

## EXTRACT FROM *A JAZZ CORRESPONDENT* by Ian Welland

### CLUB ALABAM, LOS ANGELES – MAY 1940.

A pianist sat down in front of his piano and took a cigarette from the crumpled Lucky Stripe packet resting uneasy on the piano top. The evening was still young and very few punters were taking any notice of the trio nestled on that dimly lit stage. A whistle from the microphone as it was placed to the pianist's right suggested the hubbub interlude was over and the time had arrived for music.

'Ok Oscar, what'll it be?'

'*Sweet Lorraine?*'

This song was the trio's most famous recording to date, first laid down in a session the year before. Several takes had been unsuccessful, but finally as Europe ricocheted into a second conflict that was sure to draw us all in at some point, so Trio achieved a master take and subsequently had a hit record on its hands.

Club Alabam had history. Adjoining to the prestigious Dunbar Hotel on Central Avenue, Alabam's reputation had grown steadily from a seedy alternative venue playing dixie blues in the 1920s to legendary status by the end of the 1930s. As leading jazz musicians frequented its stage so an emerging scene became labelled: West Coast Jazz.

Depending on disposable income, as a punter you either took a small table close to the stage or a private alcove away from the throng where you could entertain and be entertained with conversation and laughter more often drowning out the musicians.

For the Trio and indeed other musicians, the pay was lousy. Free drinks from the bar were now plentiful after years of prohibition; however, drinks were not the real issue. What concerned musicians was how could one Trio shine above another who played a similar set to yours?

'Tough crowd in tonight Oscar,' said Johnny the base player.

'Yeah, I've changed my mind. How about we do *Too Marvellous For Words* and sock it to them?'

'You think they're ready for this?' said Nat.

'You're the boss, Nat. You choose.'

Nat took another draw on his burning cigarette. Shuffling his scores, he found the Whiting and Mercer standard. He then led his trio slowly but rhythmically through the opening eight bars. This was the first time the Trio had tried out the song publicly as Nat had been troubled by the phrasing in the studio. He would complain it was easy to stumble over the lyrics which would not keep pace with the music. Oscar, poised to take on the middle solo section on his new electric guitar kept time with his right foot visible to his fellow band members.

Two and half minutes later, the ecstatic clientele rose to their feet. Applause filled the smoky room. Alcoves dispensed with their conversations.

'You hearing that Nat?' said a jubilant Oscar. 'We've done it. We've cracked the Alabam. We're in the big time.

Word got out to the Dunbar that there was a new Trio next door setting the Alabam a flame.

'Cancel Chicago boys,' said a smiling Nat. 'Next stop, Capitol Records on Vine Street.'

### The Nat King Cole Trio (1939 – 1947)

Pianist, Vocal, Arranger: Nat King Cole

Lead Guitar: Oscar Moore

Bass Player: Johnny Miller



*Image courtesy of Capitol Records, USA.*

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