

You Can Be Anything You Want – An Interview with Beverly Glenn-Copeland

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Beverly Glenn-Copeland

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Unique. No one who has seen and heard Beverly Glenn-Copeland forgets her. No one confuses her with any other musician. Seen-and-heard, not because the music alone is less than enough, but because the presence and personal energy are so much *more*.

She's Black, she's female, an ardent feminist, a practising Buddhist, an American emigré. Her appearance is as unique, as startlingly individual, as her music – which isn't jazz, isn't folk, isn't blues, isn't classical (but has something of all of these sometimes – and sometimes double-and-triple-times). It's just, uniquely, her own.

You figure with all that you're going to get a heavy story of struggle and troubles – out of the ghetto and female repression into self-fulfillment, fighting all the way – right?

Wrong.

BGC

My background was quite extraordinary only in the sense that my parents were middle-class Blacks – and there weren't that many middle-class Blacks. But once you pass that, it was an amazingly ordinary middle-class background. I'm middle-class till I die, probably –

(Well – more amazing than ordinary: no more 'ordinary' middle-class than 'ordinary' Black. They were Quakers. When Beverly was twelve, they moved out to a Quaker-based inter-

racial community on Philadelphia's legendary Main Line. Her father, a high-school principal, was about the most 'ordinary' one in the family.)

My father played the piano, and he was really into it! He played like three or four hours a day, after he got home from school. He was into European classical, but at the same time he had his jazz collection and was listening to it – all the greats of the time. I was surrounded by classical music the most, but I was also going to parties and listening to the Black Hit Parade. And I had my own record collection, which was pretty catholic – everything from the classics to Chinese music and African drumming – Odetta's first album – old Sonny Terry/Brownie McGee albums –

My mother was an amazingly ambitious and bright woman – and very determined, totally determined that she was going to have a good life and enjoy herself and make good money, and she just proceeded to do those things. During the war, she decided she was going to go to graduate school and all kinds of stuff people didn't make decisions about in those days, especially if they were Black.

And I had an amazing grandmother, just amazing! She was a phenomenal singer, but she only did her singing in church. She was a powerful figure in my life because she lived really independently at a time when women just didn't do that. She wasn't a professional, she'd been a seamstress all her life, and at some point she just took off and started having a gar-

den, and she bought up some land. I spent a lot of my time with her when I was a little kid. She was fearless. She was a real good hunter. She used to go out and hunt up a mess of squirrel, and she kept these huge long-barreled rifles underneath the bed — no one would mess with her!

(In 1961, she finished High School, and went to McGill to enroll in the Faculty of Music.)

I never considered anything else — except psychology or psychiatry, very briefly. All my reinforcements came from music, and that's where all my talent seemed to go. It was just a natural extension for me to do that. . . . I had a lot of support and encouragement. I was told I could do anything — I could be a doctor, a lawyer, an Indian chief, a secretary — preferably a profession, because my parents were professionals and they saw that as a way to exist, to make the load less difficult. So I was pushed toward higher education situations, but I could be anything I wanted....I wasn't told about what I was supposed to do as a woman. Part of that, I think, was because I was a Black woman, and the Black history, women's history, is a whole lot different from the white Anglo-Saxon experience, partly out of necessity — primarily out of necessity. Of course I could be a musician, was their attitude — you can do anything you want. So it was actually very similar to a white male upbringing —

(In 1965, after McGill, she went to New York to study opera and Lieder with Eleanor Steber for a year and a half.)

— I bumped into her in Aspen at a summer festival, and she wanted me to study with her, so I did. I got a tremendous lot out of it — out of all the study I ever did — but it was a very unconscious time for me. I was good at it was mostly the reason why I did it, and I always felt the reason I was good at it was that I'd *always done it*. I wasn't thinking of it in terms of other lives, but European music was a kind of second nature to me. I didn't have to think about it — I knew it and felt it and understood it. I have a real facility with German, and with the way of expressing things.

So I was still singing Lieder and getting the occasional gig, and getting ready to go to Germany and study for a long time. And one day I woke up and thought, *Oh, that's enough!* It just kind of flashed at me that I didn't really want to go to Germany, that I really wanted to write my own songs, and that my music should be an extension of my lifestyle. It felt like my studies had come to an end, and now I could use what I'd learned to hop off to my next more-meaning synthesis.

— For instance, I started wearing my hair natural in 1961, the minute I got to Canada, and it was not yet accepted. I guess I felt that if I was who I was, I was expressing whatever it was. I wore my hair a certain way because *I felt my hair was meant to be that way*, not as an expression of much else. And I wanted to sing songs that were a little bit different than classical music because I had all this other stuff I loved, that I related to stylistically, and felt a part of...

(There was a small band for a while, in Montreal in '68.)

The band only lasted about a year — really more in our minds than actually. I think we had a couple of performances. But I was getting more and more interested in playing myself and I started writing more songs. It never occurred to me to do anybody else's material. I was such a loner — still am in a lot of ways — nobody told me you were supposed to start by singing other people's songs.

(She has never looked back. She decided if she was going to do English music, the place for it was Toronto: made the move, and started getting work right away.)

— First gig I had was with Sonny Terry and Brownie McGee, can you imagine that? It was like the payoff for having listened to all those records! I think I got paid \$50 for a week's work — but in those days, \$50 was like a whole month's rent! And I was getting CBC things —

(And learning to play the guitar — her own way, with a tuning she worked out herself.)

