

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH NATALIE COLE

SUBJECT: GRAMMY WINNER NATALIE COLE TO SPEAK ON HEPATITIS C

MODERATOR: MARK HAMRICK, PRESIDENT, NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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MARK HAMRICK: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome to the National Press Club. I am Mark Hamrick with Associated Press. And I'm the 104th President of the National Press Club. We are the world's leading professional organization for journalists committed to our profession's future through our programming events such as this, while fostering a free press worldwide. For more information about the National Press Club, we'd invite you to visit our website at www.press.org. And, if you care to donate to our programs offered to the public through our Eric Friedheim National Journalism Library and the National Press Club Journalism Institute, you can find that information on the website as well.

So, on behalf of our members worldwide, I'd like to welcome our speaker and those of you attending today's event. Our head table includes guests of the speaker, as well as working journalists who are club members. And my regular refrain is political season, not so much a point of reference today, is that, if you happen to hear applause in our audience, we'd like to note that members of the general public are attending. So it is not necessarily evidence of a lack of journalistic objectivity. We'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences. Our luncheons are also featured on our member-produced weekly Podcast titled From the National Press Club, produced by members and available on iTunes. You can also follow the action on Twitter using the hashtag NPCLunch. After our guest speech concludes today, we'll have Q & A. And, as always, I ask as many questions as time permits.

Now it's time to introduce our head table guests. And please note, again in the political season, that a journalist presence at the head table does not imply or signify an endorsement of the speaker. And I would ask each of you here to stand up briefly as your name is announced. And we will begin from your right. We begin with Aaron Kessler. He is Washington

correspondent for the *Detroit Free Press*. And he's a new member of the Club. Welcome, Aaron. Nancy Hughes is Assistant Vice-President for Communications with the National Health Council. Jamila Bey, a longtime young member of the Club, and a reporter for the Voice of Russia Radio. And she's very active in our Young Members Committee. And thank you for all of that. Laura Helbling is a reporter with the RPM Report. Dr. Jonathan McCone is a gastroenterologist. And he is a guest of our speaker. Marilou Donahue is producer and editor with *Artistically Speaking*, and a member of our Speakers Committee. And then we have Donna Cryer, Chair of the National Board of the American Liver Foundation and also a guest of our speaker. Welcome here today.

We'll skip over the podium for a moment and then to Melissa Charbonneau, with News Hook Media, the very dynamic Committee Chair of our Speakers Committee. And we are so grateful for the wonderful work that she has done here today. And we're grateful to have her mother in the audience from Mississippi today. We're also joined, as we skip over the speaker for the moment, by Barbara Rose. That is Natalie Cole's manager and, obviously, a guest of the speaker. And then there's Emi Kolawole, who is the editor of *Ideas About Innovations* at *The Washington Post*. Jessica Lee is former White House correspondent for *USA Today*. Nicki Schwab, the Yeas and Nays columnist for *The Washington Examiner* and a top performer on Twitter, we might add. We're always happy for that. Derrick Gingery is a reporter for *The Pink Sheet*. And that's Elsevier Business Intelligence. And Anna Miller, a writer for the George Washington University Medical Center, a women's health columnist with *The Daily News*. And she is also a new NPC member. And we're glad to have you here today as well.

Please give them a round of applause.

[applause]

Thank you. Our guest today has been called "The New Queen of Soul." She grew up in Los Angeles in the 1950s as true Hollywood royalty. She is a bestselling artist and performer, an author, an actress, and a nine-time Grammy winner. She described her childhood years, as a member of the celebrated musical family, as "Being like the black Kennedys, living in a Hollywood bubble." If her father, legendary singer Nat King Cole, asked, "Who's coming to dinner?" the guest list might include the likes, if there were the likes of them, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, and Billie Holiday.

Surrounded by such powerful rhythm and blues influences, and gifted with a wonderful instrument in her voice, Natalie Cole burst into the R & B scene, as many of us can remember, back in the '70s, with her debut album *Inseparable*. And many of us remember that very well, almost as if it were yesterday. [laughter] She topped the charts with such hits as *This Will Be An Everlasting Love*, *Inseparable*, and *Our Love*.

She won her first two Grammys as New Artist of the Year and as Best Female R & B Vocal Performance. She was enveloped by stardom, racking up Grammys and platinum albums. Behind the glitter of success, however, she was fighting private battles. And, in a sense, that's what brings her here today.

Her 2000 autobiography, *Angel On My Shoulder*, describes a life spiraling out of control, at the time, plagued by a series of health challenges, and a highly publicized struggle with addiction. She would later tell *The Washington Post*, “As my success escalated, so did the drug problem.” Fortunately, for all of us, and for herself, she rebounded. Overcoming her addiction, she began charting new hits like, *Jump Start*, *Miss You Like Crazy*, *I Live For Your Love*, and the cover of Bruce Springsteen’s *Pink Cadillac*.

