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Guitarist

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Anyone who has listened to the music of Nat “King” Cole, [Roy Eldridge](#), [Ella Fitzgerald](#), or [Sarah Vaughan](#) has probably heard the work of jazz guitarist [John Collins](#). In a professional career that spanned seven decades, Collins helped to create some of the most memorable jazz-pop recordings of his era, including Cole’s artistic masterpiece, *After Midnight*, in 1957. After Cole’s death in 1965, Collins continued to perform with singer Patti Page and eventually formed his own touring band. He also worked on the film score to *Lady Sings the Blues*, a biography of former colleague [Billie Holiday](#). Collins released just one album under his own name, *The Incredible John Collins*, in 1984, and spent his final years as a private teacher to a new generation of jazz guitarists. Collins died in [Los Angeles](#) in 2001; though his talent was always in the shadow of the great singers he accompanied, Collins was remembered as one of the great jazz musicians of his generation.

John Elbert Collins was born on September 20, 1913—though some sources give his date of birth as one year earlier—in Montgomery, [Alabama](#). The greatest early influence on his future career as a professional musician came from his mother, who herself was a jazz-age pioneer. A talented pianist, Georgia Gorham had worked in [New York](#) City before her son’s birth, as an accompanist to [W.C. Handy](#). Best remembered as the composer of classics such as “St. Louis Blues” and “Beale Street Blues,” Handy earned the nickname “The Father of the Blues” for his work to bring the blues to a wider audience in the early part of the twentieth century. After working with Handy, Gorham returned to her native Alabama, where Collins was born. She continued to pursue her career in music, however, and worked as a pianist and bandleader after moving her family to [Chicago](#), where Collins grew up.

Collins initially studied the clarinet before switching over to guitar as his primary instrument. By the time he was in his teens, Collins was playing rhythm guitar for several Chicago-area jazz outfits. Around 1930 Collins joined his mother’s band on tours across the [United States](#). In 1935 he received his first big break by joining a Chicago-based quartet led by [Art Tatum](#), regarded as one of the best jazz pianists of his generation. After playing with Tatum, Collins went on to collaborate with a series of jazz greats. In 1936 he joined the Three Deuces, a band led by [Roy Eldridge](#), whose trumpet playing was regarded as the best of the swing era of the 1930s and 1940s. As part of Eldridge’s band, Collins appeared on numerous recordings from 1936 through 1940, including *Little Jazz* in 1935 and a collection later released as *Early Years*. Collins played with Eldridge for four years before striking out on his own in [New York](#) City.

When Collins arrived in New York City in 1940, he entered the most exciting musical scene of the day. Over the next two years he played with singer [Billie Holiday](#), tenor saxophonist [Lester Young](#), and alto saxophonist and trumpeter [Benny Carter](#). All the while, Collins improved his improvisational skills in the numerous clubs that lined [New York](#)’s 52nd Street neighborhood. He also jammed with musicians who would later take the jazz movement into more experimental, modernist directions, such as bebop leader [Dizzy Gillespie](#). This phase of Collins’s career was cut short in 1942 when the young guitarist was drafted into the U.S. Army. He served throughout the duration of [World War II](#), playing in Army bands, and returned to New York City in 1946.

After returning to civilian life, Collins played again with Tatum and added pianists [Erroll Garner](#) and [Billy Taylor](#) to his list of colleagues. In 1947 *Esquire* magazine gave Collins its New Star Award as Best Guitarist. The recognition was somewhat ironic for a musician who had been playing professionally since the 1930s. It also marked the end of the first phase of Collins’s career. In 1951 Collins joined the lineup of supporting musicians for one of the greatest stars of the era, Nat “King” Cole, a collaboration that continued until Cole’s untimely death in 1965.

By the time Collins joined Cole’s recording and performance lineup, Cole was one of the most popular singers and musicians in the [United States](#). Performing as the leader of the Nat “King” Cole Trio, the singer and pianist had scored major hits in the 1940s with “Straighten Up and Fly Right,” “I Love You for Sentimental Reasons,” and “The Christmas Song.” In 1949 Cole began recording as a solo artist, though his former Trio colleagues Irving Ashby on guitar and Joe

For the Record...

Born John Elbert Collins on September 20, 1913, in Montgomery, AL; died on October 4, 2001, in [Los Angeles](#), CA; son of bandleader and pianist Georgia Gorham; married to Naomi Collins; children: Patricia, Jan.

Played with Roy Eldridge, [Art Tatum](#), and Billie Holiday early in career; played in Nat “King” Cole’s supporting band, 1951-65; worked on film soundtracks and toured with his own band, 1970s-1980s.

