

For Sentimental Reasons

Nat King Cole and JFK had a historic relationship. This month, the crooner's daughters revive those rare moments.

BY PAIGE BOWERS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JERRY RABINOWITZ

The *Honey Fitz* Presidential Yacht was said to be one of the few places where President John F. Kennedy Jr. was at his happiest and most relaxed. Vintage pictures and home movies tell the story best. There's the photo of a sun-kissed and windblown Kennedy reading *The New York Times* and smoking a cigar on the boat's deck. There's the dotting image of the president snuggling his young daughter, Caroline, who's wrapped in a blanket and resting her head on his chest on a breezy afternoon. And finally, there's the home video of children skipping and playing around the boat as adult laughter fills the background.

Although five U.S. presidents used the *Honey Fitz*, it is the Kennedy family who gave it its timeless allure, whether it was in the waters of the Potomac River or the Intracoastal Waterway here in Palm Beach. But its Camelot-era charm was nearly lost to history until two years ago, when its current owner decided to restore the boat to its former glory. Now, the storied presidential watercraft is available for private functions such as the Nat King Cole Generation Hope President's Society Dinner and Auction that will take place at The Sailfish Club in Palm Beach on December 4.

"When I heard the yacht was being restored and would be available for charity events, I had to look into it," says Casey Cole Hooker, who co-founded Generation Hope in 2008 with her twin sister, Timolin Cole Augustus. "We were very fortunate to be able to host this event there."

The exclusive event will begin with a cocktail reception and tour of the *Honey Fitz*, where guests will see rare presidential memorabilia such as photographs, correspondence, a desk Kennedy used while on the boat



A FAMILY PHOTO OF NAT KING COLE (FAR RIGHT) WITH THEN-SENATOR JOHN F. KENNEDY DURING A DINNER FOR THE POLITICIAN'S REELECTION, CIRCA 1958. THE SILVER BOX WAS A MEMENTO FROM THE KENNEDY FOUNDATION DINNER IN 1964. IT IS INSCRIBED: "NAT KING COLE, THE BEST FRIEND A SONG EVER HAD."



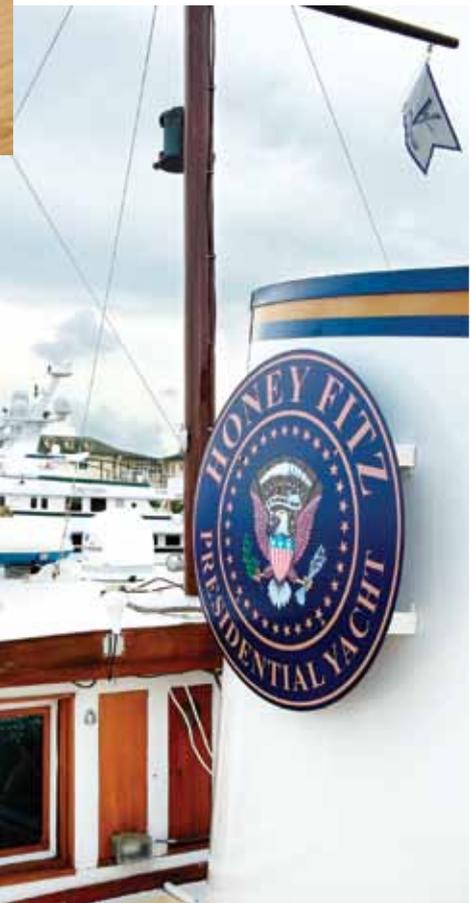
TIMOLIN COLE AUGUSTUS (LEFT) AND CASEY COLE HOOKER, TWIN DAUGHTERS OF NAT KING COLE, WILL HOST THE DECEMBER 4 EVENT ONBOARD THE HONEY FITZ.



“

KENNEDY SPENT MORE TIME ON THIS BOAT THAN ANY OTHER PRESIDENT. IT WAS A FLOATING WHITE HOUSE.”

—PAUL OCEPEK,
OFFICER OF THE WATCH



SCENES FROM THE *HONEY FITZ*, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: THE PRESIDENTIAL STATE ROOM; THE PRESIDENTIAL SEAL; BURGEES FLYING ON THE TOP DECK; THE BEAUTIFUL LACQUERED WOOD EXTERIOR. OPPOSITE PAGE: THE *HONEY FITZ*, NAMED AFTER JFK'S NICKNAME FROM HIS MATERNAL GRANDMOTHER, MAINTAINS MANY ORIGINAL FURNISHINGS, INCLUDING THE PRESIDENT'S DESK.



and a burgee flag from the Eisenhower era. The Cole family will also be sharing never-before-seen heirlooms from their own past, including Nat King Cole's wedding photographs, correspondence with notables such as Kennedy and several awards. The reception will be followed by an intimate dinner and an auction. Although the auction items had not been finalized at press time, the Cole sisters said they would at least include one trip and family memorabilia. All of the proceeds from the evening will benefit Generation Hope's music education programs in underprivileged schools.

