Cole show in this way. In fact one of the curators at the Sarnoff Library told me “it’s best not to assume that [General Sarnoff] had his hand in [the Cole incident] beyond his blessing for other’s anti-discriminatory stance.” Okay, but it can’t be denied that in the past Sarnoff had championed other sustaining “prestige” programming. It was, after all, David Sarnoff who single-handedly brought the Metropolitan Opera and the cachet of Maestro Arturo Toscanini to NBC television and radio. Neither were big revenue producers for those networks. Why is it beyond the pale to suggest he behaved with similar conviction for Cole’s program?

While it’s true that *Variety* and other trade publications in 1950 declared the “Negro audience is a 15-billion dollar market” (today it approaches \$700-

billion) and one that should not be ignored, it's equally true that the Cole show was not kept on the air to attract and tap *that* market—indeed, his show lost the network money because of racist sponsors. It is possible then that Sarnoff's continued involvement in the Cole affair was not at all animated by profit, but by something else—like personal patriotism. David Sarnoff may have used his office to exploit the television network he controlled in order to diminish the Soviet charge of U.S. racism and provide a kinder, gentler image of race to U.S. television viewers. Remember, Sarnoff's imagined America was not racist. Brotherhood and equal opportunity is what the country and

world saw on *The Nat "King" Cole Show* every week. Sarnoff might have been saying in effect, "Look, who we really are can be seen here, Tuesday nights at 7:30 on NBC-TV!"

But whatever prompted him—ambition, patriotism, pigheadedness—Sarnoff may have ached to make a difference in the postwar era as he had earlier at Normandy. Perhaps he just yearned to participate in something greater than himself again—a cause, an ideal. Sarnoff's determined saving of Nat "King" Cole's doomed TV show just might be the hidden, human story of such yearning.

We may never know for sure.

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