In 1991, our speaker recorded the tribute album to her father that was to become her most memorable, for many of us, titled *Unforgettable, With Love*. The album of her father’s greatest hits has been called her crowning glory. For many, the highlight single was the virtual duet, featuring a soundtrack of her father’s original vocal. The album spent five weeks at number one and earned six Grammy awards. Her 2008 album, *Still Unforgettable*, garnered two more.

Throughout the highly successful decades our guest spent performing under the spotlight, she was unaware that she had been living with a severe liver condition known as “the silent epidemic” to many. In 2008, during a routine blood test, she was diagnosed with chronic Hepatitis C, a possible result of her past abuse of drugs.

As it turns out, Hep C strikes more than three million Americans. And many, like our guest, don’t realize they have it, or they’re afraid to get treated. In fact, I’ll tell you here today, this is a personal story for me, because my own favorite cousin has been battling in an Indianapolis hospital even as we speak, afflicted with the same condition. He recently underwent a liver transplant, has been making a strong recovery. It just goes to show how many people are touched by this disease.

Today, our guest comes to our historic venue to raise her voice about the virus, and to talk about what can be done to combat it. She is the spokesperson for the Tune In To Hep C Campaign, a nationwide public health initiative sponsored by the American Liver Foundation and Merck. So here, to tell us about that campaign-- and, if we’re lucky, perhaps grace us with just a few bars of some of her musical history, [laughter] please give a warm National Press Club welcome to the one and only Natalie Cole.

[applause]

NATALIE COLE: Well, thank you so much Mark. And thank you to the National Press Club for having me. I did not realize you were such a prestigious group. [laughter] I am very honored to be here. It’s really very unusual when I think of the journey that I have taken, to end up here today. It’s not always the good stuff that ends you up in places like this. Sometimes it’s the challenges. And, if you’re lucky to have victory over those challenges, that can end you in a prestigious environment like this. So again, thank you for having me.

As you know, you know what I do. I sing. I sing my heart out. I love every minute of it. And I’ve had a really, really fortunate career for the last 30-plus years. And I would say that I didn’t imagine that my world would come to such a crumbling halt back in 2008, although in the late ‘70s and early ‘80s, I was already writing, if you say, maybe an epitaph.

When I got into drugs, I was a young woman. I was probably in my early 20s. And I was in the hippie culture. And we were doing things that we thought was just fun, never imagining that, first of all, many of us would no longer be here. And that there would be consequences from our actions. I was a drug user. I was a heroin user. And isn't it extraordinary what God can do when you look at me now. You'd never imagine it.

But the truth is, I was a heroin user. And, when I was diagnosed with Hepatitis C, I had to flash back to that life. And I was, in fact, using dirty needles because of the environment at the time that heroin spawned. It was generally a rock and roll environment. It was mostly folks in the music business. It was a hippie environment. And the Hepatitis C was like the kiss of death.

So, when my doctor told me I had it, 25 years later, I just couldn't believe it. I was in absolute shock that this disease could live inside my body for 20-plus years. It was absolutely extraordinary. I had no symptoms. I was pretty much a health nut, worked out at least 20 years of my life. And so, when my doctor told me that I had Hep C, I was just floored. And so, I asked him, since this virus was able to live inside my body for so long, what if I just kept on going and didn't do anything about it? You know. And he said, "Eventually, you'll get very, very sick."

So, I had to really face myself, my consequences. For many, Hep C is, you can get it through tattoos, you can get it through unsterilized needles, you can get it through blood transfusions. We didn't know that back in the day. And this is why I would say that it was my choice to do what I did, and then I ended up with Hep C. But the consequences are still the same. The liver is still damaged. Some people can live with it for many years. But eventually, you do get very sick.

So I had not many options, because I'm the kind of person that kind of wants to deal with it and get it over with. So, I went on a treatment that was very, very challenging. I continued to work, but it was very, very difficult. I lost about 25 pounds. I was in a wheelchair. I was sick every single day. And I would have to say that the attitude of someone who is ill is probably 80 percent of your ability to get past it.

I never asked, "Why me?" And I want to encourage all the people that we're going to hopefully be able to touch and approach, starting here, that your attitude about your treatment is what's going to help you get through this. We have a great, great campaign that I'm so glad that Merck Pharmaceuticals and the American Liver Foundation has approached me, as well as Greg Allman from the Allman Brothers. We have a great campaign called Tune In To Hep C. And what this-- what my role is, is to try to erase the stigma of what it means to have Hepatitis C.

There are so many people out there that do have it, that are ashamed. There are people out there who know that folks have it, and they have made them feel ashamed. This is no longer a disease to be ashamed of. I don't know if you remember back in the day when depression, nobody wanted to talk about depression, until some people started coming forward, celebrities. We know the power of celebrity.

Magic Johnson came forward with HIV. Shocked us all. But somehow, it gave us a little bit of a leverage, like, "Wow. If it can happen to him, it can happen to anybody." And the idea

that he faced it so gracefully was something that we all took notice of. And more people started coming forward. And the stigma of HIV has actually-- it's better than what we're talking about today, than Hep C.

