A Conversation with Beth Nielsen Chapman
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 4/2005)

On anybody's short list of Nashville's greatest singer songwriters, one finds Beth Nielsen Chapman. She is distinguished not only by the impressive list of cuts she's had (and the legends who have cut them) but further by the places in the Top 20 of various charts that her songs have reached. Just to name one, "This Kiss" was a worldwide hit for Faith Hill and the ASCAP Song of the Year in 1999.

Ironically, she is perhaps nearly as well known for her trials as for her triumphs. When her husband Ernest died of cancer in 1994, Beth released *Sand and Water.* Sir Elton John talked at length about this moving record and the title song in an appearance on the Oprah show, and then he sang it (instead of his classic "Candle in the Wind") in a service after the death of Princess Diana. Not many years later, Beth was diagnosed with breast cancer and went into a several year chemo battle, which she appears to have won. Typically, she was very forthcoming and outspoken about her process and kept turning her life into art.

BNC is also a hit artist with several Top Tens in the 1990s, and her popularity includes Asia and Europe, where she enjoys large followings. We found her to be a very savvy music business person, and in our conversation to come, she shares some wisdom on crossing over from major label deals to being a successful indie artist. After a year or two out (and several successful singles) in the UK, her new record *Look* will be appearing on Nashville's Compass Records label in June. We'll plan to do a review of it at that time, to remind you to pick it up. This is her sixth US release, and previous ones can be purchased at her website. Check out her bio there for detailed information on the many artists that have cut BNC tunes, it's pretty amazing.

Take note, songwriters. We discuss in the interview an upcoming workshop that Beth is giving with Julie Portman and Paul Reisler. Her wonderful twist on the theme is that they're doing it at the Vanderbilt Dyer Observatory. Another twist is that it will feature a "Drive-By Hit Songwriter" section where some famous friends will drop in with anecdotes and tips and even play songs and illustrate from whence they came. You can also find out more about the *Songwriting and Creativity Stargaze* at the artist's website.

Beth and I met first at an airport somewhere, and talked back then about doing an interview, so this conversation has been a long time coming. I was at a Maia Sharp show recently, after having just returned to Nashville, and Mindy Smith brought Beth over to the table to say hello. (It's so nice to be back in town. Things like that just weren't happening in Shanghai.) She's very charming, incredibly talented, and a truly generous soul. We're very happy to share a conversation with this very important American singer songwriter.

Puremisic: Hello, Beth, it's Frank.

Beth Nielsen Chapman: Hey, Frank.

PM: How are you?

BNC: Good. It was a great show the other night, wasn't it.

PM: Oh, wow, yeah. I've really fallen in love with that woman's music, and she has a wonderful personality on stage, too. [see our interview with Maia Sharp]

BNC: Yeah.

PM: She's very self effacing and still confident.

BNC: Yeah, she's really strong. I was knocked out with her new stuff. I mean, I've heard her stuff through the years, but she's really gotten very, very consistent.

PM: Yeah. And like you, she seems to have a really incredible ring of co-writers.

BNC: Oh, yeah.

PM: I mean, that's such a smart way to do it, just to really run in fast company.

I really enjoyed getting into your records the last couple of days. I already knew some of your songs, especially the big ones. But, really, there's such an incredible depth to the body of work you've assembled so far. It's pretty amazing.

BNC: Well, thanks. [laughs] I've been going so fast forward, I rarely look back. One day I guess I'll look back and try to assimilate it all.

PM: And what an extraordinary life you've led so far. So much success and so much adversity.

BNC: Yeah, I have had my share of adversity. I was re-writing my bio until late last night—I hadn't really gone through the whole thing in a long time—and I was like, "Wow, this sounds like a TV movie!"

PM: [laughs]

BNC: But I have to say that for everything difficult I've gone through, I've had at least the same amount of gifts and blessings and stuff, so it kind of balanced out. I can't complain.

PM: Yeah, what's the sense? How is your health today, and how is your spirit?

BNC: Oh, I'm great. Actually, my biggest challenge is not to overwork myself, because I have so much energy that I sometimes don't take as good care of myself as I should—making sure I stay rested and all that stuff.

PM: Right.

BNC: That's something that I've had to struggle with my whole life, because there's just so much I want to do, and I don't have time to get everything done. And that's my life.

PM: Yeah. And I think in the second half of one's life, the urge to go harder and harder builds, instead of going the other way.

BNC: Because we have less and less time.

PM: The dreadful snowballing effect.

BNC: That's right. It does speed up as we go, that's for sure.

PM: When you and I met the first time, in an airport somewhere, your son Ernest was with you. He seems like a really fine person.

BNC: A fine young man, yes, he is.

PM: How is he? What's he up to?

