

A “KING” DETHRONED

Nat “King” Cole was one of America’s favorite entertainers in the 1950s, so NBC built a variety show around him. Although the show was popular, it was canceled. Why? Simple: In that era, advertisers didn’t want to invest in a show headlined by an African American.

B LACK AND WHITE

Television began broadcasting in color in 1954, but at that time, American TV stars came in one color only: white. Jim Crow laws mandating racial segregation were still in effect. But after Jackie Robinson broke Major League Baseball’s color barrier and the civil-rights movement started picking up steam, change was in the air.

Before the rock ’n’ roll era, Nat “King” Cole was one of America’s most successful singers and pianists, with seventeen Top 10 hits, including “Mona Lisa,” “Orange Colored Sky,” and “The Christmas Song.” Jack Benny said Cole was “the best friend a song ever had.” Cole’s gentle baritone led millions to buy his records and inspired NBC to do something new in TV: build a musical variety show around a black entertainer. The network knew that if any star could lead the way toward racially integrated programming, it was Cole.

ON THE AIR

The Nat “King” Cole Show debuted at 7:30 p.m. on November 5, 1956, as a 15-minute program. Cole’s clout and popularity helped line up top performers, including Ella Fitzgerald, Peggy Lee, Count Basie, and Tony Bennett. Critics praised the show, and it competed well against ABC’s hit travelogue, *Bold Journey*.

Cole often performed with his arm draped over a fellow singer’s shoulders. But, anticipating negative, racist responses—especially in the South—he had to be extremely careful not to appear too friendly with white performers on camera—particularly women. Simply touching a white woman’s arm during a musical number could have been enough to cause a riot in some areas. Cole and NBC were careful not to depict any “untoward” contact, and they received no complaints from viewers.

MAD AD MEN

The real problem facing *The Nat "King" Cole Show* was with advertisers. The custom at the time was for one company or product to sponsor a program, paying for its production costs. Advertisers were secured for Cole's show, but they backed out, leaving NBC to scramble to find local advertisers and piece together the financing. Cole and most of his guests even worked for industry scale—Hollywood's minimum wage—to help keep the show in production.

Despite the shoestring budget and lack of a national sponsor, NBC kept the faith, expanding the show to 30 minutes in 1957 and renewing it for the fall season. Then, in December, Cole quit, unwilling to fight for sponsors any longer. The 57th and final episode of *The Nat "King" Cole Show* aired on December 17, 1957. When asked by reporters why the show ended, Cole joked, "Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark."

LEGACY

Cole remained as popular as ever, and he toured and recorded several more hit records before his death from lung cancer in 1965 at age 45. He was posthumously inducted into the Jazz Hall of Fame (1993) and the Hit Parade Hall of Fame (2007), and honored with a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award (1990).

For its part, NBC continued its efforts to break through TV's color barrier. In 1965 it debuted *I Spy* with Bill Cosby. In 1968 it cast Diahann Carroll as a young African-American widow and mother in the Top 10 hit sitcom *Julia*. But it wasn't until 1970 that the network (or any network) would have a successful, fully sponsored variety series hosted by an African American: *The Flip Wilson Show*.

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HIGH TIMES

In August 2010 Sacramento station KTXL broadcast a 30-second ad showing people delivering testimonials about a wonderful new product that helped ease symptoms like joint pain, nausea, and anxiety. It was the first ever TV ad for marijuana in history.

Makes sense: The first Charmin commercial was filmed in Flushing, New York.