

## Mp3 Nita Hope - View From Here



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POP: Today's Top 40, BLUES: Blues Vocals Details: October 2, 2006 View from Here Her name represents hope to hundreds of women. As a musician, breast cancer survivor, mother, Katrina survivor and activist for the rights of the ill and dying, she embodies a fierce belief in possibility and growth.

\_\_\_\_\_ Early Years \_\_\_\_\_ This woman is no rookie wannabe. She was drilled as a singer from an early age, trained in the classics. A singer/songwriter for 33 years, she honed her craft on the Midwest club circuit in her late teens and early 20s, with studio gigs on the side. An Air Force brat most of her childhood, she was exposed to a variety of lifestyles and cultures. The music she encountered in her travels was absorbed into her psyche, forging her into an eclectic and gifted musician of incredible range and sensitivity. Her empathy for those less fortunate led to an interest in medicine during her late 20s, when she became a medical assistant and finally a medical editor, all while continuing to pursue songwriting in private, something she cherishes to this day. She married and settled down on the gulf coast of Mississippi. She felt comfortable there. Her greatest love was being a mother, however. She knew only too well the demands of the music industry and her fiery but shy and loving nature kept her close to home, to spend as much time with her children as possible. She would occasionally venture out into the coffeehouse circuit to the joy of her fans at home, though. Developing debilitating stage fright in her early 30s, she rarely sang in traditional public venues, although she would venture into churches in Mississippi and Atlanta to sing gospel or rock if she was up to it, frequently doing her own arrangements and bending traditional approaches to hymns. She comments with a nervous laugh that performing was the equivalent of pulling teeth. Without anesthetic. The only time I felt

comfortable was when I wasn't singing alone on stage. Eventually, in 1999, she formed a small trio called Something Else that included Tina Pierre and Ceci Smith, who became close friends. She settled comfortably into performing, arranging, producing and co-writing their first CD, Outta the Box. She laughs about it now with a charming throatiness and southern accent. Man, those days were crazy. work, the studio, the kids, the rehearsals, plus helping to start this one coffeehouse at a Lutheran church near here, with those rehearsals too. It was like I coulda been a contender. but I'm too tired! She laughs out loud for a moment, and then sobers. I'm not particularly enchanted with organized religion but I believe in the human spirit. We are a part of something bigger. It was just my way of saying that, I guess. Caught up in her desire to finish the album and get some sleep, she says she ignored a continuous fever and increasing fatigue for a year until December 2000. One of her dogs began to nose around her right arm, poking at it, nudging, lying on it at night. After a particularly insistent prod, she felt a sharp pain. She tentatively investigated the area and froze when she found a lump in her breast. Lying next to it was a very large lymph node. As a medical editor, she already knew. She had breast cancer. The hardest thing she'd ever had to do was to tell her husband and her kids after the tests came back positive. She shakes her head again and again when pressed for details, refusing to talk more about it, lips pressed firmly together. A lovely, petite blonde, she seems larger than her physical presence. If she chooses not to speak, no one seems interested in attempting to coax her. There's something formidable about her, despite her 5'4" slender frame. \_\_\_\_\_ The Beginning \_\_\_\_\_ Her cancer was invasive. and it had entered her lymph nodes. She was hustled quickly into surgery for a mastectomy and lymph node removal. She remembers trying to cajole the surgical team into singing "Louie, Louie" while being wheeled into the operating room. She says she felt much better after the cancer was removed. Her fatigue and fever disappeared. Things were looking up. She immediately returned to her normal routine of work with part-time visits to the studio at night, and occasional rehearsals, which she snickers over. Shyeah, I got your rehearsals right here, she laughs. We spent most of 'em talking marriage and kids while we drank wine and tried not to eat too much. Her oncologist wanted her to have treatment. He offered her a choice of radiation (every day for weeks) or chemotherapy (one treatment a month for four months). She resisted. She couldn't fit the radiation into her job schedule. Chemotherapy filled her with dread. She put it off. Meantime, the album finished, the girls had a successful CD premiere gig (with Nita wrapped in bandages from her surgery hidden under a loose-fitting shirt). I saw that show. Nita shone like