BNC: He's doing great. He's just finishing college. He got a degree in music from Hampshire.

PM: From Hampshire, nice school.

BNC: Yeah, yeah. And then he decided to go get more structure and actually focus even more on music, so he just did a couple of years at Berklee in Boston. And this year he's finishing up. Now he's going to dive full on into performing and writing and producing. He's actually going to step into his whole artistry, I guess you'd say.

PM: Wow.

BNC: So that's been really exciting to see.

PM: What instruments was he pursuing at Hampshire and Berklee?

BNC: Well, he was majoring in guitar, and then he decided to major in piano. And he's pretty much played everything since he was a teenager. He's kind of like Beck. He plays drums and bass and guitar and saxophone and—

PM: Jeez.

BNC: [laughs] He's just kind of enmeshed himself in music in a lovely way, actually.

PM: He harmonized lovely on that Eric Kaz co-write.

BNC: Yeah, yeah, his voice has really come into full bloom. It's been great. And on the *Hymns* record—I don't know if I gave you that one—

PM: Yes, I got that. That's a wonderful record.

BNC: He sings the tenor parts on that, which was—coming from his tumultuous teenage years when he was going through a lot of grief, having lost his dad—to see him standing there singing in Latin was such a lovely vision.

PM: I believe it… It had been a long time since I heard an Eric Kaz song. That was great.

BNC: Oh, well, he's written some of the great ones of all time.

PM: Yeah. Is he an old friend of yours?

BNC: Yeah. Eric and I wrote "All I Have," which was actually my first hit on my first record.

PM: Oh, wow. Where does he live?

BNC: He lives in Los Angeles.

PM: I shared a little table at the Station Inn for a Gillian Welch show recently with your co-producer on *Look*, Peter Collins. He's a very nice man, and a tasteful producer.

BNC: Very tasteful. And actually it was one of the finest experiences I've had in the studio—which partly, I guess, I chalk up to my own maturity, finally, after all these years. But he was wonderful to work with, very supportive, and

also had a lot of great ideas, and knew when to sort of stand on the soapbox and say, “No!” It’s a great thing to feel that someone really fully gives you their opinion. And also, once they’ve done that, as the artist it’s up to you to finally decide. And if I were to not then necessarily agree, he is very flexible about it. So we didn’t get into any head-banging or anything like that. He was a lovely person to work with, and very knowledgeable. I guess one of his greatest strengths is the way that he relates to the musicians, and creates a very relaxed atmosphere, it’s great.

PM: Was that your first record with Peter?

BNC: Yes.

PM*:* *Look* is a fantastic record.

BNC: Thanks.

PM: I listened to it a bunch the last two days, and really, there were no sleepers, no clunkers, nothing you started to skip over after a couple of plays. They’re really good songs.

BNC: Thanks.

PM: Why was it first released in the UK?

BNC: Well, after I left Warner Brothers several years back, a couple of records back—I basically loved many of the people I worked with there, they were very big fans, and worked very hard. But unfortunately, the structure and the basic way that major labels work is that unless you’re selling whole lots of records, you really don’t ever get out of the hole, as you probably know.

PM: Indeed.

BNC: And once I sort of realized how it worked, I just looked at it and I said, “You know what? I’ve got to be able to approach this in a different way.” I had sold 250,000 records here and 100,000 records there, and from the standpoint of an independent artist, that’s fabulous. But from the standpoint of a major label, that’s—

PM: Not recouping.

BNC: Yeah. They’re saying, “Well, maybe next time we’ll do better.” I just felt that I’ve been very fortunate and successful as a songwriter, and I love making records, and I love being an artist. But I didn’t feel like continuing on with the business model that would be like the black hole. Fortunately I was able to leave Warner Brothers and be released. Then I started becoming very

interested in how the whole thing works, and where the money goes and where it comes from. And just from jumping in, I've become quite an expert. [laughs]

PM: Yeah, no doubt.

BNC: And I've worked with a really excellent attorney who was also a visionary, and started to see that if I were to split the world up into different territories, that would be a much better move for me, business-wise. Because, frankly, very few labels are globally strong. And even Warner Brothers, which is globally strong, if you're signed in Nashville and you go over to the UK, you're from Nashville, you're not one of them. So when I put out *Sand and Water*, and Elton John became very supportive of the record, and I would go over to the UK and I would find there would be resistance to really jumping in there and getting going with it.

PM: Even with Sir Elton's endorsement?

BNC: Yes. It was kind of a blase attitude. And really the bottom line was that it wasn't going to reflect on *their* bottom line if they helped sell records on Warner Brothers in Nashville.

PM: Oh.