Awards: *Esquire* magazine, New Star Award as Best Guitarist, 1947; [Los Angeles](#) Jazz Society Tribute Honoree, 1985; induction, Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame, 1993.

Comfort on bass continued to play with him on some dates through the early 1950s. In their place, Cole explored a lush, more pop-oriented sound than was possible with a small jazz combo. Collins, who had gained a reputation for being able to play just a-bout anything on the guitar, fit in well with Cole’s new direction.

Collins was playing with longtime friend Tatum when Cole asked him to replace Ashby for a Los Angeles performance at the Tiffany Club. Collins’s debut with Cole came on September 5, 1951, and on some of the subsequent dates, Tatum joined the group for a jam session. In addition to becoming a regular part of Cole’s touring band, Collins joined the superstar in the recording studio beginning with the 1953 release [Nat King Cole Sings for Two in Love](#). Collins also appeared on the albums *Unforgettable* (1953) and *The Christmas Song* (1954). Perhaps the best-known example of Collins’s work with Cole came with the *After Midnight* album, recorded in 1956 and released the following year. Billed once again as the Nat “King” Cole Trio, the musicians produced a classic jazz-pop album that included some of Cole’s best work, such as “Sweet Lorraine,” “Route 66,” and “Two Loves Have I.” Collins also played on recordings by [Ella Fitzgerald](#), [Sarah Vaughan](#), and [Carmen McRae](#) during his career.

An acclaimed guitarist in his own right, Collins took a pragmatic approach to his work with Cole. As a London *Guardian* obituary quoted Collins from a 1963 interview, “I’m relegated to the role of commercial musician. It’s very good music and it feeds my family.” With his wife, Naomi, Collins raised two daughters, Patricia and Jan; at the time of his death in October of 2001, the Collins family included five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. The family made its home in Los Angeles.

Collins’s tenure with Cole was cut short by Cole’s death from [lung cancer](#) on February 15, 1965, at the age of 45. Collins served as one of the honorary pall bearers at his friend’s funeral, along with dignitaries such as California Governor Pat Brown and Senator Robert Kennedy, as well as musicians [Frank Sinatra](#), [Count Basie](#), and Sammy Davis, Jr. Following Cole’s death, Collins played in a number of lineups, including the supporting bands for singers Patti Page and Bobby Troup. Collins also formed a band under his own name and toured [Europe](#). In 1984 he recorded his only solo project, *The Incredible John Collins*. Collins also worked in the film industry on the soundtrack for the 1972 biography of Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, and with the [Count Basie](#) Orchestra for its appearance in the 1974 comedy *Blazing Saddles*.

Collins continued to play concert dates in the 1980s and 1990s but worked mostly as a private music teacher in the last decades of his life. In 1985 the Los Angeles Jazz Society named Collins its Tribute Honoree and in 1993 he was inducted into the Alabama Jazz Hall of Fame. He was also cited by the [Smithsonian Institution](#) for his work in helping to preserve the history of jazz in America. Collins was also cited by a number of young musicians as an example of one of the best, if unheralded, talents in the jazz world. As guitarist Russell Malone told Tom Chandler of the Rasputin Music website in May of 2000, “There are a lot of great musicians.... There’s a guy named John Collins, for example. He was a great guitarist who worked in [Nat King Cole](#)’s band for 15 years. What he did in Nat’s band is great, but that’s not even a tenth of what this man is capable of. He stayed there for 15 years and people didn’t really get a chance to hear him.” Hospitalized in Los Angeles for cancer treatment, John Collins died on October 4, 2001.

Selected discography

(With Roy Eldridge) *Early Years*, Capitol, 1935.

(With Roy Eldridge) *Little Jazz*, Capitol, 1935.

(With Nat “King” Cole) *Nat King Cole Sings for Two in Love*, Capitol, 1953.

(With Nat “King” Cole) *Unforgettable*, Capitol, 1953.

(With Nat “King” Cole) *The Christmas Song*, Capitol, 1954.

(With Nat “King” Cole) *After Midnight*, Capitol, 1957.

(With Nat “King” Cole) *Love Is the Thing*, Capitol, 1957.

(With Nat “King” Cole) *The Very Thought of You*, Capitol, 1958.

(With Nat “King” Cole) *To Whom It May Concern*, Capitol, 1959.

(With Nat “King” Cole) *Wild Is Love*, Capitol, 1960.

(With Nat “King” Cole) *Ramblin’ Rose*, Capitol, 1962.

The Incredible John Collins, Niva, 1984.

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—*Timothy Borden*