Hep C still has a very serious stigma hovering over it. And we've got to embrace it and get rid of it, because there's too many people that are dying from it. Liver transplants are not that easy to get. And we have to really deal with this particular disease with all-- This is probably the one that is the most difficult one to erase the stigma. But we're going to need your help in order to do that.

The Tune In To Hep C Campaign has also inserted something really cool. They have now, on the website, TuneInToHepC.com, they have now put together an interactive guide, so that people, either who have the disease, who think they might have it, who know somebody who has it, who used to have it, they can go on this website, and they can ask questions. And it's an interactive site, so they can have someone answer them. They can have someone talk to them. They can talk to doctors, physicians about this disease. And it's just amazing.

I didn't have that. When I had my situation, I was on chemo, which was the form of treatment that I was on, for about seven months. And I was such a wreck the whole time. And there was a little-- a little number on my little medicine dispenser. There was this little number, this little 1-800 number that I could call if I needed somebody to talk to. And so, I called that number a lot.

And I would always get someone wonderful, someone who really understood. And it was just really amazing. I didn't know how to give my-- I had to give myself injections once a week. And I was not very good at it. And it was kind of nerve-wracking. And I would call this number, and this lady would talk me through it every time. It was just really, really amazing. I went to Japan, against my family's wishes, while in the midst of doing these injections. And I can tell you, it was quite-- quite an experience to try to get through 14 shows from my wheelchair. I managed to do 10, so it's okay.

And then, something wonderful happened this past July. Because music is what I do, and music is kind of who I am, and I love it so, and I always like to do different kinds of things, I had the opportunity to do a concert with the Allman Brothers. And Greg Allman and I had never met, but we fell in love right away. [laughter] And he had just had a liver transplant. He is a very quiet, shy kind of guy. So that's why I'm standing up here instead of him, because he would never do this. [laughter]

But nevertheless, we had so much fun. It was at the Beacon Theater. And I can tell you that, inside of that theater were advocates for Hep C, were patients that were still dealing with it. Some of the gentlemen on stage, some of the rockers, you know, David Crosby-- and I don't want to out just everybody, because some people don't want to talk about it-- but, you know, myself, Greg, we were all out there in favor of this dreaded disease. But we were out there, you know, giving our best. And it was really an amazing concert, not only because the night was amazing, but because of the response afterwards. In the next 24 to 48 hours, it was just amazing.

It's really something, what the power of celebrity can do, not just because you're a celebrity, but because you've been there. That's the difference. And that's why I'm able to stand up in front of you today, because I don't think I would have the passion. I don't think I would have taken the time to have the knowledge if I hadn't experienced it myself. You really would have to-- I mean you don't have to go through this, but there's just something about having been there that makes it just that much more important.

And I am just really very concerned about-- Someone asked me in an interview this morning about the lawmakers, "Are you going to talk to the lawmakers? Hopefully they're going to do something," you know. And I'm like, "You know what they can do? They can change this frickin' health insurance situation, okay." I have friends that are not in the business. They are nine-to-fivers. They're just regular people. And they're still struggling with their children and their own lives to get quality health insurance. If they had a Hep C experience, there is a good chance they might not even be able to afford a treatment. I don't know. I don't know what kind of treatments are out there. I'm not the doctor. Dr. McCone would be able to address that, as to what new treatments are out there.

But my treatment was not cheap. And I'm just wondering, as well as getting the word out about Hep C, you know, what else we can do, as far as trying to change the face of the health world. Because these people are not going to be able to have access to the treatment because they don't have the money. Why is it that 40 to 45 million people don't have health insurance? Because they can't afford it.

So, it's a bit of a dilemma, you know. But it doesn't stop us from certainly going forward. And we need to be able to give access to patients of Hep C. We need to start questioning our doctors more. People who go in for checkups don't generally get liver checkups. I'm sure most of you in this room just go for regular checkups, if you go at all to your doctor. It's not something that he would even ask if you wanted.

More people are saying, "Could you give me an HIV test?" But now we've got to start asking, "Check my liver. Just check my liver." Because you don't know. Because it's like a silent disease, like blood pressure, you don't know that it could be living inside your body. And so, I encourage, you know, you to get the word out to the doctors, to question our doctors. They're not God. They don't know everything. They're kind of flying by the wing of their butt too, you know. And you find this out when you're a patient. Very interesting how much your doctor doesn't know. [laughter]

I think I just want to say that this country is still a great country. But, of all the countries on the planet, it's got the worst healthcare in the world. And part of that is part of what we're seeing today with this Hep C business. Nobody is really paying that much attention. And people are dying. And there's not a lot of livers to go around. And we just really want to raise the awareness and reduce the stigma at the same time.

And my question to you is, can you help us? Will you help us? It's very dear to my heart, because I know the pain that is suffered. And I do know some people that have been contracted with the disease. And it's a very, very painful journey. So we come to you. You guys have a lot

of power and a lot of leverage. This is a room full of some very valuable assets here. And I'm really, really hoping that you will do whatever it takes so that we can get excited, and we can really do something about this.