BNC: And so it was, "That's fabulous, but it's not really our product." I mean, they kind of did the lip service, but you could feel that you were like the distant cousin. And again, it's a subtle thing. If you had seen me sitting in one of those offices, everybody was nodding their head and smiling and saying, "Oh, yes, great, fabulous. We'll do this, we'll do that." But if I said, "Well, can I have the budget to do this, or a little bit of that?" it was like, "Well, you'll have to get that from Nashville." Well, you go back to Nashville, and they say, "Well, if we're going to give you a budget for touring or something, I mean, it's not going to do us any good if you're touring in the UK" So you're stuck between these two worlds.

PM: Yikes.

BNC: So that spurred me on to deciding that never again was I going to do business thrice removed. I was going to approach my business as directly as possible. And in certain cases I might license a record through one country into another. For instance, I ended up doing a record and licensing my UK release through Sanctuary Records. They also did Europe and Ireland. And for the most part, that's fine, because I don't really have time to go around to each individual country and do a separate record deal. But at least when I'd go over to the UK, I was meeting with my record company in the UK, and we could discuss these different areas, and it was in their backyard, as opposed to trying to talk about it in Nashville.

PM: Right. And Sanctuary is an interesting company. I mean, weren't they originally kind of a head-banger outfit?

BNC: Yeah, yeah. But I've actually done quite well with them, and I think they did a great job.

PM: And they do Loudon now, and they do other really good songwriters.

BNC: Yeah. And the people that I work with there are very song-oriented and artist-driven. It's an artist-driven label, believe it or not, even though it's been heavy metal at times. But basically the reason I put *Look* out in the UK last March is because that was something that they were ready to have happen. The previous record, *Deeper Still*—I don't know if I sent you that one.

PM: I don't have *Deeper Still*, though I know some of the cuts from it. That's another great record.

BNC: Well, that one came out after I went through breast cancer. And I put it out on Sanctuary in the UK, and I put it out on Artemis in the US. Sanctuary did a great job, and in my opinion, Artemis dropped the ball. I mean, I'll just say that. I don't feel like they really supported it. And in fact, it became difficult to really settle up with them, and it is ongoingly difficult.

PM: Wow.

BNC: I mean, that's just the life as an independent artist. Some places you get things working right, and some places you don't. But the beauty of it is, because it didn't work out to my satisfaction with Artemis, I just said, "You can't have the next record." And I wasn't contracted to have to give it to them.

PM: Right.

BNC: So I kept my options open. And as I finished *Look*, I hadn't really had time—because I was making a record—I hadn't had time to negotiate and figure out where I was going to put the record out in the US and Canada and other places. Meanwhile, the earlier record had done really well in Europe, the *Deeper Still* record. And they were ready to put the next record out, and it was ready to go. So I thought, well, I'll just concentrate on Europe.

The other reason is that they actually still have radio stations in the UK and Europe where people call in and say, "I like that song, play it again." And then they don't get a tape recording at Clear Channel or something like that. They get a real person at the BBC, which is an example of who's been very supportive to me. There are radio personalities who are popular, and you can

talk to them. There's this relationship between people and the music and the radio, one that unfortunately is very rare in America.

PM: Well, it resembles what we grew up with, but yeah—certainly nothing that's going on now.

BNC: Right. What we grew up with, exactly. That's what I'm saying. It's like we have lost something, culturally, I think, very essential to supporting and finding and nurturing strong artists. I mean, I think it's a travesty that there are so many talented young artists who—I know the internet is a wonderful frontier, it's still being sorted out. But there's still a tremendous loss, I think, when people can't just turn on the radio and go, "Wow, what was that?!" and call them up and find out what it was, instead of getting a computer, or a corporation.

PM: I really don't understand how Clear Channel got away and get away with what they do. I mean, in a lot of other industries that's considered an illegal monopoly. I don't understand how they came to control seventy, seventy-five, eighty percent of the airwaves, and the sheds, and the concessions and everything else.

BNC: Yeah. It's a very bad trend. I don't know if you saw the movie called *The Corporation*.

PM: No.

BNC: If you get a chance, check that movie out. It's pretty chilling. But corporations, by definition, are like this thing, they're like Hal from *2001*. We've created them, but they've become entities unto themselves that don't really stop at a human being. They just become this collective of consciousness that is only interested in the bottom line, and will do anything. It's not a person at the head of Clear Channel saying, "I'm going to be a big bad guy," it's actually the collective mentality of what makes that thing breathe. And what it lives on is more acquisition. The human part of it has nothing to do with what it is. It's not human. Unfortunately, in the early '40s I think it was, there was a law passed that allowed corporations to be given the rights of American citizens.

PM: I've never heard that before.

BNC: This is in this movie. You really should see this movie, it's unbelievable. And actually somebody who ran a corporation sort of pushed it through, and nobody was really aware of what it meant, or what it would mean in the long run.

