

An Interview with successful performing songwriter, Beth Nielsen Chapman

conducted by: Bart Herbison, Executive Director of the NSAI

Beth's bio states (on her website - from an article written about her by Kerry Dexter at Dirty Linen Magazine): "Beth Nielsen Chapman is the writer behind number-one country hits for Trisha Yearwood, Willie Nelson, and Lorrie Morgan. Jazz artist Ute Lemper and blues-rock Grammy winner Bonnie Raitt have also recorded her songs. Chapman's own albums have charted in the top 10 in the Adult Contemporary field. Recently, Chapman's name has been in the news because Elton John chose the title song of her current release, Sand and Water, to sing at his concerts in memory of Princess Diana and Gianni Versace." This interview provides rare insight into the mind of an extremely talented songwriter who has decided to share the most personal aspects of her own life in her song.

Bart: Let's talk about the music first. I loved what you said; this is a good record.

Beth: Yeah, I'm very proud of this record. Well, songs come to me in really sort of subliminal ways. I often write the vowels a couple weeks ahead of the consonants. (Bart laughs.) I'm serious.

Bart: Describe that.

Beth: It's like I'll sit down and put my hands on the piano or the guitar, and then I'll hear a sound or I'll feel a chord that will resonate and then I'll get something happening in my voice. My voice is like a car that I get into and drive but I don't know where I'm going. And I record everything. And often, I sort of get into a state, a creative state that is, where I'm just feeling around

melodically, and playing things off the top of my head. Then I go back and listen to it and for the first time, hear what I just did. It's like Elvis has left the building while the thing is happening. I'll often think, "Oh that wasn't any good and I don't think I got anything out of that." Then I go back and listen to it the next day and hear a little bit of something, and that will be the beginning of a song. Then I'll sing it over and over and over again and it will develop legs. It'll sort of form itself. I'll keep coming back to it and starting it at the beginning. There's a song on this record called "Every December Sky" and I started it the day, I was actually down at the Gulf, around New Year's and I spent three days by myself in silence. I sat down and started playing this song and I got this really strange feeling and I started sobbing. It was right at that time, within that hour, that I found that Kent Robbins died and I always felt like Kent Robbins had a part in the spirit of that song coming through me and all I had was "every December sky blah, blah, blah, and I had this whole strange feeling like what does that mean? I felt there was this sense of connection between that song and Kent. And then it was two more years later before I finished that song. Then it was another year before I recorded this album. So the song has been around for about three years and then you know, somehow, I knew in the terms of the functioning of writing that song, I knew it had to start with "Every December Sky" and I knew it had to end with "Every December Sky". I knew it was about letting go and it was about believing that even though it seems like there's nothing ahead of you, that there is something ahead of you. It's really a metaphor for death and also a metaphor for life.

Bart: Well, you know, we were talking about spiritual stuff just before we started this interview. I just glanced at some of these lyrics, and Beth, you have been through so much. You lost your husband, finished this record three days before you learned you had breast cancer and what amazed me at glancing at some of these lyrics, it's almost like you could have written about even the second part of that experience. It goes so uncannily with what you have been through.

Beth: It is. It's like; going through chemotherapy, that song gave me the most comfort. It's all about believing. It's all about

really believing that in the darkest hour, in the darkest coldest day of winter, that the spring is inside the trees. That somehow folded into my psyche, many years before this challenging thing I went through. Even as I finished this song, I felt a connection with Kent. I am just looking forward to the song Harlan is going to help us all write. (Laughs)

Bart: Has Kent's family heard this song?

Beth: Yeah. Actually, Kent's wife. She actually sent me a note said that it meant a lot to her. I have never really talked about it. I never really talked about it for three years, until this record came out. I've had people speak about that song or ask particularly about that song because it is a pretty powerful song in the record. You know, I didn't mean to set out to write these songs that have to do with life and death. It's just my life has been unfolding this way. That's what I have had to learn to deal with and come to terms with and believe that everything is going to be ok even though we go through these devastating things and all of us will. I have been through breast cancer, so maybe I have gotten a head start for my age on some of the stuff that all of us will go through. We'll all go through loss and have to find a way to have a sense of faith that we're gonna be ok even though we are going through that.

Bart: How does the profoundness of the tragic part of your personal journey meet with the way you make your music?

