

A close-up portrait of a Black man with a shaved head and a grey beard, wearing black-rimmed glasses and a chain necklace. He is looking slightly to the left with a serious expression. The background is a solid dark blue.

**BULLET
PROOF SOUL**

Personal Essays

RON ALEXANDER

Unforgettable

I Loved My Friend, Natalie Cole

Natalie Cole and I shared a unique bond. We were born in the same year: she on February 6th, 1950, in Los Angeles, California, and I on August 14th, 1950, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The same era of sex, drugs, and rock n roll shaped our lives. But it was our shared love for music that truly brought us together. Music was not just a passion for us; it was a lifeline, a source of comfort and inspiration in the midst of our struggles with addiction.

Natalie was raised in an affluent family, while I was born into a middle-class family. As kids, we both loved music. She and I listened to jazz, soul, and blues — but for different reasons. She was interested in singing, while I was curious about my mother's jazz albums. Natalie's mother, Maria, was a jazz singer; her father, Nat King Cole, was a recording legend. My mother studied music, learned to read sheet music, and play the piano.

Our paths crossed in the early 1970s when she was 18 and a student at the University of Massachusetts. I, in turn, was a vagabond—a college wannabe—a high school dropout—traveling around the Five College Area, searching for validation, approval, and recognition, including Mt. Holyoke College, Hampshire College, where I met Shari Belafonte, Harry's daughter, Amherst College, and Smith College, where I befriended Yolanda King, the oldest child of Martin Luther King Jr.

I met Natalie at a local club where she regularly performed. She was funny, amusing, engaging, and easy to talk with. On stage, performing with the all-white band Black Magic, which she joined after a friend asked her to fill in for him on weekend gigs, she was captivating and energizing, showing signs of the success she would enjoy later, but also revealing her

struggles with growing drug dependence. Her mother chastised her for neglecting her classes. Her mother would be a nemesis throughout her career.

The bigger fear she faced, however, was not measuring up to her father's recording career, which was linked to her mother's disapproval, creating a trauma she would never entirely free herself from. Backstage, away from the spotlight, Natalie confided in me about the pressures she felt—not just from her family's legacy, but also from the audience and the music industry. We bonded over late-night conversations and the feeling that, despite our differences, we were both searching for our own voices.

As an addict myself, I recognized the signs of addiction in Natalie. In an article I wrote for the Amherst Gazette about her, I predicted that Natalie would have a successful career in the recording industry but would encounter many challenges along the way to stardom. I avoided getting high with her because I didn't want to encourage a downfall I was certain would happen—soon.

The energy in the clubs where she performed was electric, and Natalie's performances always drew a crowd. We'd often linger after her sets, swapping stories about our families and the challenges we faced. Those evenings laid the foundation for a friendship built on empathy and a shared ambition to make our mark on the world. She would always comfort me with soothing words of optimism, seemingly understanding my feelings of alienation from my family.

Our shared love for music was not the only thing that connected us. It turned out we were buying drugs from the same dealer. She was buying weed, and I was buying weed. She was taking acid, and I was trying acid with parallel results. Our shared struggles with addiction, the highs and the lows, the moments of clarity and the depths of despair, created a bond that

transcended our different upbringings. It's in these moments of clarity and hopelessness that we truly understood each other's pain and find solace in talking about our struggles.

Through our differences and similarities, we spent countless hours discussing life, music, and our dreams, often reflecting on the choices we made and the paths we had followed. Our shared love for music was a constant source of inspiration and connection. We both had complicated relationships with our mothers, and we found common ground in sharing stories about how controlling they were.

We often found ourselves at the same parties or gatherings, drawn together by the music and the energy of youth. Sometimes, we'd sit in smoky rooms, guitars strumming in the background, sharing stories about ourselves. Natilie would tell me stories about her legendary father, Nat King Cole, whom she described as affectionate but distant, and the clashes with her mother, who wanted her to pursue academics rather than music or performing. Those conversations revealed the vulnerability beneath our bravado and deepened the trust between us.

At the bottom of Natalie's need for drugs was the shock of her father's passing when she was 15 years old, the persistent disapproval of her mother, her inability to find herself in a cruel, complicated world, and a psychosis blocking her connection with her world as a whole person. The loss of her father was a profound trauma that she struggled to overcome, and it played a significant role in her descent into addiction. Losing her father, only to be affected by a controlling mother, set her on the path to substance abuse.

The crux of my substance abuse was the pain of never knowing my father, the stranglehold of my mother's rejection, the trauma of feeling ostracized from my world and family, and the suffering of feeling unloved and unwanted.

When she graduated in 1972 from UMass, I graduated from smoking weed to snorting coke. She kicked her heroin addiction and progressed to also snorting coke, eventually to smoking crack cocaine. My own journey with addiction was a parallel one, as I, too, moved from one substance to another, eventually finding myself in the grip of crack cocaine, just like Natalie.

Let me make it clear. Sharing a birth year, coming from similar families, and our shared struggles with drug use are all things I had in common with Natalie Cole. In 1985, when she released her ninth studio album, *Dangerous*, we were both 35 years old, and we were both helplessly addicted to crack/cocaine. I didn't kick cocaine until 1994, around the same time she released her 13th studio album, *Holly & Ivy*.

