

Growing Through the Cracks with Beth Nielsen Chapman

By BLYTHE NEWLON

Beth Nielsen Chapman. If you know the name, then you probably know her as the legendary songwriter who wrote "Strong Enough To Bend", recorded by Tanya Tucker (cowritten with Don Schlitz), which went to #1 in 1986 and was nominated for song of the year, "Nothin' I Can Do About It Now" which topped the charts for Willie Nelson, "All The Reasons Why" and the #1 hit "Five Minutes", recorded by Lorrie Morgan. She has also had songs recorded by Lee Greenwood, Alabama, Waylon Jennings, Crystal Gayle, Don Williams and many others.

If you don't know the name, get ready! Beth has recorded a wonderful new album bursting with some of the most profound, moving and intense songwriting you can imagine.

Writing poems since the third grade, Beth has always had the ability to remember and imagine. She remembers what it was like to be a child growing up, and the struggles of life. She tells us wonderful stories that are both personal and universal. The common thread through out her songs is the fragility of life, the tenacity of the human spirit, the painfully honest glimpses into relationships, the bittersweet reflections of years gone by.

Many of the songs on Beth's new self-titled album were written slowly. One song, "Child Again," took six years from start to finish. "It's a process that takes love and patience. I've found when people try so hard to be commercial, the songs don't have any substance. It's like the tail wagging the dog. I'm a great believer in elbow grease and sitting there 'till the damn thing happens."

SongTalk: *When I read of your past successes in songwriting, I expected to hear a real country sound. But this album is not country. What category would you say this is?*

Beth Nielsen Chapman: I guess I would just call this album "songwriting". I love songs of all different styles. I love songs from the 30s and 40s...from the great musicals and the 60s. Coming to Nashville was wonderful because it opened me up to country writing as still another form. It was difficult to narrow the songs down to the ones I wanted to do on the album. Jim Ed Norman who signed me out of the Nashville office has a reputation for putting the song ahead of other considerations. In the past you'll notice the great classic songs weren't written just to get on the radio, they came from someone's heart. That's the difference. These days it's so easy with the technology to get a record out, and the song I believe has suffered for that. Writing a song is like going to the grocery store to shop for dinner. You have to consider who you are serving, and what's the occasion. If I write for Willie Nelson, I know not to put in a lot of snare drum in it. A lot of these songs on the album simmered for a long time.

ST: *When did you write your first song, and what inspired you to start writing?*

BNC: I remember writing little poems in the fifth and sixth grades. When I was in the sixth grade, my father got a guitar

"There was a third grade boy that we knew in school
He was found face down in a swimming pool
As they worked on that kid every minute was an hour
And when his eyes fluttered open we could feel that power
Life holds on, given the slightest chance
For the weak and the strong
Life holds on"



**"As long as grass keeps growing through the cracks,
there will be a way."**

I had the whole song in place, but I didn't want to start it with that picture. It was too dramatic of a visual image to start the song off with. About two months later, I was fumbling through some of my old work, and I found the poem I had written about the grass growing through the concrete, and it fit perfect for an opening verse. So that's how that song started, it was almost a mystical thing.

ST: *Your songs draw vivid visual images. Are many inspired by actual events of your life, or a mixture of real things and observations?*

BNC: My songs are usually derived emotionally directly from my life. I don't write very well about things I haven't felt myself. The song on the album "Take It As It Comes" is about a friend of mine who left her husband, and it was very real to me because we're very close, and I felt there was nothing I could do. I had a real understanding and a feel for what she was going through. But because of her child she kept going, there was no choice.

Some of the most moving songs for me are the ones that

not even know I like it but I'll put it down. If you could see my music room, you'd be amazed! I have about fifty tapes around me now that say on them "DO NOT ERASE-SONG EMBRYO." They have no titles, just little pieces of melodies. Then sometimes I'll pop one into the tape machine, and say "Hey, I like that", and finish it up. But many are what I call half-incubated. They are just waiting. Of course when you co-write you have to be a little more awake than that!

ST: *Do you write on the piano, guitar or no instrument, and how does that affect the writing of your songs?*

BNC: That's a very good question. On the piano, I seem to write songs that are more diverse than I do on the guitar. I've learned every single Joni Mitchell chord on the guitar, which gives a song a certain feel, and I've learned some jazz chords from the old Hoagie Carmichael tunes that aid in writing as well.

I don't play lead on the guitar, so those tunes tend to be more rhythm oriented. On the piano, I tend to leap off ledges and I don't know where I'm going to land.

ST: *The song "Child Again" is a different view of being senile. What kind of feedback are you getting from the song?*

BNC: I've been getting great feedback from "Child Again". A radio station in Sacramento played it and the switchboard went crazy for hours from people who wanted to know where they could get the song.

And the thing that really touched me was that people were telling me it was the first time that they felt more comfortable with what was happening to their parents. They had been upset because perhaps the loved one didn't recognize them, or didn't know where they were.

The thing about my grandmother was she was very aware and depressed as her body gave out. Her mind was sharp, and that was almost the worst part. I'm almost beginning to wonder if it isn't a gift to be able to become a child again at a time like this.

I remember being in a hospital visiting a friend, and the woman in the next bed was having a great time as a child again. She was happy as a lark. But the family was so distraught trying to convince her to come back to reality.

It took five or six years to write that song, and I did it mainly on the piano. I know if I had written it on the guitar, I wouldn't have come up with some of the chord changes, or thought of using the nursery rhyme. For me, a good song seems to drop out of the ceiling and fall on the desk. A dedicated writer has to be at that desk a lot.

ST: *Now that the pressure is on your performing career, do you find writing more difficult?*

BNC: It's just becoming more difficult to find time. It used to be a luxury to lay around the house and think. Now I'm