Beth Nielsen Chapman



Born in Harlingen, Texas, smack in the middle of a family of five children, to an Air Force Major and a registered nurse, Beth grew up all over the place, a self-described “geographical mutt.”  Her family finally settled in Alabama in 1969 when Beth was just going into the ninth grade, moving there from Munich, Germany. Crossing back over the ocean, along with her came her first guitar, a German made “Framus” that, though intended as a gift for Father’s Day, had ended up in her room some months earlier. Writing songs was immediate for her from the first chords she picked out by ear.  “With the Vietnam war blazing, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s death still fresh in the news, and my heart reeling from the shock of a school trip to Dachau (a concentration camp in Munich), the bubble of my childhood’s view of the world burst and I started to sense the existential depth of human suffering for the first time,” she recalls. “Then my Dad came home with the orders that we were moving to Montgomery, Alabama, the hotbed of the civil rights movement! I held onto that guitar for dear life!”

Alabama proved to be a place of much richness for Beth. She lived in Montgomery until she married in 1979 and relocated to Mobile, Alabama. *Hearing It First*, her debut album, was recorded in Muscle Shoals and produced by Barry Beckett. Alas, it was released by Capitol Records in 1980 in the midst of the disco craze. So, she took a few years off and gave birth to a son, Ernest Chapman III.  In 1985, with the help of music legends Mac MacAnally and Barry Beckett, her young family made the move to Nashville.

By 1990, she was writing #1 hits for Tanya Tucker and Willie Nelson and was signed as a pop artist to Warner/Reprise. Her first two albums for the label were critically lauded, sold respectably and spawned eight AC pop hits, earning her a devoted fan base at home and overseas, particularly in the UK, where she has consistently been embraced by the vastly popular BBC Radio 2.

In 1993, just before the release of her second Reprise album *You Hold The Key*, Beth’s world was turned upside down when her husband was diagnosed with cancer. Three years after his death, the singer released a fourth album, 1997’s *Sand and Water*. The album's title song, a highly moving meditation on life, loss and surviving, took on a life of its own, bringing hope and comfort to countless people struggling with grief. It was even performed by Elton John on his 1997 U.S. tour in place of “Candle In The Wind” to honor the memory of Princess Diana.

Then, in 2000, just as she was finishing a new record called *Deeper Still*, incredibly, Beth faced her own battle with breast cancer. *Deeper Still*, though not released until 2002, following her treatments and recovery, is filled with songs that seemed to foreshadow her diagnosis.

"It’s happened so many times in my writing - the songs have preceded the events," she says. "Seventy percent of *Sand and Water* was written a year and a half before my husband was diagnosed. I often just follow these lyric wisps and shadows and vowels until things start to form and take shape.  So, I can be working on a song with lines that are just coming together and not really know yet what I’m writing it about.  It was amazing to me when it happened again with *Deeper Still*.

*Deeper Still* features guest vocals by John Prine, Emmylou Harris, John Hiatt, Kimmie Rhodes and Andy Bey and was voted “Album Of The Year” by BBC2’s Terry Wogan. When touring that album Beth always made it a point to stop her show and add a “public service announcement” speaking about her experience going through breast cancer and encouraging women to be vigilant in caring for their health. “Make sure somebody feels you up every month,” she would say to the hushed audience. “It’s not hard to find volunteers. Everybody loves breasts!” Although light hearted, this message resonated as Beth received several letters and emails from women who were spurred on to be checked because of her announcement and were diagnosed earlier as a result.

2004 brought *Hymns* a collection of ancient Latin hymns that Beth recorded as a gift to her parents. She sang soprano as a lead vocalist, with songwriter Pam Rose on alto, and her son Ernest on tenor. Her father, Robert Nielsen is one of four bass singers; along with songwriter Mike Reid and the legendary Ysaye Barnwell and Louis Nunley. While most of these pieces are a cappella, others feature spare accompaniment on stringed instruments from harps to cello to classical guitar. *Hymns* was featured on NPR in an interview with Mellissa Block which resulted in a deluge of orders for the CD, flooded with letters and emails of people saying they felt like they were hearing these classic hymns for the first time.

Then Beth released *Look* in 2005, co-produced with the legendary Peter Collins *(Rush, Bon Jovi, Nancy Griffith)*. The title track of which was written for her long time fiancé Bob Sherman, a psychologist and photographer, who would become her husband in 2011. *Look* pulled together Beth's many musical influences, including folk, country, rock, pop, old school soul, and jazz, an eclectic mix streamlined and focused thanks to a great band backing her in the studio which included drummer Jerry Morotta (Peter Gabriel), John Jorgenson (Elton John) on guitar and Dan Dugmore on dobro and steel, as well as ace backing vocals by Michael McDonald and Emily Salier (Indigo Girls).