PM: The rights of a person…

BNC: And by doing that, something shifted. A corporation became this unstoppable thing, where you can have a company that's polluting a river and the CEO himself will be saying, "Well, I don't know, I can't seem to control it."

Anyway, that's a whole other deal. But I think in terms of music, it's been a tremendous loss to our culture. That's not to say that everything on the radio is bad. I think there's lots of great stuff on the radio. But I think the repetitiveness of it, and the whole political hierarchy and having to pay people tremendous amounts of money to even get anything played on the radio—

PM: Right, and radio consultants.

BNC: Don't even get me started on them.

PM: Indeed.

BNC: The whole idea that people sit in a room and press a button fifteen seconds into the song, that's just crazy.

PM: It has nothing to do with the artist end of things, and how songs get written, and recorded.

BNC: No. It served me well to put the record out overseas first, because I was able to tour. I went over there for two or three tours last year. I was able to really concentrate and promote fully in that area. So I've gathered up some great fans over there.

PM: When you tour over in the UK, would you do it with a small combo or solo?

BNC: I've done it all different ways. I mean, the last tour I did was pretty much sold out, and it was me and two or three other musicians, mostly two.

PM: English guys or—

BNC: Well, an Englishman named Maartin Allcock who's an amazing musician. He was in Fairport Convention for like twenty years or something. He was also the bass player and multi-instrumentalist for Ian Anderson, from Jethro Tull. Maartin and I had worked together quite a few years back, on my second album, which I recorded partly in Surrey, England. I worked with Paul Samwell-Smith, who is an amazing producer. He did all the early Cat Stevens stuff.

PM: Mmm.

BNC: Yeah, Paul Samwell-Smith had Maartin Allcock as well as Simon Nicol, who's also in Fairport—

PM: Right.

BNC: —had them come and play on my record. And that's how Maartin and I became friends. And then many years later, last year, I was emailing, and I found Maartin's email address, so I emailed him and said, "What are you doing?" We ended up reconnecting. He was so wonderful to work with.

And then I brought John Ragusa over, who plays flute for me. He plays all different instruments as well, but mostly flute and wind instruments. So between the two of them and me, we romped around Europe a few times. [laughs] It was great.

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PM: And you're a very strong instrumentalist yourself, on several instruments.

BNC: Well, I play guitar and piano, and I little bit of dulcimer. And don't let me anywhere near a saxophone. It's very sad what I do to saxophone.

[laughter]

PM: How did the deal with Compass come together?

BNC: Well, I was actually working with a manager named Mark Tatori, and having a wonderful time with him. He had begun conversations with Garry West, who runs Compass Records with his wife Alison Brown. And they were very interested in putting the record out, and I guess, for quite a while, had been aware of my music. Then Mark was suddenly given an opportunity to run a larger management company, which was primarily country artists, which I'm not. So he had to go take advantage of that opportunity, and there I was looking for a manager. And he said, "You really ought to go over and talk to Garry West, because he seemed to really understand what you're about." So I went over there to talk to him. And we just hit it off.

PM: They're good people. Yeah, I like them.

BNC: Yeah. So Garry is actually managing me.

PM: Really.

BNC: And in the course of all of that, it just seemed like the natural thing to put the record out on Compass, which was originally what they were interested in doing anyway.

PM: Right.

BNC: So we've worked out a very great way to do it. It's a little complicated, but it's working fine. It's a rare situation where your manager is also your label. But a great deal of care has gone into the definition of things, so there's not really any problem at all.

PM: Considering some of the bad label experiences, it's kind of neat, in another way, to have your manager the head of your label.

BNC: If things are going well, of course, it's fabulous, and if things aren't going well, it's kind of hard to get your manager to go in there and yell at your label.

PM: Ah, yeah, right.

[laughter]

BNC: But what it comes down to is really just the type of people that you're working with, whether or not something like that will work.

PM: Right.

BNC: And this is so different than working with a huge corporate record company, which I don't miss at all, needless to say. Even though I worked with some great people in that corporation, I don't miss the corporate structure at all. I think my music is in a much more breathable place, and I'm very happy where I am now.

PM: And there's also something about being on a label where both of the principals are themselves fine musicians.

BNC: Yeah. It's great. Of course Garry still goes and plays bass, and works with Alison, and produces records. He just co-produced Paul Brady's new record.

PM: Right.

BNC: And so it's good. And a manager who understands all of those aspects—if you can just keep him from getting too busy, it's great. [laughs]

PM: How many number ones have you written in your life?

BNC: Six, I think. And then several that have gone knocking around up in the top ten.

PM: That's amazing. That's a big number of number ones.