We have a PSA announcement that's coming out. And I'm very happy about that-- finally. When will it be out now? In about two weeks? I hope so. And I just recorded a radio PSA as well. I think that, when people hear-- because a lot of people kind of know what I've been through. But, when they kind of hear the details of what it's like, you know, what you go through, and if you can come out on the other side, it's possible.

This is a treatable disease. But it needs more research. And it needs to just take that blanket off and really confront it with a better attitude than what we've seen. Because a lot of people are getting, you know, dissed and afraid to go see their doctors, and afraid to tell their families. And, you know, like they're embarrassed, like this is something that's their fault. Unless you were a drug user, this is not your fault. If you were a drug user, well, you know-- I mean, I accept the responsibility of what consequence I've had to pay.

But, for the most part, this is a disease that comes from just bad, bad stuff, a blood transfusion. You know, now we're all going to be freaked out about getting a blood transfusion. But that's just the way it is. And, you know, until they find a cure, we have a lot of treatments that we hope will be the answer to dealing with this.

Again, the interactive tool on the website is something that you all should take a look at. This is great for family members as well, so that they can feel, you know, not as uncomfortable dealing with their loved ones who may have it, or vice-versa. People in general are turning more to the Internet for information on health. But a lot of times, they don't know where to look. Or, they don't know if it's credible. And we are here to say that it is.

And I have no problem representing this company or the American Liver Foundation, who has done some wonderful, wonderful things through the years. But, you know, it takes someone like me to get the word out. I don't know why that is. But that's just the society that we live in. And again, I wish that even three years ago, I had known about the things that are available now. But that's okay. The best part is, is that my liver was 80 percent cured because of the treatment that I went through.

We do have copies of these materials. And there is additional information about the Tune In To Hep C Campaign. I encourage you to please take a look at it. And I think I need to probably do some thank yous. Have I talked long enough? [laughter] Okay. I would like to do some thank yous.

First of all, again, to my partners, the American Liver Foundation and Merck. They are the ones that are bringing this campaign to life. I'm just kind of like the little puppet that goes wherever they tell me to. I want to thank, of course, the National Press Club for inviting me to speak here today. And I'd also like to acknowledge the work that the Department of Health and Human Services are doing as well. They have developed the Viral Hepatitis Action Plan, which includes steps for improving the prevention treatment and care for people with viral hepatitis,

and trying to move the nation towards achieving, you know, healthy people. The goal is like, by 2020, that we will have eradicated many of these diseases. Wouldn't that be something.

And finally, I'd like to take a moment to thank Dr. McCone, because he is the one that can answer all the medical stuff. I don't know what was in that treatment that I took. My particular treatment was interferon. I'm sure many of you have heard of it. I would not recommend it, but if it works, I would recommend it. Very difficult treatment, very, very difficult, but very, very full of results. And I'm standing here today because of it. There are other treatments. There are organic treatments. There's herbal treatments. They take longer. That is one of the setbacks. But that's okay. And Dr. McCone would be able to answer all the medical questions.

And I don't have any bright quote to end this with, other than to say let's just get it done. Thank you very much.

[applause]

MARK HAMRICK: Thank you Natalie. That was wonderful. And so, the way this works is we'll stand up here together.

NATALIE COLE: [simultaneous conversation]

MARK HAMRICK: Well, that would be fine, but then they'd fire me as Press Club President.

NATALIE COLE: Oh.

MARK HAMRICK: I'd rather not have that happen. So thank you for those inspiring and very personal and touching remarks. And there are a lot of questions about the subject that you talked about, that we'll touch on immediately. And then we'll talk a little bit about your career and some thoughts along those lines.

So, let's talk about the campaign that you affirmed at this speech today. And, of course, the whole idea there is to focus on raising awareness and to encourage patients to see a doctor for screening and treatment. So this is a relatively new campaign. And I'm wondering, now that you've had a chance to reflect on this illness, and to think about how things are changing, how have you seen awareness and attitudes change, just in the short amount of time that you've been witnessing it yourself so personally?

NATALIE COLE: I would probably say, from my own perspective, as someone who was experiencing this on a daily basis, that people looked at me differently, not because there was like some thing over my head, you know, like some stain of, "Ew, stay away from her," but more like, "That's Natalie Cole. And she's got Hep C. And she's in a wheelchair. And she's still singing." As a person, as a regular person, you know, sitting out in the audience, if I saw that, I would be like, "Hey. That's pretty cool. That's amazing. Could I do that? Could I encourage someone to do that?"

You know, again, I think that it's about your attitude, you know. And I hope to see some changes with the advocates that, what they take from when I speak with them, what they take from whatever I'm saying, is that they will be able to infuse not just, "Go see your doctor. Get screening. Ask them," but check your attitude. Don't do the, "Why me?" That will make you crazy. Don't do that. [laughter]

MARK HAMRICK: I'm curious. Because, as you talked about the concert that you participated in with some other people who have been touched by this, I'm just thinking about the fact that, in my lifetime, I don't remember a lot of other people, people who have such immediate awareness in name as you do, or at least your peers, who have ever stepped forward in such an aggressive way.

