

Beth Nielsen Chapman "**Prism**" BNC Records

Released on her own label and sub-titled "**The Human Family Songbook**," Chapman has been labouring on this 2CD project since 1998. The Tibetan chant, "Hymn To Tara" which appears on Disc 2 was recorded that year and amounts to the spark that 'lit this particular fire.' Let's step back a little however, and look at this musician's recent audio/visual output. While "**Look**" [2005] the CD that immediately preceded "**Prism**" was a secular work, prior to that Chapman, raised in a Catholic household, gave us "**Hymns**" a collection of centuries old religious songs mostly sung in Latin. The liner of that 2004 release included the footnote, "This material is from a forthcoming double CD of *world hymns*." That said, none of the eleven tracks that appeared on "**Hymns**" resurface here. In more recent times Beth married sound and vision with her DVD release "**If Love Could Say God's Name**" [2007]. Filmed in St. Paul's Cathedral, London four of the dozen [mostly religious] songs Beth performed on that occasion reappear on "**Prism**."

Given the foregoing insights "**Prism**" has certainly not arrived like some unexpected bolt from the blue. The collection title is rather clever since it infers completeness. Direct a light source at a [usually triangular] prism and it will refract the spectral colours. The skin that man is attired in, similarly, bears a rich spectrum of hues. Chapman has been a Nashville based writer since 1985, and prior to her rise to fame as a solo artist, was a composer of a string of country music chart hits for other artists. Wearing her solo singer/songwriter hat Beth Nielsen Chapman performs material that weds pop, folk and country influences. On "**Prism**" she has cast those previous associations aside and embraced a wide-spectrum of musical genres, and for that matter languages. More about the latter later.....

The eleven songs on Disc 1 are [mostly] performed in English, and Chapman had a hand in co-writing five of them, plus two more on her own. I deliberately used the word 'mostly' in the previous sentence since the rhythmically infectious opening cut "God Is In [Goddess In]" embraces a few 'foreign' phases, while the composer credit raises the question "*How many musicians does it take to co-write a song?*" Based on a composition by percussionist/performer Billy Jonas, street poet Chris Chandler and associate Laura Mahr, Chapman and her long time collaborator Annie Roboff edited the original lyric and added a bridge. The lyric to "My Religion [Sweet Love]" penned by Chapman and poet Atoaji Radellant is a freeform affair that references [by name] numerous world faiths while stylistically could be categorised as hip-hop jazz.

When it comes to Chapman's compositions, by far, I prefer those she composes on her own. In that regard, almost two decades on, "Emily" and "Years" from her 1990 self-titled sophomore recording [\*] still give me chills. Chapman's piano led "Prayers Of An Atheist" and the Disc 1 closer "This Life That's Lent To You" are top drawer efforts in that vein, and I'd even hazard a guess that Beth's research into Native American beliefs inspired the latter lyric. If I had to pick a Chapman co-writer that I admire, it would be Texan Kimmie Rhodes [£] and their "Shine All Your Light" previously appeared on Kimmie's "**Rich From The Journey**" [2000]. Rhodes' recording of her inspirational Blaze Foley tribute "Our Father's Face," on which – uncredited - Beth performed a verse, possesses a similar heartfelt spirituality to "Shine All Your Light." As for Nashville based hit songwriting scribes whose work is on display here, Beth co-wrote the up-tempo percussive "That Mystery" with Mark Germino, diminutive Don Henry penned "Beautiful Fool" and in the process succeeded in conjuring realistic images of troubled late 1960's America with mention of Martin Luther King and the iconic Walt's - Disney and Cronkite, while Gary Nicholson's "Choose Love" is beautiful paean that captures the pain and joy of our Earthbound existence [\$.]. As for living legends Beth co-wrote "Thank You My Lord," it praises the beauty of creation, with Hal David [go on with you, of course you remember Bacharach/David?]. One of two older songs on Disc 1, "For The Beauty Of The Earth" dates from 1864 and was composed by Englishman Folliot Sandford Pierpoint, while Katharine von Schlegel's lyric "Be Still My Soul" dates from the opening half of the eighteenth century and is teamed with a Jean Sibelius melody, written in 1899, taken from the composers masterwork "Finlandia."

While the twenty-page liner booklet contains copious details regarding the session players and recording studios used [worldwide], barring the opening verses from "Prayer Of An Atheist," sadly the lyrics are not featured. That comes as a bit of stretch since most of the dozen songs on Disc 2 are performed in foreign tongues. All is not lost however, as those lyrics including English translations are available on Beth's web site and we've provided the link below [+]. That said Disc 2 opens with the Joe Henry/John Jarvis co-write "The Flame," Henry being a past songwriting collaborator of Chapman's. Given the task

of proficiently performing in a foreign tongue the end result is a testament to the care that Chapman has taken in constructing and completing this work. "Shalom Alechem" a traditional Hebrew song, "Masibulele Ku Jesu," and the Negro spiritual "Pilgrim Of Sorrow" appeared on the aforementioned DVD. Elsewhere on Disc 2 Beth performs an arrangement of the traditional "Yemaya" [Cuban], and there's the chants "Hymn To Tara" [Tibetan], "Veni Creator Spiritus" [Latin Gregorian], while, considering my comment about "This Life That's Lent To You," the closing track "Navajo Chant" on Disc 2 pretty much 'mirrors Disc 1.' The song "Bhavani" is derived from a Sanskrit text, "In Yonder Valley" finds Chapman visit the world of the Shakers, "Durrow" is sung in Welsh, and "Bad-e Saba" is based on a text by fourteenth century Iranian poet/scholar Hafiz.

Released in the U.K. late last year, musically speaking 2008 has finally kicked in Stateside with the appearance of "**Prism.**" All in all it's a heartfelt song collection with no sell-by date restriction, and definitely a 'family' affair considering the insights I've offered regarding the contributing writers. That said, does this world possess the will to pause long enough to truly listen and adopt a path of love, in the process casting aside hate, greed and many other Earthbound ills.

**Note.**

[\*] – Circa 1980, Capitol Records issued Beth's solo debut "**Hearing It First.**"

[£] – As a songwriter, Kimmie has also collaborated extensively with Gary Nicholson.

[\$] – The lyric to Chapman and Nicholson's "Beyond The Blue," from the formers album "**Sand And Water**" [1996], possessed a distinctly spiritual edge.

[+] – Links to the song lyrics including their English translations is located on the web at <http://www.bethnielsenchapman.com/lyrics/prismlyrics.html>

Folkwax Score 9 out of 10

**Arthur Wood.**

Kerrville Kronikles 01/08.

[1125 words]