BNC: Well, I'm happy with it. [laughs]

PM: Any idea how many cuts have come from your deep catalog?

BNC: Wow, I don't know. It's probably less than you would think. The thing is that I've had a really nice batting average in terms of if somebody cut the song, it usually got on the record, and then the average for it being a single has been fairly decent, too. That's the best thing. It doesn't necessarily matter how many cuts you have, it matters more how many of them you can actually make money from. [laughs]

PM: Right.

BNC: I've become very involved in the whole issue of downloading. I just went to Washington.

PM: So I heard.

BNC: It's a crucial time. I mean, I brought my son with me, actually, as sort of representing the youth position. There are a lot of kids his age—and he deals with a lot of them and knows a lot of them—who just want to be able to download music for free, and they don't understand why they can't. They think that they're just stealing from the big bad record companies.

PM: Right. It's such a misunderstood situation.

BNC: Yes, it is. And so it's so important, I think, more than ever, right now, for us to just try to re-educate people as much as possible. I think the model is going to have to change. There's not going to be the same system of payment and the same royalty rates and stuff. But the fundamental thing that has to be put back in the barn is the obvious need for there to be compensation for the people who create the works that are the reason that you buy the iPod. [laughs] You're not going to walk around with an empty metal shell. And if you don't feed the people who create the music, there won't be very many people doing it.

PM: How about this 99 cents a song from iTunes paradigm, is that working? Is that paying the songwriters?

BNC: Well, it helps to show that there can be monumental income from this. One of the most telling things for me as a young songwriter was when I was first starting out, and I was eighteen, and I signed a really bad publishing deal, basically I signed a five-year artist deal/publishing deal that was like a slave contract. But I was so excited that somebody wanted me, and I was so excited that I was going to be a star. I mean, you could have just gone up to me—which this guy did—and said, "I'll take those songs." And I went, "Great! Have them." But the mentality of "I need to be famous" overriding "I need to make a living" is very temporary. As soon as you start to delve deeply into the life of being a creator of intellectual property, you find out that you could have millions of people who know who you are but if you're a songwriter and you don't go out and perform, you don't have any way of making a living, right? Obviously, if I become really famous as a singer, even if I give my songs away on the internet I can go do a concert and make money that way—as long as Clear Channel doesn't come after me.

[laughter]

BNC: But there is this great gap in awareness. People don't realize that there are many, many people who make their living as producers, engineers, all the musicians who do demos, just an incredible amount of people who lose their way of making a living. Songwriters like Harlan Howard or Irving Berlin, Otis Blackwell, people who didn't go out and perform, who gave us the most incredible music that we have, because they were able to make a living and concentrate on it and get really good at it.

So when I was eighteen and I found out that this guy wasn't going to do anything for me, I couldn't get out of the contract, went through this whole thing for two years. Finally, by virtue of some good fortune, Screen Gems bought my contract from him.

PM: Wow.

BNC: And I began to work with Charlie Feldman and the people at Screen Gems, who were a legitimate publishing company. And that's how I first started to come to Nashville. Screen Gems paid him $12,000 for my songs, fifty songs. And you could have knocked me over with a feather when I found out that somebody paid somebody else $12,000 for what I did all by myself, and that money passed me by completely, went right over my head. And I was like, "Wait a minute! Are you kidding? You paid $12,000 for those songs?" And they were like, "Yeah, and we're going to give you a weekly salary, because you're now going to write for us, and this is a legitimate publishing deal. And you're supposed to get paid, honey!"

PM: Wow.

BNC: To me that was an amazing realization. I saw that I needed to protect what I created, and to learn as much as possible about how to protect myself, because it is something of great value. And unfortunately, a lot of people who download songs don't think that it is. But they will learn that it is.

PM: Well, I hope they will, anyway.

BNC: Yes.

PM: Of that first batch that Screen Gems paid 12K for, did anything happen with any one of those songs?

BNC: Well, I recorded an album with Barry Beckett in 1979. It came out in 1980, on Capital Records. So I recorded ten of them.

[laughter]

BNC: And of course, they were my songs on the way to learning how to be a songwriter, which is even more amazing to me—that somebody actually found them valuable. And what they saw was my potential. My talent was there, and so they were interested in—

PM: Like publishers are supposed to.

BNC: Yeah, that's what they used to do.

PM: Yeah, right.

BNC: [laughs] Yeah, and I think Crystal Gayle actually recorded one of them, as well.

PM: Wow.

BNC: So, a little bit of action. But the next five years were much more of a growth period for me as a writer, and where I really started to get much more focused and in the ballpark.

PM: You've made such a lot of magic, and continue to, with Annie Roboff. Maybe you'd tell our readers a little about her.

