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His rep and repertoire keep expanding

Freddy Cole is well regarded for his jazz acumen

By Andrew Gilbert
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The first time Freddy Cole played Boston he was on top of the world. Barely out of his teens, he held down the piano chair in Earl Bostic's band during the height of the R&B alto saxophonist's fame in the early 1950s.

The situation was a little more complicated the second time he arrived here. After Cole spent several semesters at Juilliard, word reached his dutiful older brother Nat "King" Cole that school couldn't compete with New York City's 24/7 musical feast.

"I was doing the things that young people do," says Cole, 76. "I was hanging out, not really going to classes."

Nat Cole was footing the bill and figured Freddy was more likely to focus on his coursework if he matriculated at New England Conservatory. It may not have been Manhattan, but mid-'50s Boston still offered plenty of extracurricular opportunities for the resourceful young pianist.



"I had a ball," Cole says. "I caught some great jam sessions at the after-hours joint off Tremont Avenue, the Pioneer Club, and I sat in sometimes. I worked all around town. Most every place had some kind of music. I still have a lot of friends there, classmates and guys I met along the way."

The unfailingly suave singer returns to Boston tomorrow night for a gig at Scullers with guitarist Randy Napoleon, bassist Elias Bailey, and drummer Curtis Boyd. It's essentially the same combo featured on his ebulliently swinging new HighNote album "The Dreamer in Me," which was recorded last year at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola.

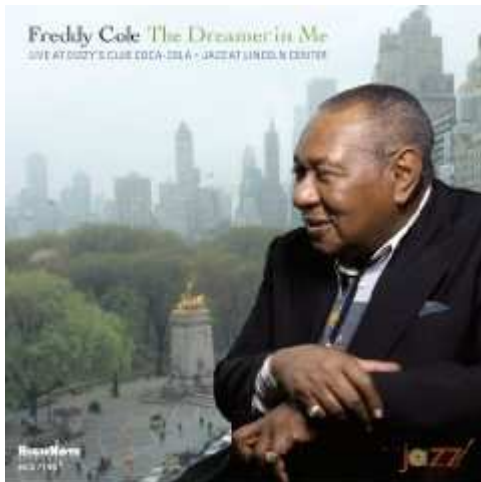
The album captures Cole and his working band sifting through his huge repertoire of songs, delivering chestnuts that might stump even the most dedicated American Songbook aficionado. What's impressive isn't just Cole's catlike grace as a performer; it's the way he moves effortlessly from one obscure song to another, making unrelated material feel like chapters in a larger narrative.

"Freddy uses his limitless repertoire to construct a set like an instrumentalist uses phrases and harmonic devices to improvise a solo," Napoleon says. "There's never a set list. He responds to the mood of the audience."

"The Dreamer in Me" is just the latest in a string of nearly a dozen masterly CDs by Cole. The albums add up to a body of work as richly detailed, diverse, and satisfying as that of any other jazz-inflected male singer over the past two decades, which begs the question why he's not better known.

Recording for respected indie labels and performing at top clubs around the world, he hardly counts as a cult figure. But considering that he bears one of American music's most famous names, the 2006 documentary "The Cole Nobody Knows" can be forgiven its hyperbolic title. He's long past caring about the people who insist on comparing him to his late brother.

"I'm very much at peace," Cole says. "It doesn't really bother me at all anymore."



One reason he's avoided the travails of fame is that he came to singing relatively late. The youngest of five capaciously gifted siblings, Cole grew up in a Chicago household surrounded by musicians. When jazz wasn't playing on the phonograph at home, there was music in the Baptist Church where his father, the Rev. Edward J. Coles, was head of the congregation (Nat was the first to drop the "s" from the family name).

He earned valuable road experience as a pianist with Bostic and Lionel Hampton, but always knew he wanted to sing as well. But just as he was coming into his own, the bottom fell out of the jazz market when the Beatles spearheaded the British Invasion. During the '60s and '70s, when many straight-ahead jazz players took day jobs, Cole stayed busy on the

bandstand.

"It didn't have to be an out and out jazz gig," Cole says. "I played hotels, casinos, weddings, bat mitzvahs. In the jazz sense I may have been hurting myself with some critics. Some still want to refer to me as a cocktail act, which is far from the truth, but I can do that also."

No one's done more to change the perception of Cole from lightweight to heavyweight than veteran producer Todd Barkan. From Fantasy to Telarc to the recent albums for HighNote, he's recorded Cole with jazz's finest accompanists, including saxophonists David "Fathead" Newman, Houston Person, Grover Washington Jr., and Eric Alexander.

"My relationship with Freddy is one of the most personally and artistically satisfying of my professional career, right alongside Roland Kirk, Grover Washington, and Dexter Gordon," says Barkan, programming director for Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola. "I totally respect the fact that he needs to record material that he strongly relates to, personally and artistically. The songs crystallize and embody a story that resonates with him, that he can live in."