What was it that made you decide to, let's say, infuse your musical legacy with this cause, that you feel so deeply about? In other words, what energized you to say, "You know, I'm here today, not to talk about my next album," which is usually the thing for someone in your position, "Or my next book," and sort of laugh it up with Jay on the *Tonight Show*, but to talk about something that's very serious, and to press this at the very top of your agenda. What was it that made you do that?

By the time the Merck Pharmaceutical people came to me, I had been through the chemo. I had been through a kidney transplant. And my sister died on the same day of my kidney transplant. I just felt like I have been through enough tough stuff that I can do this. I can talk about this and really inspire someone. And that's why I did it.

MARK HAMRICK: And, when you talk about the stigma, those of us that haven't been through what you've been through, can you flesh that out a little bit more for us, about what happens with that, how it affects people who aren't celebrities, who are, by their very nature, given opportunities to do things in our society that other people aren't able to do, what about for the person that isn't a celebrity? What kind of stigma are they facing?

NATALIE COLE: I can only imagine that the normal Joe or the normal Sally that has to deal with something like this, it's a very lonely disease. I think that, unless you have the support of family and friends, unless you have a medical health giver to go to, that you're alone. You're alone, and you're scared. And you don't know what your future holds. And that's what I think is the burden that many people carry that do have this disease and are reluctant to talk about it, afraid to talk about it, unable to talk about it, because they don't have any resources.

MARK HAMRICK: You talked a little bit about access to care in your speech, and essentially saying that the treatment options and the access to care are not where they need to be. For members of the general public, who may or may not have healthcare coverage, what are they up against with Hepatitis C these days?

NATALIE COLE: Well, I mean, I can answer that question only so much. I think Dr. McCone would probably answer that better. I don't know, you know. Again, without certain resources, if you've, let's say, just discovered that you've got Hep C, and the way you've

discovered it is the way that I discovered it-- you just happened to go in for a routine exam or something, some blood work, and boom, there it is, it's like you're asking yourself, "What do I do next?"

Now, I think that, you know, anyone with access to a computer can go online, look up Hep C, and it'll take you to the TuneInToHepCCampaign.com. And there will be answers there that weren't even there three years ago. So at least they've got that access now. Again, you know, a lot of people are afraid to go to the doctor, you know. They just don't want to do that. They're in denial. You know, they don't have the money, or whatever the reasons are. And there may be something going on with them, and they know that something is not right. But they're afraid to go. So now, you go on the Internet.

MARK HAMRICK: And speaking with one of our guests here at the head table, before we got started today, I understand that there's really a movement underfoot, now, to not only screen people who might be at high risk, but ultimately to screen people much the same as they are routinely screened for something like HIV.

NATALIE COLE: Absolutely.

MARK HAMRICK: What's the importance of that?

NATALIE COLE: Absolutely. Because, again, this thing that we call this stigma is so-- You know, HIV still has a bit of a stigma. It's not totally, you know, rah-rah. But it's done so much better over the past, probably, just five years, let's just say five years. If we can get the concept of Hepatitis C to that level, we'll be so much further ahead. It's valuable. It's important that we approach Hep C with the same kind of aggressiveness that we have with HIV. And I think that there is no reason why we can't have some similar positive results and continue to find more treatments.

MARK HAMRICK: And I guess, you know, the way our culture and our behaviors have changed over the years, I understand that it could be someone who does something as innocent, relatively speaking, as getting ear piercings. It could be a mother who had a blood transfusion. That's not someone who stuck a needle in their arm. That's someone who thought that they were just going through their everyday life.

NATALIE COLE: That's right. It's a little on scary side. And, you know, our hospitals, our doctors' offices, I mean you just get a little paranoid, you know. I understand why some people don't want to go to the doctor. But, you know, like our county hospitals, maybe they're not as kept up as well as-- I don't know about the hospitals here in D.C. But at home in Los Angeles, Cedars is a great hospital, UCLA, USC. But then there's the county hospital. Maybe they're not as-- you know.

MARK HAMRICK: Yeah.

NATALIE COLE: So you would want to go, if you're going to go get a test, go to a place that you know has the best testing, you know. And it doesn't necessarily have to be costly.

But again, that kind of information would be on the website, where you can go to be tested, where you can go to be screened.

MARK HAMRICK: And we talked about in your speech, you know, your engagements in substance abuse during a time, years ago. What was your own sense of the potential health risk to yourself? And, was there an awareness, really, that you could be putting yourself at risk in particular for Hepatitis C? Or was it just living that lifestyle that many thought would be okay in the end?

NATALIE COLE: Living my life. Living my life, having fun, kicking up my heels, not a care in the world. You know, for us ex-drug people, ex-drug addicts, we have our own little code of languages and stuff. But anyway, we've also seen a side of life that maybe many of you in this room have not seen. We've seen death. We've seen it come right in front of our face. And, for some reason, it passes by.

And so, when I was getting high and doing all of that stuff, I probably OD'd at least two or three different times. Never thought twice about it. Oh, I think I remember once I was concerned about the headlines. The headlines might say, "Nat King Cole's daughter found underneath the sink in neighbor's apartment, OD'd." But, guess what. I still put that needle in my arm, you know.