a beacon. When she opens her lips anywhere, people sit up and listen. And listen, and listen. You know how a crowd likes to make noise? Lots of moving around, shifting in their seats, kids whining. but when she sings, everything stops. Right there. As if for a moment, the only thing that exists is that one note that shes setting on fire, or the next note, or the next. She torched the house that night with a blistering rendition of Stormy Monday that I remember to this day. At the mention of it, she quirks a smile. Kick-butt blues in chest staples and tight bandages, ya know? It brings a whole new meaning to oxygen deprivation, she laughs. I tell her I had no idea that she was recovering from surgery that night. I did," she laughs. "Believe me. But you werent supposed to, right? So it worked pretty well. The CD did well in online sales on MP3. One of her songs climbed to #3 in Germany on MP3 online radio. It was about my marriage. I had Tina sing it. I was a little too close to the subject, she grinned. The band broke up around the time Nita had made her choice to take chemotherapy. She claims her voice never fully recovered its power after chemo. But she doesnt seem to mind that, she says. Its not like in blues it makes for a big change, you know? After prodding her a little, she gives in and belts out a quick run-through of Come on in My Kitchen. I cant tell any difference, I say to her. She smiles ruefully and says she hears that a lot. Her voice is stunning in real life..powerful, sultry and passionate. She can do amazing things with it, growling, rolling it, breaking it, throwing it high into a clear, almost Celtic soprano, dropping it dizzily into a rich, chocolate alto. \_\_\_\_\_ The Project \_\_\_\_\_ I ask her about this album, why she decided to do a solo project finally, when people had been asking for one for so long. She shrugs and says, Well, things change, you know? After I got BC (breast cancer), I found this online group, bcsupport.org, and they really helped me. I made a few friends there. Some of them I was pretty tight with." "Seems crazy, doesnt it? Getting that close to people you dont see that often? But it does happen. The times are changing, I guess. She smiles wryly. I met some really great gals there, really great. One of them, Gerri Collins, she was a nurse. She was always after me to go back to school. She didnt know I was a musician for a long time because I dont talk about it much online. She laughs, then sighs. She thought Id make a good nurse. She encouraged me to go back to school, which I did. Because of her, really. By then, though, shed heard me sing. She couldnt figure out why Id want to do anything else. She shakes her head. She and another friend of mine, Brenda Roots, they both died of breast cancer. And Id known several others on the site who passed away too. I think thats what probably did it." "I was kickin the idea around of doing something as a solo artist but I just couldnt think of anything to say.

I think thats important for a songwriter/singer..you really have to have something to say that forces you out in the open, no hiding. She stops for moment, staring off. I miss them. Like nobodys business, I miss those girls. They woke me right up, you know?" "I started noticing that people were dying. Lots were getting better, lots. But hearing what they were saying, what they were really saying about it, things they werent telling their families, well....." "I noticed that theres a definite dialogue problem between the dying and the living, the ill and the healthy. Theres a gap there; the healthy dont seem to want to reach out to them, or maybe they dont know what to say to them, or whatever. The ill dont want to worry anyone. Its like in that movie, Cool Hand Luke, where that guy says in that fake accent, What WE-ah have HE-yah is a FAYL-yuh ta ca-MOON-I-CATE. She chuckles. So she began an odyssey of writing, co-writing, producing and performing on a CD that she hoped would return her friends' favor, she says. She found a couple of other writers, Millie Glaser and Rhonda Stamm, both breast cancer survivors in the same support group online. They volunteered their efforts as well. Wake them up, thats what I wanted people to do, Nita says. We have to wake up. Look at us..how many times have you walked behind somebody and they just stop? Stop dead, right in front of you? Theyre blocking traffic but they dont even notice! Its like theyre so caught up in their internal business that they dont realize theyre forcing everyone to go out of their way for them. She shakes her head. We can learn a lot from these women, these women with breast cancer. A lot about slowing down, listening to ourselves, telling the truth to ourselves about what we really want, who we really want to be, how we want to behave. Listening to each other." "This whole me, me, me isnt as important as what can I do today that will make a difference? People like to feel like what theyre doing is important but its like theyve forgotten how to do that, all while theyre running around thinking that getting there is the important thing," she continues. "Its just such a rush.a rush to get to work, to get that deadline, to get home, getting mad at that guy who cut us off in traffic or that person whos maybe a little slow in the checkout lane. Where we all goin? Its all gonna come to an end somewhere. For all of us. Is that what we want to remember? That we rushed through it and missed all the important stuff? I started getting a little mad about it. She sighs, a little frustrated. We should be smarter than this, you know? She began the long process of plastic surgery to rebuild her chest. Shed had a second mastectomy in 2001 after too many poorly defined but suspicious scans.

\_\_\_\_\_ Winds of Change \_\_\_\_\_ Things moved along until August 27, 2005. It was the day before my daughters birthday. My husband always leaves for every hurricane and takes the

kids. I dont, I stay with the animals. Weve got three cats and a dog. Tough to find a place thatll take pets when that many people are evacuating. She stops for a minute, frowning. I could see Katrina on the Weather channel. Theyd been talking all summer long about this killer storm over here, that killer storm over there. People were pretty desensitized to it, I think. But I could see her changing every time she hit a new warm pocket in the water. You could see her reorganize and get redder and redder on the Doppler, until parts of her were just black. Not a good sign. At around 11:00 a.m., she abruptly decided to evacuate with her family, taking the dog and leaving the cats with food and water in dishes put up as high as she could find a place for them. I could tell you stories about that day and the next and the next until now. But who can read all that? she says. We made a late run for Atlanta. What shouldve been a six-hour drive took us 13 hours. Too many people, not enough gas for all of us to get where we needed. And you could see the prices skyrocketing all the way up there. Tell me how that works, is what I wanna know. What I didnt know was that half a million people were on the run, too. She shakes her head. Her sister stayed behind in Gulfport, MS. Nita wasnt in contact with her. She had no idea if shed evacuated or not. Meantime, Nitas neighbors daughter begged to come with them. Nita volunteered to stay behind with the dog to make room for the neighbor girl. Nitas husband Scott was adamant that Nita go. The neighbors mother refused to let either of her daughters go with her, anyway. Theyd already evacuated for other storms. One of them, we didnt even get a drop of rain. Thats a lot of money for a family to commit, when they evacuate. I think they thought they could handle it. Wed never, ever been flooded where we lived, not even in Camille. We figured, what? Maybe wed get 2 feet? You could survive that, right? She pauses, runs her hands through her hair, taps her feet nervously. They say twenty-three feet of water hit the beach two miles from my house. It was really hard to say..because it knocked down the surge gauges so no ones sure. It washed out everything it could get to. People I know, you know? Their houses, everythingthe bayou rose up and met it right smack in the middle of our neighborhood. It was like a huge washing machine and every house was stuck in spin. She falters for a moment. She has this look Ive come to know from speaking with so many Katrina survivors, an empty, no-one-home expression. I dont know what to say about it anymore, okay? She smiles, trying not to offend. Its just thatI dont know.I dont think anyone can really understand. I dont think they really could unless they saw it firsthand, really. Talking about it hasnt helped Mississippi much. She smiles wryly. Theyd rather talk about New Orleans. A million and a half American people were affected by that storm and they want to talk about one place, like

