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Living

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Plan B Productions

Documentary pays homage to Atlanta's secret legend

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Jazz musician Freddy Cole has called Atlanta home for more than 30 years.

He's golfed with Hank Aaron and Bill Campbell. His neighbors include Shirley Franklin and Andrew Young. And he's shared a stage at Chastain with his niece Natalie, jazz vocalist Nancy Wilson and the late Nina Simone.

Still, the smoky-voiced singer remains, as the old Percy Mayfield blues tune suggests, "A Stranger in My Own Hometown." Out of the hundreds of dates he performs each year, Cole gigs far more in Europe and in New York City than he does locally.

Tonight, "The Cole Nobody Knows," a new documentary on the performer by Atlanta filmmaker Clay Walker, makes its premiere at the 2005 Westwood Los Angeles International Film Festival in California. His new album, "This Love of Mine" on HighNote Records, is garnering Grammy buzz.

On the cusp of his 74th birthday this month, Cole might finally receive the recognition in his hometown that he routinely receives overseas.

A telling moment comes after the documentary's end credits, when a German TV reporter asks the singer and pianist why some people call him 'The Cole nobody knows.'

Cole replies matter-of-factly: "Well, I'm always introduced



SEAN DRAKES / Special

Freddy Cole, Nat's brother, played a rare Atlanta gig at Churchill Grounds last Saturday.

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Cole: Film celebrates jazz singer

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as Nat Cole's brother, Ike Cole's brother and Natalie Cole's uncle. So I added a few others. I'm also Lionel Cole's father. I'm Crystal Cole's father. I'm the Cole nobody knows."

As soon as Walker heard the story, he knew he had a title for the project.

'Creating awareness'

The 25-minute film is an intergenerational love note of sorts to Cole's 50-year career by Walker, 37, a decadelong admirer.

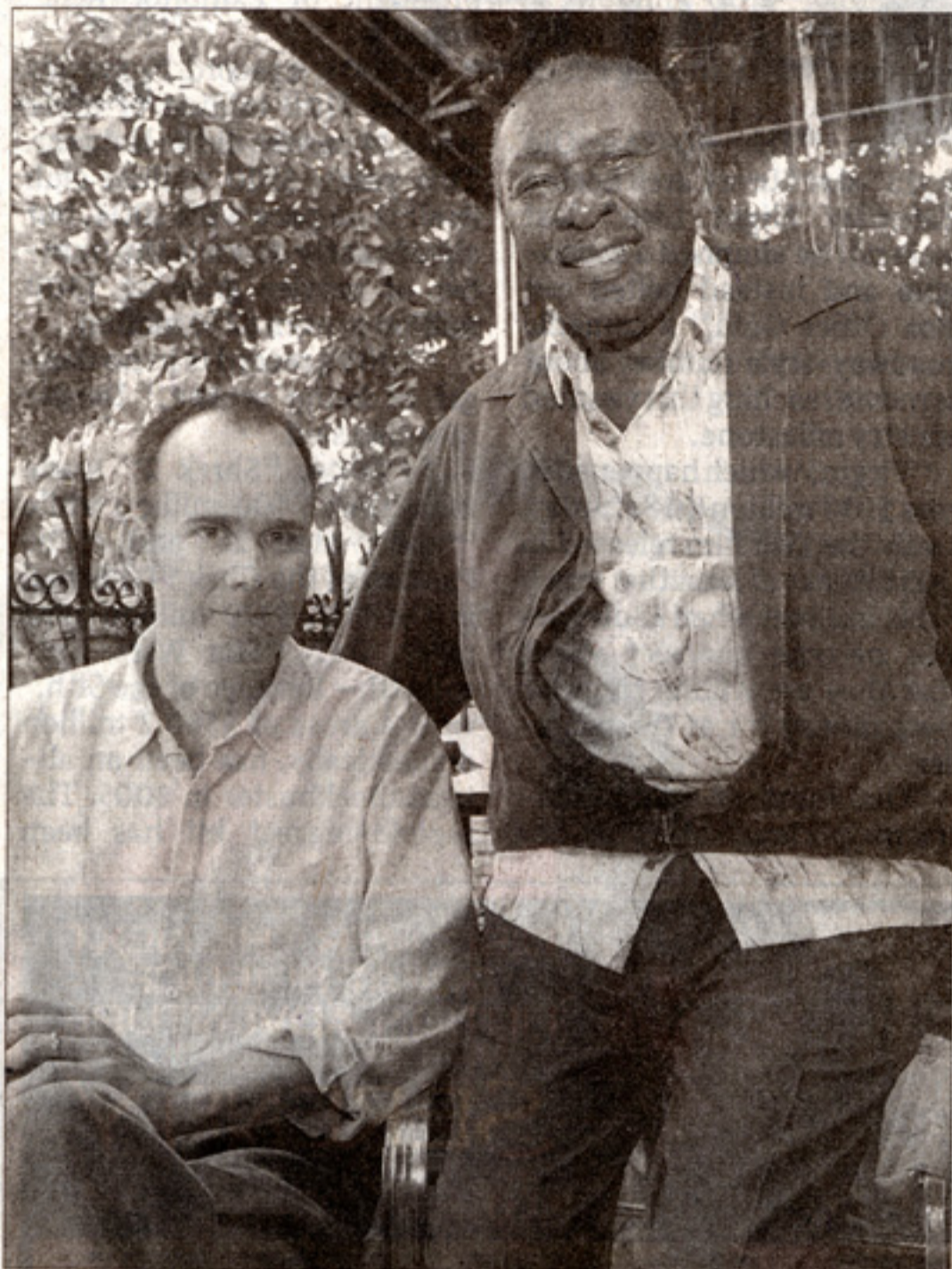
Walker previously has been best known for "Post No Bills," a PBS documentary about Los Angeles poster artist Robbie Conal, and "Musical Candy," an independent film on North Carolina retro swing-rockers Squirrel Nut Zippers.

