

Beth Nielsen Chapman

Prism

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"Beth Nielsen Chapman embarks upon a journey, a beautiful voice singing songs from different lands, from diverse faiths, and in different languages, that says so movingly we are all family, we share a common humanity, and we can be human only together. What a glorious, melodious testimony."

--Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Beth Nielsen Chapman's newest project, an impressive double CD set titled ***Prism***, seamlessly weaves her inspired, beautiful voice through an eclectic mix of songs from many different languages, cultures and spiritual traditions. The product of a decade of hard work, ***Prism*** combines songs of devotion from Buddhist, Jewish, Sufi, Muslim, Shaker, Negro-spiritual, Hindu, Catholic, Protestant and other traditions, and also includes an entire CD of new music.

Whenever possible, Beth met and worked with scholars of each language and culture, paying special attention to detail and in some cases, collaborating by creating modern musical versions of ancient sacred texts. This was done in a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect.

These songs celebrate the deep connection and similarities shared across all of humanity. Largely inspired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu's ideas of our common humanity, Beth often refers to this collection of songs as the "human family songbook."

Beth describes her experience, when singing at a service at the Washington National Cathedral in 2002, where Tutu was "speaking to representatives of most of the major religions on the first anniversary of 9/11, pleading, in that vast space, for those present to consider that we are all a part of this family, and only by working together could we ever lift ourselves out of the darkness."

The message interwoven into Beth's new songs, all in English and featured on CD #1, is similarly inspired, traversing many emotions and styles of popular music. Humor, sorrow and a deep, heart-centered celebration of life, all work together to highlight a human connection that goes beyond ideology.

The first single, "Shine All Your Light," is a classic example. Co-written with Kimmie Rhodes, the song is filled with vibrant imagery. The lyrics tell the story effortlessly as the music unfolds into a crescendo of strings, luminous background vocals, and a tight backbeat. "Like sand on a mountain, rain on a fountain/ shade on a shadow, a breeze in this tornado/ just do what you can, clap with one hand/ and shine all your light in the sun."

"Choose Love," with a similar sentiment, was written by celebrated Nashville songwriter Gary Nicholson. Recorded in Nashville and South Africa, it has an infectious upbeat chorus and a message for the world that bypasses all dogma with a deeply reassuring tone of transcendence.

Another English track, "My Religion," was built around a hip-hop lyric written by Atoaji Radellant, a musician and poet introduced to Beth through her son Ernest. "My Religion" speaks for itself:

"My Religion

I am a Hindu-Buddhist-Jew-Islamic-Christian

Combining one soul, one vision

Living peacefully where music is the only divinity

and sharing of art my sacred creed

My confession of faith is to struggle, go out of my way

And find love to the end of my days."

(Atoaji Radellant)

Other songs, with titles like "God Is In," by Billy Jonas, or "That Mystery," co-written with Mark Germino, strongly reflect this sentiment.

Beth regularly teaches creativity and songwriting workshops, where she is usually asked about the genesis of her songs. She often describes the phenomenon of writing the vowels a few weeks before the consonants when writing a song. This actually helped her to learn the songs from different languages because, as she says, "it was a natural discovery that by disappearing into the sounds of the vowels—which are pretty universal—I could truly let go into that other language with more effortlessness...but that doesn't mean that I could ever attempt Farsi or Welsh again without lots of professional help!"

Hearing the familiar tone of Beth's voice through the 9 languages on CD #2, the integrity of the vowels is the same, no matter how different the edges of the words. Reflecting on this, Beth remarks, "In the center of the words are the same pure vowels, just as each of us are, in our center, the same human family across many cultural lines and spiritual paths. Vowels are the DNA of language and communication, across all boundary lines of culture and perspective. These universal tones connect us all."

Beth is no stranger to foreign tongues, having already released a 2004 project with the songs of her own spiritual roots, the Catholic hymns she grew up with. "At the time, I didn't realize how essential it would be for me to fully explore the tradition I was born into, before steering my voice into all these other languages." It is from this center that she moves forward with *Prism* to sing beautifully in each of the nine languages on the double CD set.

Many of the strings on *Prism* were recorded in South Africa, where Beth also recorded "Masibulele Ku Jesu," a favorite Zulu hymn of Bishop Tutu's. Co-

producing with renowned South African duo JB Arthur (strings, production, arranging, conducting) and Sibusiso Victor Masondo (bass, production, vocals), Beth recorded Masibulele Ku Jesu with an internationally acclaimed a cappella vocal group from Soweto, No Limits.

Recording *Prism* also took Beth to Wales where she recorded the elegant ancient Gaelic hymn "Durrow," co-producing with legendary bass player and producer Maartin Allcock. In her words, "singing in Welsh was one of the most difficult languages." Lucky for her, she had the assistance of the popular Welsh singer and harpist Gwenan Gibbard, who coached Beth on her pronunciation.

When it came to pronunciation, the most challenging language for Beth was Farsi. Working with the Persian Classical master Dr. Nader Majd, Beth experienced a very challenging learning curve, due to the quartertone nature of Persian Classical music. Through a string of unusual coincidences, Beth suddenly found herself introduced to Dr. Majd, who played a number of different Persian scales on the Tar, a traditional plucked stringed instrument, to see what she was most attracted to. A scale was decided on, and Dr. Majd then wrote a melody to an ancient Hafiz poem, "Bad-e Saba", meaning "The Breath of Saba Wind."

"I've always had this belief that diversity of faith is like the brilliant scattering of light shining through the angled cuts of a diamond. Even as it appears fragmented, it is all borne of the same source of light and each of us have an inborn right to define and celebrate the beauty and sureness of spirit in our lives in the ways in which we feel moved."