

COVER STORY



Manuello Paganelli

Natalie COLE

STAYING STRONG WITH 'STILL UNFORGETTABLE' MUSIC

Natalie Cole says she is a “warrior” and when faced with life challenges, she fights back.

She is battling back from a life-threatening health crisis with an armor of faith in God, support of family and friends, and a good sense of humor.

The eight-time Grammy winner was diagnosed with hepatitis C, an incurable liver disease, in February as she was recording her current CD, *Still Unforgettable*. And while the liver disease is under control today, she is now suffering from kidney failure and is on dialysis three times a week, she says.

“I hope nobody I know gets it. I hope they find a cure,” Cole, 58, tells JET about the disease while sitting in the living room at her Beverly Hills home.

Cole recalls the day she learned she had hepatitis C.

“I just went to the doctor for a routine checkup. I needed some blood work for insurance purposes and that’s when they diagnosed me with hepatitis C,” she says.

“My liver was scarred, it wasn’t damaged. It was treatable.”

One can get the hepatitis C virus “through needles, through a blood transfusion or through some kind of a tattoo,” she explains. She admits that the disease may stem from her heroin abuse in the early ’80s. “This virus had been in my body for 25 years since my drug use. It does lie dormant.”

Cole also got a tattoo about 10 years

ago. “People who have these real extreme tattoos or a lot of tattoos, [the virus] may show up in their blood many, many years from now,” she says.

Cole underwent chemotherapy that included the drug interferon, often used for cancer patients. She thinks the treatment may have led to the damage of her kidneys, which at one point was functioning at only 10 percent.

During the treatment, the now-petite vocalist lost 15 pounds and her hair fell out. She is now sporting a short hairstyle to compensate.

Cole says she has been extremely fatigued and has had to use oxygen tanks to help her breathe. In July and August, she recalls, “going from the bedroom to the kitchen was an act of Congress,” she laughs. “I was in a wheelchair because my legs got very feeble. I was very fragile. I could not lift my head off the pillow. I had these big oxygen tanks in the bedroom, then I had one in the bathroom, then we started having them on the airplane. I was just falling apart.”

While in New York promoting the CD in September, she had to be rushed to the hospital. “I almost died,” she reveals. “Not from the hepatitis, but from the kidney failure. My girlfriend – I call her an angel on my shoulder – if she had not called the doctor, I could have died. I thought my life was over... The doctors were very, very concerned.” Cole was hospitalized for 10 days.

COVER STORY

She admits that one of her biggest challenges is slowing down and cutting back on touring and public appearances.

"I am like 'the show must go on.' When I think about it, I have never taken the time to rest. And it really is ridiculous," Cole says. "When you're sick, you need to sit down and take care of yourself."

Despite her illness, Cole says she still wants to look her best at all times. She says jokingly that months ago she "looked like a scarecrow ... it was not pretty."

While sitting recently on her living room couch dressed in white denim slacks and an earth-toned silk print blouse, Cole sported her short hair and makeup applied just right, looking every bit of the classy and confident woman she sang about in her '70s hit *Sophisticated Lady* (*She's A Different Lady*).

"Honey, I can't be looking sick and be looking bad. Some things are not acceptable. You got to roll with it," she laughs.

Cole is encouraged by her faith in God. "Honey, God is so good. God just covers me," she says. "He tells me 'You might be sick on the outside, but you will be pretty in the inside and get through this.' I have made continual progress and I am grateful for that. I know I am pretty much out of the woods now."

She also accepts God's will—whatever that might be. "He's in charge. I wouldn't try to second-

guess. I complain every now and then," she laughs. "But at the end of the day, I am cool. I'm happy," she says. "Which is a very strange thing to be, in the midst of something like this. I'm content because of the grace of God and everything that

▼ Natalie Cole holds a copy of her *Still Unforgettable* CD, featuring the duet *Walkin' My Baby Back Home* with her father Nat King Cole, during a signing at Borders Westwood in LA.



Chris Pizzello/AP



Healthy and vibrant, Cole performs in 2007 concert before she was diagnosed with hepatitis C. "I was mostly in good health up until this happened," she says.

Earl Gibson III/AP

He has done for me in the past. I believe He's going to continue to do. If He decides to take me for some reason – although I don't think that's what this is all about because I still have quite a few more years – but if that should happen, I'm OK with that too. I really am. I am very much at peace.”

On her new CD, *Still Unforgettable*, Cole returns to the standards from the era of her late father, legendary balladeer Nat King Cole. Her last venture into the American songbook tunes was the Grammy-winning smash CD, *Unforgettable... With Love* in 1991, featuring the duet *Unforgettable* with her father.

“This music is really in my blood. I can do it with my eyes closed and it took many years to get back to doing it. I missed it. That genre of music and that style of music stand so much on its own.”

She sings with her father on his '50s classic *Walkin' My Baby Back Home*, the CD's first single.

Cole says she appreciates her family's and friends' support. “My mom (Maria Cole) was here. She came for about a week. She just had to come and look at my face and say ‘What is going on?’”

She says her sisters, Timolin, Casey and Carole “are a little frantic. They're like ‘what do you need us to do?’”

Carole Cole is president and CEO of the family business, King Cole Partners, which oversees their father's music catalog. Their latest project is the Christmas CD *The Nat King Cole Holiday Collection*, featuring Nat King Cole singing

duets with Anthony Hamilton, Ne-Yo, Faith Evans and Natalie Cole.

Carole told JET magazine: “Natalie's coming along brilliantly. She is so strong. Slowing down is not on her agenda, but she is willing to slow down a bit.”

Natalie's son, Robbie, 31, is coping well with his mother's illness and calls her every day. “Robbie is pretty cool. He's not used to seeing me fragile. But now when I'm doing better, he gets better. But I don't want him to obsess about this. I don't want him to need to be at my bedside or feel like he has to take care of me.”

Cole's heard from all of her friends, including Dionne Warwick, Chaka Khan, Smokey Robinson and Quincy Jones. “When I woke up in my hospital room, Patti LaBelle was sitting there. I am really just so touched and amazed that people take the time, because they don't have to do that.”

LaBelle told JET: “When I first heard the news of Natalie's sickness, I ran to see her at the hospital. I just sat with her and talked to her to lift her spirits. I reassured her that things would get better. I still call and visit her when I can to make sure she is doing well. I continue to let her know that she's in my thoughts and prayers.”

Tena Clark, the album's executive producer, told JET: “I've seen her come a long way in a short period of time. She went down fast and came back fast. I call her the comeback girl.”

Cole shares the philosophy that keeps her going. “Life is good. You've got to fight for it. You can't let it do you. You do life.” □