When you're addicted to drugs, you don't think. You're not thinking of tomorrow. You're not thinking of down the road, next week. You're thinking of just that moment. And I can't tell you how many people I lost during that time.

MARK HAMRICK: Is it your sense that it was worse back in the day than it is now on the sense of prevalence of the abuse in, let's say, the entertainment community?

NATALIE COLE: You know, it's hard to say, because-- this is going to sound really crazy. But at least back in the day, we had good drugs. [laughter] I'm serious. The quality of the cocaine, the quality of the heroin, the quality of the marijuana, was not laced with sodium pentothal. It didn't have poison in it. It didn't have rat poison in it. These days, the kids are taking the XTC, the GHB, I don't even know what half of the stuff is that they're taking. And this stuff is laced with stuff. They don't know what's in it. And that's why they're dying like the way they are.

I mean, you know, it's a different kind of culture that we're seeing now, maybe not as many heroin users, I don't really know. But, you know, the XTC, the meth, these are very, very powerful drugs that could affect some kind of organ in their life, in their body. It depends on how long they do it. Sometimes it only takes one time. And they are gone.

MARK HAMRICK: And in the sense that it was almost glorified back in the '70s, and maybe the early '80s, and now maybe not so much though?

NATALIE COLE: No. Because I mean, back in the '70s, you know, some of the most well-known record producers, they had drawers of cocaine. You know, they were giving it to the

artists. The managers would go out and get it for the artists. For me, if you didn't get high, I wouldn't hire you, you know. You couldn't even be in my circle. I mean it was a whole 'nother thought process.

MARK HAMRICK: It was a big party.

NATALIE COLE: It was a big party, yeah. And then, it went from being fun to not being so much fun. Folks started dying, and we started freaking out, you know. And some of us were able to get to rehab in time, thank God.

MARK HAMRICK: What was the first intervention like that that you can remember, where the key turned from, "It's a party" to, "Something has to be done"?

NATALIE COLE: Probably when I had my son. And there is something about-- Something that goes on in your brain, even though you don't necessarily do anything about it. But there's something that goes on in your brain as you're going to get a bag of heroin or a bag of cocaine, and you've got your son with you, and he's like two, in his pajamas. And you're taking him with you on your drug run.

MARK HAMRICK: So you're doing that?

NATALIE COLE: I think that would kind of--

MARK HAMRICK: So that's when you had an awareness that-- [simultaneous conversation]

NATALIE COLE: I had an awareness, but I didn't do anything about it, you know. There were just way too many events that happened that should have turned out really ugly and bad. I could have lost my son. And I wrote about this in my first book. My son fell in the pool. I was back in the bedroom getting high. I had people working for me that did not know how to swim, and they jumped in the pool anyway, to save him. But, did I stop? No, you know. And there were a lot of those. And, did I stop? No. So it's just really by the grace of God that I'm here.

MARK HAMRICK: What was it that got you into rehab in terms of a particular event? Was there something that caused you to go to rehab one particular day, or anything like that you can remember or care to share?

NATALIE COLE: I went to rehab twice. The first time, I have to say it was interesting because the facility that I went to was in California. They knew nothing about drug disease or drug addiction. They thought that it was a psychological or psychiatric problem, that you were crazy, and that you needed psychiatric help. So, needless to say, I was there for 30 days. And 30 minutes after I left, I was back at it.

The second time I went, interestingly enough, the people that approached me were not my family members, but my attorney, my business manager, my accountant-- and I can't remember the fourth person. I think there was a fourth person. They came to my home.

MARK HAMRICK: It was the gravy train.

NATALIE COLE: I mean, you know, they're like in the suits. The suits came to my house, you know. And it was so unusual for them to say, you know, "We really care about you. We have a lot of respect for you. But we're not going to be able to represent you anymore because you're going to be dead." And I was just like, "What? This is-- Ooh, who are you?" My mother couldn't get me to do it. My sister couldn't talk me into it. For some reason, what they did was something-- something-- something clicked in here.

MARK HAMRICK: So that's serious. Got to listen to these people.

NATALIE COLE: Yep. And I was on my way to Hazelton.

MARK HAMRICK: Well, I guess it's a blessing, right?

NATALIE COLE: Yes, indeed it was.

MARK HAMRICK: Someone asked, so what can you do to encourage more African Americans to get into the research study so the drug can help more people?

NATALIE COLE: Well, these two ladies-- well, particularly you, who has a newspaper that I'm sure goes to the black community-- okay.

MARK HAMRICK: Talk it up?

NATALIE COLE: Talk it up. If I need to do an interview, we'll do an interview. And address it specifically to the black community. Because we don't go to the doctor very often. We're not good at that. And I could get on their case a lot. So, I'd be happy to talk to you afterwards.

MARK HAMRICK: Very good. Someone asked here, from the audience, won't Hep C patients now be covered the Affordable Healthcare Act, the one that's so contentious in the political realm these days, which forbids the denial of healthcare insurance based upon a preexisting condition? In other words, is that helping, to the best of your knowledge?