I didn't know much about the guitar, so I just adapted it to my own lack of understanding, and my desires for certain sounds. I just took the strings and started making them into different notes, and that opened up vast doors to me —

(She says she cannot now even remember most of the songs she used to do on guitar —)

— The instrument does tell you what it wants....But it was limiting too, because after a while I realized that in order to write the songs I was beginning to hear, I was going to have to learn more about the guitar — I was going to have to back-track and start all over again.

(Two musician friends were very significant in different ways during these years — the early '70s.)

— Lenny Breau used to come over occasionally and we would play music together. It was a great honor to be able to do that. Lenny was a really amazing jazz musician. I didn't know anything about how he made the music he made — except vocally. I could do what he did, sort of, vocally. At that time, the only instrument I was playing was guitar....

And then I had an experience. I was with my friend, Daisy Debolt — 1972, I think it was — she had a pump organ, and I sat down and spontaneously set this poem of hers on the pump organ. I hadn't played a piano really since I was eight or nine, and I sat at the keyboard, and I knew everything about it — you know? One of those split seconds in which you're shown what your potential is? Happily, I recorded it — to this day, I can't find what I was doing. You know — just a subconscious understanding of where the sound was going. Well, at that point I realized I was going to have to get a keyboard.

It took another year and a half, actually. And then I just started playing more and more of it. I just recently started to get instruction. I'm excited, now, learning how to play. I want to know how you move — what kind of feelings do you get in your hands? — how loose do you keep yourself? — how do you hit it so you can make the most of your musculature to move as fast as possible? I'm starting to get interested in the theory of how you play, to your own advantage, from your own natural spaces as much as possible —

(During the year and a half between the experience with Daisy Debolt and the beginning of serious work on the piano, two other important things happened. One was purely professional — the opportunity to write the musical score for a film, Frank Vitale's Montreal Main. The other was vital — her arrival, after years of searching, at a 'Buddhist practice' which is now central to her life, philosophy, and creativity.)

My basic practice consists of chanting about an hour and a half a day, and reciting several sections of a couple of chapters of the Lotus Sutra. You chant to a scroll which is a mandala to look at. The purpose of the mandala and of the chanting is to bring out your own inner life force and wisdom, which is always there potentially, and gets tapped to greater or lesser degrees according to your mood, the day, who you are, your energy, your environment, your own personal energies — it makes your life very rhythmical, in rhythm with the universe in a kind of way —

(There was one other major dynamic that began to make itself felt during the same critical period – 1972-3 – that saw the beginning of the piano work and the acceptance of the Buddhist practice – African drumming.)

– Jeffrey Crelinsten and I began playing these little teeny hand drums. He used to come out to my house in the mountains and bring these drums, and I had a couple of little ones too, and away we'd go. We had cymbals and bells – it was fun. But we also took ourselves seriously, and we used to do it at my gigs too.

During the last phase of my guitar playing, a drummer named Dido played master congas with me for a while. I went out and bought a really good drum, and I ended up drumming behind his solos, and I was learning all the time, learning from just being able to listen – like being an apprentice. If I could keep the beat, I was really happy.

It's the other instrument besides the piano I feel really involved with. I figure my life has been a story of how to have an African culture-base transplanted and married to a European culture-base – and how to express that musically. What I did was, I managed to get myself born to a father whose natural heart-space was in European culture – Debussy and all that – so I got to study that. Then, at the point where my own personality began emerging, I became aware that I had taken it as a study to transplant, to marry to, the basically Black musical expression which I feel is my centre.

In drumming, I experience the foundation of my African heritage. With the piano, I experience a synthesis of an African heritage and an exposure to a European culture-base. European and African music come together for me in the way in which I'm trying to approach the piano. I get to explore the harmonies, which I love – and the rhythms, which are definitely African – and the style of singing is African-based too, blues-based, but more sort of how the African developed after it got here, to this continent.

One difference with the drumming is that I can improvise to some extent. I've been exploring certain rhythms,

they're gaining depth as I explore, and there are certain things that my body is just *into* right now – but I never know exactly what I'm going to play.

(She does not think of herself as a poet.)

I think of myself as a real good musician and as a person who has a way with words, and who is extremely strict about trying to make things rhyme, *a, b, a, b*. I can only think of certain words. I know what I want to say, and try to put it in a rhyme scheme which is currently the way a popular song goes.

(But she admits she may have written a couple of poems. She mentions One day on a lonely pilgrimage, I wandered to your door, which is on her album. What comes first, I asked, the music or the words?)

Always the music. Usually what happens is, I'll have a musical flash, and words will come with it, not necessarily the words I'll use, but just from my subconscious, sort of telling me in words what it is I'm feeling at that moment when I'm thinking that melody. Then I'll start working with those words –

(What is she planning next? Where does she want to go?)

I like to imagine being able to play the piano in such a way as to completely fill up the space. There's no room left anywhere, anything – it's just – a PIANO!

Then I have another sound in my head which is like an orchestral sound – very expanded, using everything from Gamelan bells to all kinds of Moog synthesizer, and a couple of pianos and a string section – you know, cello and viola – and a horn section – French horns – and then a whole African drumming –

(Beverly wants to do more work in children's television – she has been a regular on 'Mr. Dressup' for a while now – and she'd like her basic job to be songwriting – writing songs that other people will sing – pop songs.)

Starry-eyed woman

*i'm a starry-eyed woman
lovin' what i'm doin'
i'm gonna jump up and down
to celebrate the new age
turnin' the next page
and the love i've found
i just want to keep on goin'
long's i have my vision
i can carry on
and be a starry-eyed woman
with both feet on the ground.*

*They say the taller the tree
the deeper the root
well i'm buildin' up dreams
and puttin' down shoots
so i can build my place
and turn a face to the stars
so i can build my place
and turn a face
to the stars.*