*Look* also featured writing collaborations with some of the titans of popular song, from the late Harlan Howard (Heartaches By The Number, I Fall To Pieces), with whom she wrote *Time Won’t Tell*, to Andy Bey, who wrote the title track with Beth, (a Jazz artist described as "a musical force of 20th century American music-Ben Ratliff, NY Times). There is also a beautiful rendition of *I Find Your Love*, a song written for the movie “Calendar Girls” with Patrick Doyle (who's scores include "Bridget Jones’ Diary”, “Godsford Park” and “Sense and Sensibility” among many others).

Endorsed and partly inspired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in 2007 Beth released *Prism-The Human Family Songbook*, a double CD collection that was 10 years in the making, of sacred songs sung in nine languages, a tribute to the world’s great musical traditions. Around this time Beth also filmed a DVD *If Love Could Say God’s Name* which featured many selections from *Prism*, recorded live at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, packed to the rafters, with the amazing 100 voices of the London Orianaan Choir.

Rejuvenated and inspired to go back to her songwriting roots for a new album called *Back To Love*, she delved deep into her writing but for the first time since her break from writing in the early ‘80s Beth hit a wall. As a songwriting teacher and creative coach now for many years, sheknew more than a little about writer's block and how to deal with it. But when, after eight months of effort, she found herself unable to complete lyrics for some of *Back To Love*'s key songs. She remembered telling her best friend and co-writer Annie Roboff “Wow, I almost feel like…I don’t know…like I’m under a rock or weighted down by something when I try to access what I want to say lyrically.”

For the first time Beth started to worry that maybe all that she’d been teaching about creativity was not true: how creativity is like oxygen and right there for everyone to breathe into and that it waits for us to invite it in. Beth was using all her tricks, and nothing was working. And then unbelievably, a few weeks later during an MRI to address a loud ringing in her ears, doctors discovered that a fast growing but benign brain tumor was growing in her left frontal lobe, the language center of her brain. “Have you been having any trouble with language?” a young intern asked her. “Uh…well actually yes!” Beth was honestly so relieved that this might be the explanation for her lack of lyrics she looked incredibly happy as the medical team looked at her with sideward glances. The operation was successful, and Beth’s creative muse returned in a rush.

“As I came out of the anesthesia after surgery the two lines that I’d been struggling to figure out for the song *How We Love,* were just parading out of the mist through my head like camels coming into view over the desert horizon,” she said. “It was like creativity was alive and well and flowing again after the technical issue was fixed.” Now more than ever Beth would preach her faith in creativity as a constant: that we can clear our pathways to it, pulling it in and engaging more of it.

Beth released *Back To Love****,*** in 2010 which spawned 2 hits on BBC Radio 2, marking a great year for Beth in the UK, starting with a performance at *Abbey Road*with *Robert Plant*and the 100 voice *London Orianana Choir*and ending with her October appearance at the Mermaid Theater in London with a 60 piece orchestra performing live on Radio BBC's *Friday Night Is Music Night*.

In 2012 Beth teamed up with astronomer Rocky Alvey and Annie Roboff to write *The Mighty Sky*, a romping collection of songs about the wonders of astronomy that earned her a 2014 Grammy nomination for “Best Children’s Álbum.” Beth hurled her voice into many different styles of music on this project which has caught the ears of NASA. Several songs from *The Mighty Sky* were performed at the UN in NY alongside many dignitaries in the world of astronomy including Charles Bolden, NASA Administrator, for the 51st Anniversary Celebration of the International Day of Human Space Flight. *The Mighty Sky* was also featured in a performance of an educational collaboration at the Royal Albert Hall in the Music for Youth Schools Proms in 2015.

On Beth’s 2014 release UnCovered, she decided to reclaim a batch of songs she wrote that had been covered by other artists, that she’d never recorded herself. Most had been Top 10 hits, seven of which topped the charts at #1. Recorded in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and her own “Tree House” studio in Nashville, UnCovered opens with a crystalline piano that gives way to an infectious groove on *Simple Things,* with backing vocals by Kim Carnes (of *Bette Davis Eyes* fame). Other guest artists lending their talent to the project include legendary guitarist Duane Eddy on *Shine On Me,* a song Beth wrote with Waylon Jennings that also features backing vocals by Jessie Colter-Jennings; Vince Gill duets on *Here We Are,* a #1 hit she and Vince wrote for Alabama; Darrell Scott sings and plays on *Maybe That’s All It Takes,* a stunning ballad that was a hit for Don Williams; Pam Tillis and Lorrie Morgan sing on *Five Minutes,* Lorrie’s first #1 hit; Amy Grant, Ruth Trimble and Eilidh Patterson lend their vocals to the stand-out track *Pray* written with and featuring guitar instrumentalist extraordinaire Muriel Andersen; *Almost Home*—written with Mary Chapin Carpenter and Annie Roboff—features the “Wine Women & Song” artists Gretchen Peters, Suzy Bogguss and Matraca Berg on rollicking background vocals, alongside Bekka Bramlett, who also sings and plays tambourine alongside Bonnie Raitt sideman George Marinelli’s electric guitar on *Meet Me Halfway* the bluesy track written by Beth, Bonnie Raitt and Annie Roboff for Raitt’s *Fundamental* release. The Scottish sessions co-produced with the brilliant Phil Cunningham, feature top grade musicians including Duncan Chisholm, John McCusker, James Mackintosh, Euan Burton, and Matheu Watson. Additional recording was done at Squiggle Studios in Harlech, Wales, where legendary bassist and longtime sideman on Beth’s UK tours, former Fairport Convention member Martin Allcock plays on several tracks.