BNC: Oh, she's amazing. That's one of the greatest writing relationships I've ever had. And, of course, she's a real good friend of mine, too. We hang out a lot. But our chemistry as co-writers has been just effortless, from the very first thing we wrote right up to today. Sometimes she'll go out and play in my band—she plays keyboard—because I do a lot of songs that we wrote together. And we'll sit down and try to be practicing, but we can't sit down without

starting a song. We're like, "We're not going to write! We're not going to write!"

PM: [laughs]

BNC: "Oh, stop it!" And then, damn it, I've got to get the tape recorder out, and we don't get anything done, except new stuff.

PM: Wow. Imagine chemistry like that, "We're not going to write! We're not going to write!"

BNC: Yeah. I teach songwriting a lot, and I do that as an exercise for writer's block. One of the great things you can do is sit down and give yourself fifteen minutes and an egg timer, and say, "Under no condition am I going to write."

[laughter]

BNC: And see if you can stop yourself. It's funny. But anyway, Annie is brilliant. A genius, in my opinion.

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PM: Where does she come from?

BNC: She's from New York, and has done so many different things. She wrote a lot of the theme songs for NFL Football, like commercial stuff.

PM: Really?

BNC: She was one of the writers of the cut-away music for Prince Charles and Diana's wedding on ABC, the ABC cut-away music to their wedding coverage.

PM: Holy jeez!

BNC: She was in that whole world. I think that's one of the reasons that her strength in songwriting is often structuring the song so that it's just infectious, and you move to the next section, and then you're heading toward the bridge, and then she drops you back off in another key, and it's like a roller coaster ride that's really smartly put out. That's what happened when we wrote "This Kiss" with Robin Lerner.

PM: Which is a complicated little song. For an infectious hit song.

BNC: Very. It's simple and complicated at the same time, really.

PM: Yeah.

BNC: It's complex, but it's very easy to follow, and to me that is really what her strong point is as a writer.

PM: She seems like a real fun person, too.

BNC: Oh, yeah. She's great.

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PM: You mentioned it briefly, why don't we discuss that Celestial Songwriting Workshop you're soon to do with Paul Reisler and Julie Portman.

BNC: Oh, yeah! Well, that's really exciting for me. I've gone and taught songwriting quite a bit through the years. In fact, Paul Reisler is the first person, years ago, who got me into it. He called me, because he was doing a workshop in his area, and he said, "I want you to come and teach." And I had really only taught at Berklee in Boston one time, so I wasn't even somebody who thought of myself as a regular teacher. And that just got me going. Since then I've taught in several workshops, in the Rocky Mountain Folk Fest and various things like that.

I went to the Observatory not too long ago, and I was so knocked out with it as a place. It's this incredible place right here in our backyard. And I thought, wouldn't it be great to have a workshop in this kind of environment where we're looking into a telescope. I mean, to me, songwriting is like that, where you go into this space where you're connecting into the wonder of creativity, which is a very amazing magical thing. And I thought, well, this would just be so conducive and analogous to the process of writing, at least the way I teach it. So we just started talking, and I started working with Rocky, the man who runs the Observatory. He and I have just had the most fun putting it together, and just kind of creating it. We're going to have a great time. We want to have a great turnout. Paul and Julie are coming, because they were the most natural first choices that I could think of for co-teachers.

PM: I don't know Julie. Could we say something about her? I know Paul is a very well-known songwriting teacher.

BNC: Yeah. Well, Julie is an amazing teacher as well. They're married. Julie is an Obie winning playwright. She teaches workshops herself quite regularly, a life stories workshop, which is teaching people how to write about their life, and write their story, which is a very important part of coming into a flow creatively. She also teaches classes on performance, and how to present the full spirit of who you are in a performance. And it's amazing. I learned so much going to one of her classes one time. And I perform all the time, but I learned a

different aspect about it, something that I had never even thought about. So I thought it would be great, not only just to learn it from a songwriting standpoint, or the detail of melody writing or that kind of thing, but also to—even if you're a songwriter and not a performer, at some point you have to present your songs. So even if it's about that, it's still a very useful aspect of being a professional songwriter, being able to present yourself with confidence. So it's going to be great. And we're going to have this other thing that I'm really excited about, which I call "Drive-By Hit Songwriters."

PM: [laughs]

BNC: I'm getting some of my hit songwriting friends to come by at odd points, for surprise cameo appearances. And they're going to come and interrupt the classes and sing a song and talk about their songwriting for about ten minutes, and then they're going to leave. [laughs]

PM: That's totally cool. We'll link to all the details, because that's something that a lot of people should know about. That sounds amazing.

BNC: Well, as workshops go, it will be a unique experience. I know Darrell Brown is going to be a drive-by, and Annie Roboff. And I'm working on Marcus Hummond, I haven't got a confirmation yet. But there will be no slouches in that group. Darrel Brown has just written a couple of hits for Keith Urban. It'll be great fun.

PM: Let's talk a little more about *Look*, the CD that's coming out in the States shortly. When is that appearing on Compass, do we know?

BNC: Coming out in June.

PM: In June, okay. I love the opener, which I guess was the first UK single, that you wrote with our buddy Bill Lloyd, "Trying to Love You." That's a beautiful tune.

BNC: Every time I've put a record out, Bill Lloyd has had a song on there.

PM: Really?

BNC: Every single one. [laughs] So it's almost a superstition now.

PM: Yeah, right. He's one of my favorite Nashville guys. He does so many things well.

BNC: Yes.

PM: Is there a story connected to the three-way write with Al Anderson and David Baerwald, "Will and Liz"?

BNC: Well, that was written at the Durango Songwriter whatchamajigger. I was teaching songwriting there. Al was there, and David. We just ran into each other in the lobby, and we decided we had to go find a room and write a song. [laughs]

PM: Wow.

BNC: I'd had the first part of the melody for a while. And Al threw in the other part of the melody. And we just started talking about love that's destructive. I was sort of gathering these songs for *Look*. I mean, *Look* as a record is really—if you do the overview, it's various songs coming from different angles talking about love. There's "Who We Are," the song about a parent and child. And "Trying To Love You" is a song about, really, all the aspects of love in one relationship. So I thought it was intriguing to write a song about a relationship that's very destructive, where two people kind of crash into each other and it ain't so healthy.

PM: Right.

BNC: And it's not meant to be funny, but it's got a kind of a caricature thing to it. It's very unusual for me. I don't normally record stuff like that. But anyway, it was great working with David Baerwald. And I'd worked with Al—

PM: Yeah. They're two real characters.

BNC: Yeah! [laughs] It was a fun afternoon, I can say that.

PM: And that's also one of the places where guitarist Tom Bukovac gets to shine. He's amazing.

BNC: Oh, yeah, yeah. He's great. We actually had him playing when we did a demo of it, and we just called him back in there and said, "Okay. Well, you've got to do that thing you did."

[laughter]

PM: Have you ever seen him play around town with Pat Buchanan?

BNC: I know Pat very well, but I haven't seen them play together. I bet that's great.

PM: Your co-writer Matt Rawlings plays some unbelievable piano on "Touch My Heart," which laid me out really bad several times in a row.

BNC: Yeah. He's amazing. Matt and I, again, we've written many times for my records. We wrote "Color of Roses" together, which is on the *Sand and Water* album. Matt is just such a genius. I mean, when we get together and write, he just starts playing chords, and I just start singing over them, and something happens that neither one of us can take full credit for. [laughs] It's just an amazing thing—it's incredible that we don't do it more often. He's out on the road with Mark Knopfler right now. Actually, he's in India with Mark Knopfler, which ought to be so much fun. But it's just such a gift to have him in my life as a co-writer. What happened on that song is we sat down, and we scoped out this melody, and then about two years later, after many attempts, I finally, in the eleventh hour, finished writing the lyric to that song. And it was so emotional for me, even though I didn't feel it was even my own emotion.

PM: It's a great set of lyrics, too. It's just fantastic.

BNC: Thanks. I dedicated it to a friend of mine who lost her daughter, and actually, I feel like, in a way, that child sort of wrote that song with me. In sort of an odd way.

PM: Wow. We touched upon it briefly, that was an incredible record you put out called *Hymns*, Latin Hymns out of the Catholic Tradition before Vatican II and the folk mass changed all that.

BNC: Yeah, it's been amazing. That thing just keeps going.

PM: As a young at altar boy, I served mass in Latin hundreds of times, so that really resonated with me.

BNC: Oh, yeah, then you really remember that stuff, too.

PM: Oh, big time. Were you a Catholic School kid?

BNC: Sure, yeah, the whole deal.

PM: Yeah, me too. How many years did you do?

BNC: It sounds like prison, doesn't it?

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, right.

BNC: I got out when I was a young teenager—pretty much off and on until I was in high school, and then it was like, "Okay, that's it, Mom. I'm not doing that anymore." I was rebelling, of course, as everybody who's Catholic

eventually does. [laughs] But I have to say, from a very early age I've believed that all religions have a reason to be here and a value and a purpose for people, and different cultures should celebrate their own ways of looking at however they want to pray. I was actually working on an album of world hymns, which I've been working on for several years, and I'm still working on. And each hymn is in a different language from a different culture. I'm singing one in Hebrew and one in Sanskrit and one in Tibetan, you name it—

PM: What a beautiful project.