Her musical prowess was undeniable. She won nine Grammy Awards and received several nominations. At the 18th Annual Grammy Awards, she won the Grammy Award for Best New Artist, becoming the first African American recipient in R&B to win the award. Her achievements, such as "Sophisticated Lady " (1976), "I Got Love On My Mind," and "Our Love " (1977), continue to inspire me and evoke a sense of awe.

Her biggest charting album, *Unforgettable, With Love*, was certified 7x platinum by the Recording Industry Association of America. She recorded an album in Spanish that sold more than a million copies. During her lifetime, Natalie sold more than 30 million records.

But trouble was coming. During an intense conversation, she revealed to me her diagnosis of Hepatitis C, a potentially dangerous condition that went undiagnosed for years. As was always the case with Natalie, she spoke to me with a gentle, humble, calm voice, reflecting on how she contradicted the disease and why it went undiagnosed for so many years. She blamed herself. I cried. We cried together, she sobbed. The partying, the drinking, shooting Heroin,

smoking Crack, and the overall neglect of her health, she said, were the culprits. And yet, despite all of these hurdles, she changed her life.

On November 8th, 2010, she appeared on CNN's Larry King Live.

KING: Are you in a very good place in your life now?

NATALIE COLE, SINGER: I think so.

KING: Happy time. Because there have been ups and downs?

COLE: Yes, there have. Yeah. I was (UNINTELLIGIBLE).

KING: What has straightened it all out?

COLE: Probably just enough knocks on the head to finally say, this is not working. You know that saying that you keep doing something over and over again expecting a different result, that's called insanity.

KING: That's the definition of insanity, right.

COLE: So I started saying, I don't want to be crazy anymore. I need to make some changes. And the first thing I started doing was getting all the men out of my life, because that was a big problem for me. That was a crutch, if you will. You know, trying to define yourself through other people or men, in particular. And my son told me, mom, you need to stop dating. Just stop dating for a while.

KING: So you can be very talented and still have insecurities.

COLE: Absolutely.

KING: You know, people wonder, why would someone...

COLE: I think that talented people really do have insecurities, and that is one of the things that motivates them, because that's one thing they know they're good at. And when they're up on that stage, you can do no wrong. The audience is yours, they're there to see you.

COLE: And you feel, you know, like almost invulnerable. It's a high, I think, for most of us. And that is why we do it, you know, for so long.

KING: Having watched you perform so much at our gala for our own charity, we are just looking at you backstage. You're the happiest when you're on, right?

COLE: I am. I'm pretty happy when I'm on.

KING: You're in control?

COLE: Well, that is very important, too. That is a nice thing to be in control of.

Although we both kicked crack/cocaine, it was too late for Natalie. She died on December 31, 2015. New Year's Eve. Her passing still devastates me, a reminder of the destructive power of addiction and the importance of seeking help and support. Unknowingly, for over 20 years, she suffered from Hepatitis C, inflammation of the kidney, leading to finding a kidney donor in May 2009, and inevitably dying from congestive heart failure brought on by idiopathic pulmonary arterial hypertension.

I recovered from substance abuse in 1994 without any health complications. It was a long and arduous journey, marked by moments of doubt and despair. Natalie's passing still devastates me. She won her battles with addiction but lost her fight with health issues. Like so many others, she recovered from substance abuse but died from the effects of using drugs for far too many years. She might have lived had she quit using drugs earlier in her life. She might have lived had her Hepatitis C been diagnosed sooner.

The lure of drugs, the powerful cravings and impulses affecting the brain, are tough to resist, even when the consequences are severe, as was the case with Natalie. This loss of control is often taken to be a defining feature of addiction. Substance abuse defies the brain's vital capability to survive and exist, overcoming the body's most essential and sacred purpose of self-

preservation. Substance addictions present the sharpest example of how cravings impact motivation and behavior differently than other desires. That's why and how she was unable to ignore her health for so long.

I miss her live performances, our conversations, and the way she engaged with audiences. Her family, friends, and fans adored her, and the world loved her for her courage. I wish she had lived after kicking heroin and crack/cocaine to enjoy life as I do. She fulfilled her life's calling during her 65 years—the hit records, the Grammy awards, the recovery from substance abuse--while I am still fulfilling my purpose, living one day at a time, clean and sober for 31 years.

Studio albums

- *Inseparable* (1975)
- *Natalie* (1976)
- *Unpredictable* (1977)
- *Thankful* (1977)
- *I Love You So* (1979)
- *Don't Look Back* (1980)
- *Happy Love* (1981)
- *I'm Ready* (1983)
- *Dangerous* (1985)
- *Everlasting* (1987)

- *Good to Be Back* (1989)
- *Unforgettable... with Love* (1991)
 - *Take a Look* (1993)
 - *Holly & Ivy* (1994)
 - *Stardust* (1996)
- *Snowfall on the Sahara* (1999)
- *The Magic of Christmas* with the London Symphony Orchestra (1999)
 - *Ask a Woman Who Knows* (2002)
 - *Leavin'* (2006)
 - *Still Unforgettable* (2008)
- *Caroling, Caroling: Christmas with Natalie Cole* (2008)
 - *Natalie Cole en español* (2013)