Over lunch recently on the patio at Baraonda Cafe Italiano in Midtown, Walker and Cole discussed the origins of the documentary.

Walker concedes, "A lot of people have asked, 'Why would you make a film about Freddy Cole? He doesn't have a drug problem. His kids like him. What's the story?' Well, it's about respect for a man and his career. It's about creating awareness for a great talent."

Walker was driving in his car in the winter of 1994 when H. Johnson played a cover of Stevie Wonder's "Overjoyed" by jazz saxophonist Grover Washington Jr. on his WABE-FM show. Cole was on vocals. Mesmerized, Walker called the station to find out who the singer was. The next day, he was at Turtles on Ponce de Leon Avenue to buy the disc.

At a Spivey Hall gig celebrating Cole's 70th birthday in 2001, Walker shyly approached the singer and "mumbled something incoherent." His wife later persuaded Walker to approach Cole about doing a documentary.



KEITH HADLEY / Staff

Atlanta filmmaker **Clay Walker** says his documentary on **Freddy Cole** is "about creating awareness for a great talent."

"He got it, man," Cole says simply. "Clay understands the music. I've been fortunate in my career. But it's a tough fight out there by yourself."

Shooting on the project began with Cole's gig at New York's Blue Note in December 2003. Walker and his crew then followed Cole to Paris; Locarno, Switzerland; the Hollywood Bowl; and even Atlanta's Chastain Park Amphitheatre through the spring of this year with the singer's engagement at Au Bar in Manhattan.

Jazz greats and Cole fans Monty Alexander, Clark Terry and David "Fathead" Newman all appear on camera to discuss Cole's career, along with Atlanta jazz DJs Johnson and Carl Anthony.

'Not My Brother'

Walker uses the first 10 minutes of "The Cole Nobody Knows" to introduce the musician's work before revealing the performer's musical lineage. The plotting is intentional.

In the film, WABE-FM host Johnson explains: "If John Coltrane's son sounds exactly like him, what's point? If Freddy Cole sounded exactly like his brothers, why listen to Freddy? But Freddy has a different story to tell. And it is uniquely Freddy's story to tell."

In concert and on recordings, Freddy Cole swings harder on the keyboard and his vocal phrasings are more reminiscent of Billie Holiday than his late sibling, Nat.

While Nat King Cole started out in small jazz combos, he remains best known for his hit Capitol Records recordings like "Mona Lisa" and "Unforgettable" — tunes filled with lush strings and choral accompaniments.

It's not surprising that Freddy Cole's favorite recording of his brother's is "After Midnight," a 1956 small combo album that returned the elder Cole to his jazz roots.

The brothers' vocals share a quality that People magazine has described as "a gorgeous autumnal baritone."

The centerpiece of "The Cole Nobody Knows" is a performance of Freddy Cole's self-penned "I'm Not My Brother, I'm Me."

"I'm not trying to fill nobody's shoes," Cole sings in the film. "You see, my brother made a whole lotta money, but I sing the blues. And I'll say in all sincerity I'm not my brother, I'm just me."

'A rare treasure'

Since 1972, Cole, a Chicago native, has resided in Atlanta. He loves his adopted hometown but isn't exactly, well, jazzed about its jazz scene.

"I've worked too long and too hard to play in some little joint for \$65 a night," says Cole. "In New York, jazz fans support you. In Atlanta, unless you're booked in a club where folks can drive up to the front door, you're out of luck. If people have to look for parking, forget it."

Last weekend, Cole played four sold-out sets at Churchill Grounds in Midtown, his only local public gigs set for this year.

For Cole's final set, WCLK-FM music director and "Jazz at Sundown" host Renee Williams introduced him as a "rare treasure" and "one of jazz's great balladeers."

As Saturday night turned into Sunday morning, Cole, clad in tailored gray suit, swung through selections from the Great American Songbook.

He also endured a wine-guzzling couple who decided to get up and swing dance dangerously close to the club's intimate Whisper Room stage. Later, as Cole performed the ballad "How Do You Keep the Music Playing?" a woman in sunglasses wobbled into the room, yelling "Freddy, I knew that was you, baby!"

The warmth remained in the singer's voice on "Our Love Is Here to Stay."

Empty martini and highball glasses were cleared away, and Cole was treated to a standing ovation. His hands glided across the keyboard to plunk out the opening notes of "I'll Be Seeing You."

"It's wonderful to come home and see so many of my friends," he said, smiling to his golfing buddies and neighbors. "Hopefully, we'll do this again real soon."

In the morning, though, "The Cole Nobody Knows" was busy preparing for gigs in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and Vienna, Austria.