Beth: Joyfully. I feel much more joyful about the things that I can notice now, that maybe I wasn't paying too much attention to before and they're the smallest things available to everybody. They are dumb, sort of, meaning that they are so obvious, like looking at a flower or watching the seasons change. Really appreciating a friend. Remembering that you know have this great day to spend and what you are going to do with it. Not getting so bogged down, and how am I doing, how do I compare, can I get more stuff.

Bart: It's really about the journey than about the destination.

Beth: There's something about having all your hair fall out, especially being a woman. You look in the mirror and go, "Whoa!" and your sort of enter into the Twilight Zone in a way, but it's not all bad. I mean, one of the good things you get from it is a lot of things get stripped away that you are going to leave behind anyway. So you get this sense of what might be really more towards something to focus on besides the accumulation of more stuff, which I get caught up just like everybody. Getting ahead. The issues of competition, competitive issues go out the window. I mean, I celebrate more other people's success and less of a comparative feeling, like gee, I wish I were selling as many records as so and so.

Bart: Did you know you wear that? I mean I remember we talked right when you learned the news. You are on our board of directors and we missed you so much. You just look different from the first time I saw you after you went through everything. I feel your energy. I like being around you. It's osmosis. Has it changed the music?

Beth: Yeah. Everything I go through, I grow. This music was written before I went through it. But the death of my husband informed a lot of my music. It opened me up. It sort of cracked me open, really. You know, going through the losses and grieving the losses, the way I deal with my grief is to write through it, write my way through it. One of the things I lost in terms of going through breast cancer is a sense of innocence that I am invincible. Now I have to honor my health more than my pocket book. I don't scramble around trying to get ahead at the price of my health. I have been a driven person before and sometimes I still am you know, but I am driven to stay healthy now more than driven to get ahead. We don't take care of ourselves physically. We sit there and knock back sodas and all these devastating unhealthy things. I love sodas, but they use them to wash blood off the highways. They use sodas. There something going on with that soda that can cut through the concrete.

Bart: I get this picture in my head right now of the Kentucky Derby. Let me tell you where I am going with this. You put these horses in the thing and they make them wait a few seconds, they

are ready to race and they make them wait then they want to jump out the gate. Well, you have made this music and I am going to digress for a second. I think you really are what songwriter/artist means. You've done it with little support, with great support. You've just kept doing it. Always out there. One of your colleagues on the board and I were remarking that there were two of you a couple of years ago.

Beth: I wish there were.

Bart: Where I am going with all this, is do you feel like a horse that is getting out the gate? You have been waiting to get out and do this record and go play it and go share it with the world. You are ready.

Beth: Oh yeah. I am really enjoying this time. I get my frustration going with this should be more happening and that should be more happening. I check myself whenever I can't hold it. You feel good. You have hair. You're healthy; you're not nauseated. We got nothing to get too complaining about right there. Beyond that, it is very fortunate that there are so few people that get to do what they love and find a way to make a living doing it. I know many of the songwriters out there have not realized that place which is a great thing to be grateful for. I am going to be doing a bunch of dates this summer with Judy Collins and Arlo Guthrie.

Bart: Where is Beth going to be June and July?

Beth: I am a very eclectic songwriter and my artist's career has been very eclectic. I get airplay on AC. I have been doing shows with Buddy and Julie Miller and Judy Collins. I am going to open for Trisha Yearwood a couple of dates in July. The category thing is a real challenge. I don't fit neatly into one category. It is sort of a love/hate thing I have with it. Mostly a love thing. I really like all kinds of music. I don't like having to say this is what I do and I don't do that. I am hoping with an artist named Andy Bay who is an incredible jazz artist and we have gotten to be good friends. I like to have one foot in all those styles and camps. As a songwriter, I was very influenced by everything from the 30's

and 40's through Motown through the singer/songwriters of the 70's through country music by way of Emmylou Harris and Willie Nelson and artists who drew great songs from all different genres and made them their own. To me, that is the melting pot to where I get my inspiration. Artists like Linda Ronstadt who do Mexican albums and Nelson Riddle albums and why we have to pick one thing and be stuck with it, I don't understand. Part of the challenge of that is finding a way to glue it all together so they know where to put you in the record store. (Laughs.) I always tell them put me under "C", for Chapman. We were talking about the changes between the Internet and the radio world. They have this satellite radio stations that are popping up where there are no commercials. There is an opportunity there, perhaps for music to find its way based on just the merit of the music as opposed to is it going to sell razor blades to women who are 35 and older? That has been a real cap on the creativity that people can have if they want to make a successful career by way of radio. It is kind of a shake up time that we are in right now and putting a record out in the midst of it is pretty interesting. I am not sure what is going to happen. All I know is I can go out and sing and perform my songs and love doing it and if nothing else, I can sell my CD's out of the back of my truck.

Bart: Let's move away from the spirit side. Let's be human. What do you hope this record does? Not in terms of sales, but in terms of you?

Beth: I hope that it reaches the people who need to hear it because I do think that what has happened to me in my life that has come through into my songs has been helpful to people, especially my last album, "Sand and Water". I still get letters from people everyday thanking me and telling me my psychologist wrote your name and your album on a prescription pad and told me I had to listen to it 30 minutes in the morning and 30 minutes in the evening to make me cry. I have grieved the loss of my child or grieved the loss of my husband. This is not a copy of that kind of record. It is sort of an extension and a moving forward through what I went through in the years following "Sand and Water" which is an ongoing process of learning to relate to grief in a way that I can live and a way that

can enrich my life as opposed to devastate me and keep me from being able to move.

Bart: I think that personifies the power of music, what music is all about. I was watching a show last night with this actor. He doesn't care who you are, especially if you are a creative person, that you will be at a reception with other actors and after you have kind of made it, you're still going, "I hope everybody doesn't find out that I am not one of them." I get a sense that you're past that. I mean, I guess I want to ask you a few questions. People know your music, I hope this helps them know you as a person and where the music comes from. We recently gave you the Maggie Cavender award. You pulled off a tremendous coup for this organization. We did a TV show that you helped save and I won't get into details about that, but to say thank you. Garth Brooks ends up at the last minute hosting this thing for us and you played "Emily". He asked you to play it on the special. We had to stop the tape because he was so moved. Do you know the power of how you touch people? I mean your touching a Garth. You got know that that translates to us common folk.

Beth: Well I think Garth is a really sensitive person and he's huge in terms of his body of work and what he's accomplished as an artist. But, I know him more personally now and I found him really a deeply sensitive person. He's like preaching to the choir on songs like that. But, "Emily" was written many years before I ever really went through a direct hit from her loss. When I wrote "Emily", I didn't know the power of music like I know it now. I used to sing it at the Bluebird when I first moved to town. My husband would be sitting there and I would always get to the end of the song and then as everybody was filling up with tears and really responding to the song, I would always crack some joke and say something like, "Oh well." I was uncomfortable with the fact that I had gotten everybody sad. I remember my husband saying, "You should really that moment go by. Let people have what your song gave them and quit getting in the way of it." "Accept that you have this gift and let people share it with you and stop apologizing for giving them the opportunity to have these feelings." I stepped into that a couple of years after that

conversation. It took me a while to allow that. After Ernest died, "Sand and Water" was something I had to write, whether I took it out of my house or not. I had to write the song and work my way through that grief. I almost panicked at the end of that. Right before the record came out, I called Rodney Crowell, who produced it with me and said I don't know if I can do this, I don't know if I can put these songs out because they're so personal. If people don't care or laugh at me or something, I just don't think I can handle it. He said you gotta trust that this is something people need to hear to help them.

Bart: And it was.

Beth: And this record has been the same thing. There have been so many letters from people who are using these songs to get connected to a sense of hopefulness, which to me is my main focus, is. I teach workshops. I teach songwriting. Sometimes I teach workshops on grief and creativity and the way that those two things need to work together. I teach them to regular people, hospice workers, and not just songwriters. It's really the same message. Within each and every breathing alive person, there is creativity. I hate it when people say they are not creative. You just have to access it and let it help you heal. You don't have to take your paintings and make that you're living with them. Find a way to manifest your creativity, whether it is baking bread or designing something, painting a picture, or playing a song. As children, you are not encouraged culturally to own what you already own. It's like Dorothy with the red slippers. She has been wearing them through the whole damn movie and all she had to do was click them together. That's creativity. That's the red slippers that everybody's wearing they don't even know they have on.

Bart: A couple of random things. Where are you from?

Beth: I am from air force bases. I grew up all over the place.

Bart: Now you're hangin' with Elton John and Vince is on this record and everybody else. That has got to be cool.

Beth: When Elton called me on the phone one day, I said, " Who is this really?" I love the way Elton goes to artists whose music he has been moved by and supports them. He has done that with many artists. I am very lucky to be one of them. He keeps doing it. He keeps his passion alive for music by finding these kids.

Bart: But, don't you want to call your mom and say, "Guess what?"

Beth: Absolutely.