"As his children, this takes us back to a special time that will never be lived or seen again," Hooker says. "It was difficult to look at some of these items and realize that it's what's left of our legacy and our parents."

Timolin adds: "But our parents would love this and support it wholeheartedly. They would love that this is going to a wonderful cause."

Although there are legions of rumors about the celebrities who may have set foot on the boat during Kennedy's time, it is unknown whether Nat King Cole ever visited the president on the vessel. The boat's current captain, Paul Ocepek, says to his knowledge, the boat kept no guest logs, so anything current staff members know about the boat is gleaned from old photographs given by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston or knowledge from the yacht's former staffers.

What is certain is Nat King Cole was a prominent supporter of Kennedy's senatorial and presidential bids, and the young politician from Massachusetts was always grateful for that backing, especially given the racial unrest in the 1960s.

"The letters we will display on the boat from President Kennedy to our father show appreciation for his support during a sensitive time when African Americans couldn't be seated with white Americans in a restaurant," Hooker says. "Politically, the breakthrough in their relationship was special."

Casey and Timolin's older sister, Carole, of-

ten told a story about the time Kennedy, who was then a senatorial candidate, showed up for her cotillion ball.

"It made the cover of *Ebony*," Hooker says, adding the magazine will be displayed on the boat December 4. "My sister was 17 years old then, and the article talks about how she looked up at my mother when Kennedy walked in and their mouths were agape because it was such a surprise. Kennedy realized the lengths my father had to go to in order to show up and support him in light of the time. So he thanked my father by showing up at my sister's cotillion. That was pretty amazing."

Ocepek, a Palm Beach native who was hired by *Honey Fitz*'s owners three years ago, says he is constantly educating himself about the boat's lore.

"Last year, the man who captained the boat for JFK gave me a Xeroxed copy of the personal scrapbook from the three or four years he spent at the helm," Ocepek says. "What I learned from him was just how family-oriented President Kennedy was and how much this boat meant to him as a getaway and a place where he could feel peace and enjoy time with his family and friends."

Among the things Ocepek says Kennedy enjoyed on the boat: a cocktail called the Bullshot,



The young politician from Massachusetts was grateful for Nat King Cole's backing, given the racial unrest of the 1960s.

which was a shaken mixture of 1 ounce of vodka, 3 ounces of chilled beef bouillon and dashes of Worcestershire, Tabasco, salt and pepper to taste. The president also smoked four to five cigars a day, usually an exclusive brand such as H. Upmann, which was made in Havana and therefore harder to procure after 1962, when Kennedy signed the Cuban Trade Embargo.

"Kennedy spent more time on this boat than any other president," Ocepek says. "It was a floating White House and family getaway where he could relax and the kids could be kids. So when guests come aboard the boat today, they're almost a little bit shy and really try to be gentle with everything because of its rich history."

The boat was originally commissioned in 1931 by businessman Sewell Avery, who

was enlisted by J.P. Morgan and Co. during the Great Depression to return the Montgomery Ward department store chain to profitability. Avery loved sailing and sought a large craft on which he could cruise the waters of Lake Michigan in his spare time. Defoe Motor Works fulfilled his dream with a 93-foot-long boat hewn from military-grade fir and white oak that the financier named after his daughter, Lenore.

"When Avery first built the boat, it had 1,000-horsepower engines and could travel at speeds of 26 knots, which is fast even by today's standards," Ocepek says. The boat also had a salon, upper sun decks, a formal dining room that sat eight, a master stateroom, a galley, crew quarters and bathrooms.



THE COLE FAMILY WILL SHARE NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN HEIRLOOMS, INCLUDING WEDDING PHOTOS AND CORRESPONDENCE WITH PRESIDENT KENNEDY.



The federal government requisitioned the boat in 1942 for use in the war effort, and its high-performance engines were replaced with ones that slowed its speed to 10 knots. After the war, the boat became a presidential yacht under President Harry S. Truman. The only change made to it at that time was the addition of a second salon in the rear of the boat.

“Mechanically and structurally, it’s still pretty much the same boat,” Ocepek says, adding he and his crew handle 90 percent of the maintenance, from painting to varnishing the mahogany and teak brightwork. “There’s no hydraulic steering and no autopilot. The operation is vintage 1931. People are fascinated by that, about how in this modern era of technology, you have this vintage equipment that works great.” ◀◀

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: NAT KING COLE WITH TWIN DAUGHTERS CASEY AND TIMOLIN AT THEIR HOME IN LOS ANGELES; COLE AND MARIA HAWKINS ELLINGTON ON THEIR WEDDING DAY, MARCH 28, 1948; COLE SHAKING PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY’S HAND ON AN UNKNOWN OCCASION; PERFORMING AT KENNEDY’S INAUGURAL GALA, 1961; WITH PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON AT THE WHITE HOUSE AFTER THE DEDICATION OF THE HOLLYWOOD MUSEUM IN THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS.