

HOPE NUNNERY

Holler of the mountains

**NEW YORK CITY,
NEW YORK**

HOPE Nunnery has a name, a voice and a story that all seem in

their own ways too good to be true. At least until you hear her talk about them. Then, like the songs on her first album, *WildernessLounge*, they just seem natural, and inhabited.

First, that name. "I got Hope, because my parents were told they couldn't have children," she says, waiting on a decaf coffee in an Irish bar off Times Square. "But sixteen years being married, here I come. And the nurse in the hospital said, You've hoped for a child so long, you should name her Hope.' So I got Judith Hope, but they always called me Hope."

Nunnery is a not-uncommon family name in the part of South Carolina where she grew up, near Sumter. (Her mother's people were Hatfields, she says, "which carries its own baggage.") This was in the 1950s and '60s, and Nunnery, who is 52, recounts a childhood drawn from a pastoral America of cotton fields and mules and church singing. And her grandmother sitting on the porch, which is where the voice comes in.

"We'd get on the porch and sing unaccompanied," Nunnery says. "And of course we're not Appalachian by any stretch, but when you think of those voices that you can almost hear mountain in them, she had that sort of voice. She could holler.

"I mean, I'm alive because she could holler. I got into her medicine one time and almost killed myself, I was like 3 years old. She hollered and got the nearest neighbor to come and take us to the hospital."

Nunnery's own voice is deep and wild, rich, sometimes ghostly (but in an assertive, chain-rattling way). The songs are spare and melodic, with strains of gospel, country-blues and honky-tonk. The lyrics are haunted by loss, but uplifted by glimpses of redemption, however fleeting.

On her album's title track, Nunnery happily declares herself "an old gal singer

in the Wilderness Lounge/Where seeking souls all come around." It's not the sentiment you expect to find on a debut album, but most people don't wait until after their 50th birthday to make a debut.

"You know what," she says, "I don't think my heart was big enough to write these songs twenty years ago."

Nunnery was the first person in her family to attend college — neither of her parents finished high school — and majored in theater almost accidentally. In the 1980s she found her way to New York, where she auditioned and worked day jobs, including as a child abuse investigator. (She currently works as a secretary.)

Her early love of music stayed with

her, and along the way she began honing her craft, taking lessons in voice and music. The latter led her to Steve Tarshis, a local pro who started as her slide-guitar teacher and ended up as her bandmate.

"Once I heard her sing, my mind was blown," says Tarshis, a self-described "Jewish guy from Westchester" who had played around town with roots-rock bands. He produced Nunnery's album, played guitar and contributed vocals.

"I'm kind of a student of American music in general," Tarshis says. "And the important thing about it to me is not just the preservation of it, which I think is important, but the continuation of it. What I saw in Hope was someone with a very unique ability to do that, because she's got a foot in both worlds."

"My grandmother was born in 1894, and I was born in 1955," Nunnery says. "When you think of 1894, and New York City in 2008, I'm a product of her raising. And of the things she'd say to me, and how she'd walk with her snake stick. I've seen her, me and her walking up the little dirt road by the church, and her take her toe and just chop that snake in one fell swoop. Things like that you just suck into you, and you get to New York, and years pass, and they become more real than what happened yesterday.

"I think it's a product of aging," she continues. "I think it's also a product of aging well. I like to say I feel like I'm doing that. I'm not afraid of being old. As a matter of fact, I feel like I'm finally coming into my own."

— JESSE FOX MAYSHARK



Hope Nunnery and Steve Tarshis.

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