Bart: I'm going to tell you a really cool moment for me. We did the Green's Grocery taping. I have met your son Ernest a few times. I started talking to him about his music. He plays everything. I asked him what he had been doing. He told me he learned to play the saxophone in the last couple of weeks. Then he told me he recorded seven albums. That is so cool!

Beth: He has been in Ireland for four months studying peace and conflict resolution. He has been traveling with a band called Different Drum, and they are half Protestant and half Catholic. He is really learning a lot about music.

Bart: Hook him up with Bono.

Beth: (Laughs) He called me and asked me if I knew Bono. I told him no. He said, "I really want to talk to him." I said, "Get in line." I was thinking the other day; I should get him a penny whistle. That is a cool Irish thing. He just turned 21 in Ireland. The other day I got this message of a 30-second raging penny whistle. (Laughs)

Bart: There is an old Hoyt Axton album called "Fearless" and he does a song on there called the "Pennywhistle", you need to get that for him. You are on our board of directors. We have made some strides; we still have a long way to go. People still want to take your music. Just a word to our songwriter members and I would like you to encourage people that get up and are trying to make a living out of it everyday to understand we really need people to give back because we are starting to make a

difference.

Beth: It's a very important time for people who are advocates of songwriters and protecting the work that they create as creative people whether it is songwriting or anything else. It's going to take a lot of hard work and legislation to support that this is breaking the law. You reduce it to a lemonade stand. You don't just drive by and pick up lemonade and drive off. You have to create a give and take or you are not going to have an industry and you are not going to have a bed for creativity to be a garden. It's just not going to be there. You're going to have uninteresting things. It's a deadening thing to our artistic abilities. The other thing is, years ago, I remember in the 50's, being a kid and seeing a lot of litter on the side of the road and there was this campaign where they had an Indian who was crying on TV. There was something that shifted in that. It was a very powerful shift in people's consciousness where they realized they had to take responsibility for this because otherwise we're gonna be living in a sewer. All of America will be living in a sewer. Now, that is not to say that you never see litter. But, people really frown on people that throw cups and things out their window. I don't ever see that. It was done all the time. I think one of the things that needs to happen is there needs to be some funding for a PR campaign to educate young people on what they're going to lose and also the fact that it is distasteful to steal other people's property. It is other people's property. Change the perception. It is going to take more than just what we can do within the industry. I think it is going to take a public campaign that goes out to the common man, you know, to the general public and it's going to be expensive. It worked for littering. It's like, if you are a college student, you can learn how to rip things off the Internet, but at least you wouldn't go around boasting about it or talking about it. That needs to change. There are good, decent people that won't do that, won't steal. Somebody asked me the other day if someone said to you that you could go to a grocery store and take a loaf of bread and not get arrested. Go take it. Would you take it? I wouldn't do that for a loaf of bread. It's tacky. That's the word that needs to be applied to people that download music illegally. It's very tacky.

Bart: Last question. You have and are living you're dream. What's one or two things you hope you still get to do, somebody you get to work with?

Beth: There's a long list of people I'd love to work with.

Bart: But do you see yourself doing this thing or that thing?

Beth: I actually have a couple of different kinds of records I want to make. I want to make a record called "The Hymns" album. I have been toying with it for about ten years. Each hymns either something I have found or something I have written that kind of covers every major religion of the world. My belief has always been that the source of love and all creation, whatever you call God, comes through every culture and every religion. There is a dark side and light side of every religion. What I want to do is just draw the light side from each one that I can find and put that all on one record and use my voice as sort of the common denominator. Another record I want to make is like a bluegrass record. I have had songs I've collected over the years I have written that I would really like to do in a really rootsy kind of way. I would like to do an album of just all the songs that other people have had hits on, the versions that I do. I am still working on getting enough hits in order to make a whole album. (Laughs)

Bart: Well you have at least a side.

Beth: That's right, I have at least a side.

Bart: Well, Beth this has been great. I can't wait to hear those records.

Beth: Thanks.

More information on Beth can be found on her website at <http://www.bethnielsenchapman.com/>.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER:

Bart Herbison is Executive Director of the [Nashville Songwriters Association International \(NSAI\)](#), a post he has held since 1997. A Paris, Tenn., native, Herbison worked as a reporter and spent 14 years in Country radio before joining the staff of U.S. Rep. Bob Clement in 1987. During the next 10 years, Herbison served as the Tennessee Congressman's Press Secretary, then Campaign Manager, then Chief Administrative Officer before leaving Capitol Hill for Music Row. Herbison is a 1996 graduate of Leadership Music.