thats all there is. Her home was blasted with over 5 feet of water. She lost all her instruments but managed to salvage a violin, although a guitar made it but not well, she grimaced. At least the cats were alive, that was really something. I was so glad they were okay. One was pretty dehydrated but the others did well. She managed to get to Gulfport with her husband to retrieve her sister, whom shed heard had survived in one of the worst hit areas. Nita wasnt sure if she was still there or even if they could reach her through the debris. To this day, I wont forget that plowin my car through those messed up streets with stuff lyin everywhere, busted glass, downed wires and who knows who lying around waitin for anyone with food and water..there was no one down here with food or water and we came down five days after, when law enforcement said it was safe enough." "People were starving and thirsty and pretty scary. Man, there were just huge piles of debris everywhere, houses that looked like theyd imploded or were all sucked in and then blown out. I kept worrying about looters and stuff. You know, the things Id seen on the news. And the smell, the smell of death everywhere..it came through our AC vents in the car. We had to cover our faces when we got there, our eyes were burning so bad. To her relief, she found her sister. That was a moment, Ill tell you that much. She grins. They returned to Atlanta for a couple of weeks to regroup. Her sister left for New Mexico. She and her family went back down to live in some trailers on a wildlife refuge where her husband works as a biologist. They were so good to us there. We were so lucky. You couldnt have asked for better people than they had there, especially right at first, when we took the first trip down. That was a bad time. I lost a good friend..her husband, son drowned in their attic. I missed their funerals. I cant believe I missed their funerals. She hitches a breath. Id written this little piano piece for a friend of mine for the album, another BC girl. It was playing in my car, over and over and over because I was just too shocked to really hear anything. Now when I hear that song, that version of it, the reprise? Im back there all over again, sitting in my car on that street, with all these shell-shocked people wandering by me with dead, empty eyes and my girlfriends gone. Everything I knew was gone. But the worst, she says, is when she had to take her children to the house for the first time. They knew it was bad. I dont think they got how bad it really was, though. I felt like my kids were just beaten black and blue right in front of me. We didnt have much left but some photos my daughter had pinned up high on her walls. She really saved us with those. Her eyes light up. You shouldve seen em though, when it came time to gut the house, they were all in there, tearing out hunks of walls, tearing out carpet, wearing masks and looking like real pros. I was so proud of them, I cant even tell you. Nita and her family are now back in their home, rebuilt and

safe with great floors! she enthuses. Theyll last. Theyll last. And she smiles. \_\_\_\_\_

Another Life \_\_\_\_\_ She finished the album a few weeks ago. She said she brought it down to Mobile, AL after Katrina. I was too tired to work on the house and drive back and forth to Atlanta, she said. My husband was working and we were lucky we had that. We were living in a different town, next to our hometown, and I was driving the kids back and forth to school and then working with the contractor to get the house done." "There just werent enough workers then. Id work on the house all day, go home, make dinner, hang out a little, then go to the studio in Mobile. It was a push. It got better, though. Lots. And she smiles. It always gets better. Shes set to start school again in January, to finish up her bachelor's in social work and work in hospice care, so her minds been on that a lot lately. Im surprised by this; I ask her why shed want to work that closely with the dying when shes already had cancer. Doesnt it remind her? Shes as startled as me for a moment. Then she bursts into laughter. Well, its true, theres no cure for breast cancer. But hospice? Shoot, Im good at it. Ive got an in now. I dont mind all the traffic, the saying hello and goodbye. Its like life, you know? Only faster. Suits me. Helps me try to get this point across about dialogue with those who are ill. She spends her time writing more music, trying to wade through the bureaucracy and the paperwork after Katrina, trying to get the word out about the album and keeping watch over the Grief Board at BC Support online. There, shes known as Hope. And she is that. To so many. I ask her what she thinks of her album. She says she wants people who dont know anything about breast cancer to see that this isnt an elitist project or even a particularly intellectual one. She thinks of it as an emotive work. The lyrics, theyre for anyone. Breast cancer girls will understand it right away, I think. I didnt want a project that was about separating the sick from the well. I wanted everyone to relate it to something personal and then when they find out its about breast cancer, they say, oh, hey, I can sort of understand that a little now. And maybe theyll make a choicea choice not to turn away from their friend or their mom or their sister or wife because theyre afraid themselves or they just dont think they have what it takes to face it with them, side by side. She smiles. Because they do, you know. We all do. We can do anything if we believe in it enough. \_\_\_\_\_ Epilogue

\_\_\_\_\_ I listened to the album on my way home from this interview. Ive been a reporter for a long time. Ive seen some terrible and wonderful things in my career. But when Nita sings these songs when you hear them..youll believe theres something bigger out there too. I took it out of my car and played it again at home. Im listening to it right now. When she tells you she doesnt need much more than

that or that she craves peace or she growls at you to get up, she means it. And you feel what she feels.  
Her voice and these songs make me feel like I could do anything. Even face my own fears.

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