Chapman’s prowess at writing in a wide range of styles shines through on this collection. From the infectious pop sensibilities of *This Kiss* (Faith Hill) and *Simple Things* (Jim Brickman) to the strains of bluegrass and country in *Strong Enough To Bend* (#1 for Tanya Tucker) and *Nothin’ I Can Do About It Now* (#1 for Willie Nelson), the true thread that runs through it all is a her great passion for the well written song. It is also clear that she has a whole lot of fun performing these songs, and has no trouble bringing them home and making them her own once again.

In 2016, Beth joined with Olivia Newton-John & Canadian artist Amy Sky to create “LIV ON” – A New Album to Aid & Comfort Those Experiencing Grief & Loss While Using the Power of Music To Heal, touring in the UK, Ireland, US and Canada. Born out of a deep friendship with Olivia, also a survivor, who had been a great help to Beth during her journey through breast cancer, Beth was thrilled to be invited into this amazing trio.

*Hearts Of Glass,* Beth’s 2018 album, produced by Sam Ashworth, which includes several new compositions and a few striking new versions of some rediscovered BNC gems, is riveting and sparse, a powerful collection of songs that reach into the place within us where vulnerability meets strength which is often where Beth’s songs will take you, right into the center of the full beautiful dance of contradictions that inhabit love and life.

From writing hits for other artists to recording her own, Beth has penned numerous tunes for many top artists including Bonnie Raitt, Emmylou Harris, Bette Midler, Elton John, Neil Diamond, Trisha Yearwood, Martina McBride, Michael McDonald, Amy Grant, Keb Mo’, Roberta Flack, Waylon Jennings, Faith Hill, Ute Lemper, Willie Nelson, Bettye LaVette and many more.

Her music has been heard on ER, Dawson’s Creek, Providence, Felicity and in movie soundtracks, including The Prince of Egypt, Message In A Bottle, The Rookie, Where The Heart Is and Practical Magic. Mega-hit “This Kiss,” sung by Faith Hill, was ASCAP’S 1999 Song Of The Year, garnered a Grammy nomination and Nashville NAMMY’S 1999 Songwriter of the Year. Beth also received a special award by The Alabama Music Hall Of Fame and was the recipient of ***The Distinguished Artist Award*** from the Alabama State Council on the Arts in 2009 and in October of 2016 Beth was inducted into the ***Songwriter’s Hall of Fame***, one she considers to be the highest honor she’s ever received.

As a breast cancer survivor, speaker on grief and creativity, and a teacher of songwriting, vocal, and creativity workshops, Beth, in addition to her concerts, has taught at Universities internationally including the Royal Scottish Academy of Music & Drama, The Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts, and the Berklee School of Music among others, and has delivered deeply moving and inspiring Keynotes at various conferences. Her stories and delivery illustrate the power of music to heal, as she weaves her music into this theme, opening every heart to experience how resilience is fueled through creativity. That is the clear focus in her presentations as she deems herself a “creativity whisperer” with a passion for inspiring others to fully blossom into their creative potential which is the birthright of every human.

“The Moth” (NPR) has featured Beth <https://themoth.org/stories/seven-shades-of-blue>

<https://themoth.org/stories/nothing-i-can-do-about-it-now> highlighting her gift of storytelling.

In 2019 Beth was honored to be invited to become an Ambassador for the **Buddy Holly Educational Foundation**.

September of 2022 will bring the release of Beth’s 15th solo album, **“CrazyTown”** on Cooking Vinyl. Working with legendary producer Ray Kennedy (Lucinda Williams, Steve Earle) this one is going to be epic!

Beth will be back out touring in support of CrazyTown in 2022 so get ready to laugh and cry and, well, just fasten your seat belt. One thing you can count on at a BNC concert is one great song after another and some fascinating stories woven inbetween.

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