NATALIE COLE: Beats me.

MARK HAMRICK: Okay, fair enough.

[laughter]

MARK HAMRICK: Very good. You're not having to qualify people for healthcare these days. Fair enough. Here someone asked-- and this is obviously a personal statement from someone in our audience. They're saying, thank you for putting your warm beautiful face to the cause of Hep C. And this person is saying, for those of us who've rebounded or relapsed while on treatment, or experienced lymphoma or RA associated with Hep C, what's on the horizon for tests for markers and tests for response to treatment? In other words, is there progress being made there?

NATALIE COLE: Yeah, that's a medical question. I wish I could answer it, but I do not know.

MARK HAMRICK: Okay.

NATALIE COLE: But again, go on the website. Tune into Hep C.com. You'll find-- If you can't find 99 percent of the answers that you're looking for, then tell the Merck people, and they'll have to redo it. Because that's why they did it, so that people can go and ask the hard questions.

MARK HAMRICK: Absolutely. Someone is asking, how did you keep your voice strong while you were undergoing treatment?

NATALIE COLE: You know, I think that the reason that my voice kind of stayed more or less in decent shape, because it's a gift. It didn't have anything to do with my disease. It still just stayed there. And it was there for me when I needed it, it really was.

MARK HAMRICK: You must be extremely grateful for the fact.

NATALIE COLE: I am so grateful, so grateful.

MARK HAMRICK: You've obviously worked as a recording artist, as an actress, as an author, probably some things I'm not thinking of at this very moment as well. That's a pretty rich, creative portfolio. And people would like to know, when you're not working on this important project, what are you doing these days to serve the creative side of your personality, whether it's a new project, recording, anything along those lines?

NATALIE COLE: I just believe that God sends me where I'm needed. And that's kind of the way it's been, especially since I've been ill, which has only been over the last three years. But, when I look back on my career, I really believe that God has sent me where I've been needed. And the fact that I even continue to work is just amazing to me, that what I do is still considered viable.

I mean, there's still so much I haven't done. And yet, I'm very, very happy with what I have done. I try to stay-- I'm in the community a lot. People see me through the community. And, you know, I think it's important when people just like you as a person, you know. Forget about what you do. If they can just get to know you a little bit as a person, that goes a long way. And so, when I have to then speak on things, I don't come off like an idiot, you know, because

I've either been there, or I'm talking to people, and I'm hearing what they're saying. And I'm hearing that message forward. And I just believe in just being real, and just letting this-- letting what I do, do what it's supposed to do.

MARK HAMRICK: A lot of people will think about the legacy of your father, who still seems very much a relevant part of pop culture. If you go Christmas shopping in the mall, you can't help but hear him.

NATALIE COLE: Oh God, I know. [laughter]

MARK HAMRICK: Right?

NATALIE COLE: It's so embarrassing, I'm telling you.

MARK HAMRICK: Really? Tell me why.

NATALIE COLE: Because, you know, especially if you're going into a mall-- not just one store, but like if you're going into several stores, and every store is playing one of my dad's songs. [laughter] And I even actually walk into a store, and I hear, "Chestnuts roasting"-- I turn around and I walk out. [laughter] I'll come back later.

MARK HAMRICK: It seems like it should qualify you for a discount at the very least. [laughter]

NATALIE COLE: Yeah. How about that?

MARK HAMRICK: Well how much do you think-- or do you keep in your mind about that musical legacy, in the sense that you've obviously embraced your father's talent, in the sense that you've performed with him, even though he passed away tragically at an early age? How often is his musical talent, and also that of your mother, you know, present with you on a day-to-day basis?

NATALIE COLE: I'd say almost all the time. I rely on that to help me make, you know, just even decisions about the music that I want to sing, the future music that I want to do. Or, what is the best road for me to take, depending on what the goal is. Like, if I want to reach a certain audience, then there are certain songs that I want to sing. And, you know, my dad, when I realized, after all these years, that my dad still makes people smile when they talk about him, when they come up to me and say, "I was such a big fan of your father's."

But there is a healing that actually took place when my father was singing. It's still there. And some of that has been passed on to me. And that's what people say, you know. And I think that that's an amazing quality. And that's why I know it's a gift, you know.

MARK HAMRICK: And yet, he was such a ground-breaker in many ways. And there was the race part of that. I mean he had a television show. I've seen it described that he may have been the first black or African American to host a television variety show.

NATALIE COLE: He was. He was, right. And he was not politically involved. He was not trying to make a statement. He was just happy to have his TV show. I remember we used to sit home and watch it, you know, for those 15 minutes. And all he had to say about it after the sponsors pulled the show, because they were just too scared to have a black person with that kind of power. Because he was getting ready to have a lot of power. And the sponsors pulled the show. And the only thing my dad had to say about it was, "I guess Madison Avenue is afraid of the dark." [laughter] And I thought that was a very cool statement to make.

