

From the Garden of the Good Old Unknown

by Beth Nielsen Chapman



Not long after I started to have some success as a songwriter, I received a call from Pat Pattison at Berklee School of Music in Boston asking me to come and do a residency there and teach a "songwriting" class. I told him I would be honored, hung up the phone and realized I didn't have the slightest idea how I wrote songs. In fact, a little part of me didn't even want to try to "know" for fear that I would start thinking about it too much. I had already suffered one major stretch of writer's block once, which had come in and faded out, big, blank and unexplainable. How could I teach songwriting to someone else?

To add to my pressure, Pat, in his book on lyric writing, devoted half of a chapter brilliantly dissecting and illustrating the inner workings of a song of mine called "Child Again" from my first album on Warner Reprise. On the plane flying to Boston I read as he described how my second verse "relit" the chorus etc. etc. I was amazed to read about the intricacies of this song that I had had no inkling of as I was writing it. And now I was going to "teach" someone else how I did it? I was sure they'd find out I was an impostor.

I decided I'd better think fast...I must know *something*, right? I mean, after all I did write the song. So how could I write the song and not know what I was doing? As I "thought" about it, I realized that I never "think" about it when it's happening. As I've developed as a writer, I've benefited from immersing myself in music that I loved, soaking up the craft and structure by repeated listenings, learning the chords to all the songs I could get my hands on. The geography of the great songs that inspired me left its imprint on me as a result of my taking many trips into those songs as a tourist. Writing my own songs has always been like setting out on a journey without a map and little clue of a destination. Almost always, it has been

about following a sound that comes from a place within me that sometimes runs like clear water, and sometimes there's rust and rock in that water, but the water is always in there.

So began my journey into teaching...me trying to inspire the students at Berklee how to be comfortable with not knowing how to write as you are writing.

Sometimes I have lovely bursts of confident ramblings and lines or melodies that are "on the way to something." And sometimes there are days I face The Great White (blank piece of paper) and hours later have nothing. I count those writing sessions as at least character building creative workouts. Those are the times when my fear shows up (you know that little voice that tells you you don't have what it takes, and you never will). I always invite It to pull up a chair, and I pour It a cup of tea. Fear is, sometimes, part of risking being original (also known as "creating"), but fear is not a part of me. I made this decision to acknowledge my fear when It shows up, but never let It sit in my lap and obstruct my view or borrow my pencil.

I suspect that, by definition, every writer at one time or another has felt both the "creative bliss" and the "creative abyss." If you call yourself a "writer," you've probably dived deep enough or flown high enough (at least once) into that place of no gravity, that effortless, unexplainable dimension of existence, where, as Tom Schuyler so eloquently describes in his anthem to songwriting "Sixteenth Avenue," these golden words roll off of someone's tongue. It's the accidental, inspired wandering and bumping into what "rings true" that is the mystery as well as the deep communication of art.

One of my favorite books on approaching creativity is Brenda Uleand's *If You Want To Write*, which could have just as easily been called *If You Want to Paint, Sculpt, Design,*

Arrange, Compose, Etc., because all of the oxygen of creativity comes from the same source of inspiration: playfulness and trust in the unknown. I like to think of it as "lift off." What Uleand calls "independence of spirit" is, in my opinion, one of the fundamental ingredients of great songwriting. There's a lot that can be analyzed, appreciated, and even studied about the craft of songwriting. Looking back and observing what's made something work in a song is a very valuable exercise. But there's a big difference between studying steps and surrendering into the soul of a dance with your whole body.

Living in Nashville, the songwriting capitol of the world, has taught me a great deal about all of the aspects of being a songwriter. But the greatest piece of wisdom I have come to hold as a writer doesn't come from any of the ropes of the business or the rules of the craft. It's learning to listen through the noise at the intersection of the undefinable for the thing that rings true. *

Beth Nielsen Chapman has had songs recorded by Trisha Yearwood, Willie Nelson, Faith Hill and Bonnie Raitt, among others. She's released five albums as an artist, including a greatest hits package on Reprise this past spring.

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