BNC: Even one in Farsi. [laughs] So that has been a labor of love, and it continues. It'll probably be at least the end of the year before I'm finished with it. But in the process of doing that, when I came to the Latin hymns, I thought, well, that'll be a cinch, because I grew up with those, and I'll just go down to Tower Records and find one of those collections of those hymns and pick out my favorite ones. And I started looking around, and there was just nothing recorded in a collection. There would be one here, and one there.

PM: Very surprising.

BNC: Yeah, it's amazing, because I thought it was bad enough that they didn't do them very often in mass anymore. I used to sit there in the folk mass and go, "Hey, let's do 'Dona Nobis Pacem'!" They'd be looking at me like, "Are you kidding?"

PM: They'd be saying, "Let's do 'Kumbaya' again."

BNC: "Kumbaya"!

[laughter]

BNC: In fact, right now I'm writing an article for the Catholic Digest, and I'm talking about that very thing.

PM: Unbelievable. So are you a very confirmed and practicing Catholic?

BNC: Well, I think when you're born Catholic, it's like being born Jewish, you just are. I'm a Catholic being. But do I follow all the rules and regulations and devoutly go? No. I actually sometimes go to a Buddhist service, sometimes I'll go to Temple.

PM: Yeah, I'm definitely a Buddhist Catholic, no doubt about it. [laughs]

BNC: I believe that God is in many places. And I don't feel particularly like I have to follow and go to mass every Sunday. I love to go to mass, but I go when I want to. And I feel there's an aspect to all religion that's spiritual and

there's an aspect to all religion that's business. I don't really follow any of the things that came down through the business side. Well, I won't say I don't follow any of them, but I just don't feel that I have to follow all of them. I choose what I feel comfortable with. I think there are many, many things about Catholicism that are very beautiful, but I also feel that way about other religions. I think that there are sides to all religions that are not beautiful, that are very much a problem and cause a lot of pain in the world. And that includes all the major religions, including Catholicism.

PM: Yeah, there's dysfunction in every corner.

BNC: Yes. And what happens, I think, is the ego is this thing that we all have attached to us, and it's like a balloon. If it starts getting filled up, it's very hard for many human beings not to start to think that balloon is part of who they are. And I mean, you hear of great, great teachers, gurus, and people all through history, and as soon as they start to become famous and other people start to say, "Wow, you're it, you're God, you're the guru," they often—not all the time—but very frequently fall into sin. By sin I mean that they might start sleeping with their students, or buying five million Cadillacs with the people's money. It's just the tendency we have to go to the dark side, I guess.

PM: Yeah.

BNC: So when you asked, "Are you a practicing Catholic," that's a loaded question, because there's a certain mentality around having to follow all the rules that can sometimes be a negative thing in people's lives. I celebrate the part of it that I think is very beautiful.

PM: I like to hear people talking positively about Catholicism. To me, in my life, it's been some time since I've heard that. It's good to hear it from you.

BNC: Well, I think it's got some really beautiful aspects. I think right now it's so fascinating, because when I did this record—well, for instance, when I was recording this record, I had never heard of *The Da Vinci Code*. I didn't know what *The Passion* was until the very last part of recording, when somebody came in and said, "Do you know they're doing this movie, Mel Gibson is doing some movie?" I was like, "Really?"

PM: And then they both started kicking ass.

BNC: I've had so many people write to me and say, "You really should get this in *The Passion"* or "You really should get this in *The Da Vinci Code*." What's really interesting is that within the realm of the Catholic Church, *The Da Vinci Code* is considered radical, liberal, crazy stuff.

PM: Big time.

BNC: And *The Passion* is considered to be coming from a pretty fundamental viewpoint. So I'm somewhere floating around in some place that goes all around that stuff. I don't really want to get—

PM: Tainted by either.

BNC: I just want the music to represent the beauty of the music. But it's a very interesting time, because last week I saw Mary on the cover of *Time* magazine.

PM: Really?

BNC: Yeah.

PM: I haven't seen that because I was in China up until a few days ago.

BNC: Oh, my God. It's been so much, lately. It's everywhere. And then they had a whole special on CNN last week, because a Cardinal came out saying that they should ban *The Da Vinci Code*, the book, which of course will only kick the sales up through the roof.

PM: Right.

BNC: Catholicism has been very prevalent lately, compared to usually.

PM: I've got to pick up that Mary issue. I'm definitely a big Mary guy, even though [laughs] I'm kind of a dyed-in-the-wool Buddhist anymore, but not when it comes to Mary.

BNC: Well, Mary would love Buddhism. I bet Mary loves Buddhism.

[Truth be told, I didn't realize till 10 minutes later that the tape ran out right here. When we hung up and I discovered my mistake, I quickly made notes about what we'd said after this point. But, in the long run, I like this ending best.]

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