

Natalie Cole, ‘Unforgettable’ Voice, Dies at 65

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Natalie Cole, a buoyantly jazzy singer who became a million-selling, [Grammy Award](#)-winning pop hitmaker with her 1975 debut album and went on to even greater popularity when she followed the example of her father, Nat King Cole, in interpreting pre-rock pop standards, died on Thursday in Los Angeles. She was 65.

The cause was “ongoing health issues,” her family said. Ms. Cole had undergone a kidney transplant in 2009 and had suffered from other ailments recently, forcing the cancellation of tour dates in November and December.

Ms. Cole had a light, supple, perpetually optimistic voice, full of syncopated turns and airborne swoops, drawing on both the nuances of jazz singing and the dynamics of gospel. It brought her million-selling albums in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s as she moved from the sound of her own generation to that of her parents.

“The biggest similarities between Ms. Cole and her father are in attitude. Instead of working toward catharsis, they aspire to a genteel elegance, balance and good feeling,” [Stephen Holden wrote](#) in The New York Times in 1993. “But where the ultimate direction of the father’s singing was an easy chair on a moonlit porch, his daughter’s tenser, more brittle singing evokes an urban, indoor setting. To the decorous phrasing of a big band singer she brings a steady current of soul-music sassiness.”

Ms. Cole performing in Los Angeles in 2008. Credit Andrew Gombert/European Pressphoto Agency

Ms. Cole was equally at home in the pop-soul of her No. 1 1975 hit, “This Will Be (An Everlasting Love),” and in her technology-assisted duet with her father in 1991, based on his 1951 recording of “[Unforgettable](#).”

Both songs brought her [Grammy Awards](#). The “Unforgettable...With Love” album, on which Ms. Cole sang her father’s hits, also swept the top Grammy Awards — including album, record and song of the year — and sold seven million copies in the United States alone.

Yet over a long career, Ms. Cole recorded broad selections of material, including Tin Pan Alley staples, songs written for her and songs by, among others, Fiona Apple and Bruce Springsteen. Her most recent album, in 2013, was “Natalie Cole en Español,” a collection of Latin pop favorites that was nominated for Latin Grammy Awards.

Ms. Cole repeatedly overcame personal setbacks.

Her first run of success in the 1970s was followed by struggles with heroin, alcohol and crack cocaine addiction in the early 1980s, a period she wrote about in her 2000 autobiography, “Angel on My Shoulder.” (She played herself in “Livin’ for Love: The Natalie Cole Story,” a TV movie based on the book.) She went through rehab in 1983.

“I just can’t have fun with drugs the way some people can,” she told [The Los Angeles Times](#) in 1985. “They can get high or have a drink and go home. I’m not like that.”

In 2009, as a result of hepatitis C that she believed she had contracted through past intravenous drug use, she underwent chemotherapy and a kidney transplant. Her 2010 book, “Love Brought Me Back,” chronicled the search for a donor. But she continued to perform well into 2015.

Ms. Cole and her father, Nat King Cole, in a photograph from about 1955. They sang together on a Christmas album. Credit Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

Natalie Cole was born on Feb. 6, 1950, to Nat Cole and his wife, Maria Cole, who had sung with the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Natalie grew up surrounded by music and celebrities, and she made her recording debut as a child, singing with her father on a Christmas album. But after Nat Cole’s death in 1965, she turned away from music. She majored in child psychology and graduated from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst in 1972.

But she was soon singing in clubs — although she resisted singing her father’s material.

“I had to do my own songs in my own way,” she told [Rolling Stone](#) in 1977.

She was noticed by producers based in Chicago, Chuck Jackson and Marvin Yancy, who wrote much of her early material. She married Mr. Yancy in 1976, the first of three marriages.

Ms. Cole is survived by her son, Robert Yancy, and her two sisters, Timolin Cole and Casey Cole.

Capitol Records, which was also Nat Cole’s label, signed Natalie Cole and released, in 1975, her debut album, “Inseparable,” which drew comparisons to Aretha Franklin. She was named Best New Artist at the 1976 Grammy Awards, where “This Will Be” also won as “Best R&B Vocal Performance, Female.”

Ms. Cole’s third album, “Unpredictable” in 1977, was also a Top 10 pop album. She showed off her acrobatic live vocals on “Natalie Live” in 1978 and made a duet album, “We’re the Best of Friends,” with the R&B crooner Peabo Bryson in 1979. But her pop profile dwindled, in part because of her drug problems.

Her career was revived in 1987, after rehab, with “Everlasting,” which included three Top 10 pop singles: “Jump Start,” the ballad “I Live for Your Love” and her version of Bruce Springsteen’s “Pink Cadillac.”

Yet it was with “Unforgettable...With Love” in 1991, leaping back to a previous generation’s songs, that Ms. Cole would establish her latter-day career. “Unforgettable” reminded both radio programmers and the record business that there was a large audience for music offering comfort far from the cutting edge.

“The shock of it all is that this record is getting airplay,” Ms. Cole said in an interview at the time. “It’s absolutely shocking to see it between Van Halen and Skid Row on the charts, totally out of its element. It should be encouraging to record companies and my contemporaries.”

Yet the Grammy sweep for “Unforgettable” in 1992 drew some criticism, particularly as the Song of the Year was four decades old. In 1993, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences changed the Song of the Year rules to make songs eligible only in the first year they were recorded or rose to prominence.

But Ms. Cole’s new direction continued to yield both hits and awards.

Her 1993 album, “Take a Look” and a 1994 Christmas album, “Holly & Ivy,” both sold half a million copies; “Stardust,” another collection of standards in 1996, eventually sold a million copies and brought her a Grammy for another duet with her father, “When I Fall in Love.” Her 2008 album, “Still Unforgettable,” was named Best Traditional Pop Album.

Ms. Cole also did some acting, appearing in television series including “Grey’s Anatomy.”

Ms. Cole grew further into her family’s heritage. In the late 1990s she performed with her uncle, the jazz singer [Freddie Cole](#). And the virtual duets with her father continued through “Natalie Cole en Español.” His own “Cole Español” album was released in 1958.)

“He would step out on faith to do something musically,” she told “[CBS This Morning](#)” in 2013. “He would just take that risk, and that’s something that I’ve gotten from him, I guess. He was never trendy.”