But my dad was not a political person. And he was thrown into it a number of times when he would be asked to perform in front of audiences that were segregated. And that was just not his thing, even though he was from Alabama, Montgomery, Alabama. And he knew what segregation was, but he was not going to let that dictate his career.

And, you know, he got a little scuffles from it. You know, there were people that would throw things at him. And they would boo him and, you know, stuff like that. But he stuck to his guns. He said, "I'm not singing in front of a segregated audience. I sing to"-- He said, "I sing to everybody."

MARK HAMRICK: So, to keep that bipartisan tradition going, we now sit in Washington, D.C. with Barack Obama the President.

NATALIE COLE: Right.

MARK HAMRICK: And, as of today, an African American leading in some polls for the Republican nomination for President.

NATALIE COLE: Oh, Cain, right? Yes.

MARK HAMRICK: Yes. So, from either your perspective and what you think about what your father might have thought, what would he think these days?

NATALIE COLE: Oh, I think he'd be fascinated. I think he would be just absolutely, you know, glued to the television watching this in his lifetime, he would have been. And I think that we as the black people that I certainly know, are pretty glued, you know, that regardless of the results, just the idea that we have gotten this far is really an amazing thing. And I think that any ethnicity can say that when they see one of their own get up there like that. It's the coolest thing. It's a beautiful thing. And it gives us hope that, you know, we can all do something great, no matter who we are.

I think it's just unfortunate that President Obama has had so much-- you'll have to pardon me, but I just have to say it like I see it. He's had so much shit thrown at him, okay. And I'm not happy about it. And yes, I voted for him. But I don't believe that any one man, black, white, yellow or purple, can turn this country around in four years, period. So they need to get off his case, let him do what he's going to do, and, you know, maybe he'll make it the next four

years. I would wish that he would, just for the consistency of having somebody there. Now he knows what to do. [laughter] Now he knows, okay.

It's kind of like being in school. This man was very young when he came into office, you know. He didn't know half the stuff that was going to happen to him. And, you know, I think Cain-- I first started looking at Cain, and I'm like, "Hmm. Where the hell did he come from?" [laughter] You know. But, at the same time, I'm saying the same thing. Give him a break, too. I mean, what can possibly happen? We're in such an interesting culture and time of our lives right now, anything can happen.

So, why not, you know? Wouldn't that be something? I don't know what the Republicans would think, but-- [laughter] But it would be really an extraordinary thing if Cain ended up being a frontrunner, you know. But I think, for right now, I am very pleased that Obama came into this environment. I'm glad that we have a black President, because it showed us just how prejudiced we really are, okay. Because they have basically blamed this man, you know, for everything. [laughter] And they've really taken such pot shots at him. It's really not fair. Give him another four years and let him get it right. [laughter]

MARK HAMRICK: Very good. If you'll just stand by here, thank you for that. And we'll go to one last question here in a moment. We're almost out of time. I'd like to remind our guests today about some upcoming speakers. Very much at the intersection of what we've been talking about here today, on October 24th, we still have some tickets available for TMZ's Harvey Levin to talk about the changing landscape in entertainment news. And, on October 31st, Herman Cain will be our guest speaker here at the NPC Luncheon.

NATALIE COLE: And it's no coincidence that it's on Halloween?

[laughter]

MARK HAMRICK: That's when he could make it. We opened the invitation to him. [laughter] So, first of all, before our last question, I'd like to present you with a token of our appreciation, that's the official NPC coffee mug.

NATALIE COLE: Lovely. Thank you.

MARK HAMRICK: Thank you very much. And the last question is-- and it's actually a serious one. And that is, given your father's death from lung cancer, and your own battles with addiction, what advice would you give President Obama about cigarette smoking?

NATALIE COLE: Is he still smoking?

MARK HAMRICK: We don't know. You know, I think it's sort of still out there a little bit. We certainly don't see it in public.

NATALIE COLE: Right.

MARK HAMRICK: We don't want him to smoke though, right, as President of the United States?

NATALIE COLE: No we don't. Can you blame him though?

[laughter]

MARK HAMRICK: He needs to take a break, right? Your father did die from cigarette smoke.

NATALIE COLE: Yes he did. And he was a very heavy smoker. He smoked like-- what were those things called?

MARK HAMRICK: Kools? Was it Kools?

NATALIE COLE: No, he didn't do menthol.

MARK HAMRICK: Okay.

NATALIE COLE: Philip Morris Camels? Yeah. Lucky Strike. And he had a cigarette holder, you know, that filtered it. That didn't do him any good. But yeah, he was a very heavy smoker. I wouldn't know what to tell Obama, you know. I think that he is a smart enough man to know. It may just be really tough for him. But I can tell him what I did. I also was smoking up until about six years ago.

MARK HAMRICK: And you stopped?

NATALIE COLE: I stopped because I couldn't hit all my notes. And I would hate for something like that to happen before he would-- you know. But I can tell you that-- and I wasn't that big of a smoker-- But, within 30 days of not smoking, it came back.

MARK HAMRICK: Your voice was back. How about a round of applause for our guest speaker today.

[applause]

END OF INTERVIEW