

On creating community when we're physically separated



Musician Beverly Glenn-Copeland on moving slowly and steadily toward your goals, listening closely to what a song is telling you, learning from a younger generation, and reaching out to others with kindness.

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As told to Max Mertens, 2624 words.

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I want to start off by talking about the [Keyboard Fantasies documentary](#). How did that come to be, and was there any nervousness or hesitation on your part about having a filmmaker and camera crew follow you around?

It came about because [Posy Dixon](#), who was part of LUCA with her business partner Liz [Proctor], approached me a few years ago and we started talking on Skype. She told me what she did, and after four or five months of talking, she said "I've been interested in doing a documentary, and I think I'm going to use my own money and come over to Canada and do it." She showed up, found someone here who would be a good camera person, came up with a schedule of things we might do in a very relaxed manner, and away we went.

We got together the group that I'd been working with called [Indigo Rising](#), and started filming in this wonderful recording studio in Nova Scotia. Then when we went to tour Europe about four or five months later, she showed up with a crew, and followed us around and did some more. That's how that happened. As far as how I felt about being in my face, she's so sensitive that I didn't have any problem with it. I found it an interesting experience because that had never happened to me before.

What did you learn from collaborating and playing shows with these younger musicians?

This is how our communities have worked for many, many years down through time. It's only in the last short while that our generations are separate from each other. A short while meaning since the heavy-duty industrial revolution. In the last 100 years there's been just such a separation of generations. The way we have worked as humans, the way our societies have worked as humans all over the world, the elders have a certain wisdom gained from years and years of experiencing.

Now I'm not saying that's what I was doing with young people, but what has happened in my lifetime is I have lived long enough to see once again the generations are coming together and saying "We need each other." We need each other. This is the new message that is being put out by the younger generation—not necessarily by my generation because we didn't necessarily have the understanding of this multi-generational way of life, of community—but the young ones are very wise.

The Indigo children, there's a prophecy that came out in the '80s or something that I happened to find out about that said there was coming a generation who represented a next level of growth for humankind, that they were very wise. I looked for years, but in fact they were babies when I was looking for them, they were just being born in the mid-'80s. And now they're here and they're wise. These wise ones are the great benefit to play with.

I'm curious if they taught you any new ways to make music, because you've always been a musician who was ahead of the curve when it came to new technologies.

Actually, they haven't been able to teach me much to do with new technologies, because I'm not all that much interested in new technologies, except when I receive something from the universe that says this is a piece that you're meant to give to the world. I'm not at the cutting edge of that at all, nor do I give a hoot about the cutting edge, I just need to be able to make it.

You come from an incredibly musical family, both your parents played music. Are there particular traits or habits that you acquired from them when it comes to your creative process?

I don't know if on any conscious level that it affects anything to do with my process. My father played the classical piano repertoire of Europe five hours a day brilliantly when he would come home from being a principal of a high school, and my mother could play pretty much anything that wasn't the classical repertoire. She'd just sit down and she could pick it out on the piano, and I would sit down beside her and we would sing songs together that were not the things that my father was interested in. I was given a musical education that was extensive in my own home. So when I went off to university to study music, I was familiar with an awful lot of music.

In addition, my own interests as a teenager was the music of the world, so I was listening to music as many places as I could find. I remember I was listening to Chinese music and West African music at the time; I found some Indian music, and I listened to all kinds of other genres of music that was easily available in the West. That's primarily what they gave me. Because they gave me that education at home, I think I was able to go that path with greater ease because there was never any expectation from them that I should be anything.

How has your physical environment throughout the years shaped your music?

For me, when I am in an environment that is as natural as possible, my idea of natural as possible, which is as close to the earth as I can live to it. I'm not growing food or whatever, but where I can be among trees, when I can live close to that, there is a silence in that. The silence is not the silence of nature itself, but the silence of the hustle and bustle, the silence of our wheels constantly turning and our machines constantly running. When I'm in those kinds of environments that's like food for me. I feel refreshed and I can go out at night, and look up at the stars and not at the city lights, just simple things like that make such a difference to me. That's my need. Now, everybody doesn't have that same need, there are many people who live in the midst of concrete and are incredibly creative and have all kinds of wonderful offerings, but just for me personally that's what it is.

You live in Sackville, New Brunswick, which has an incredible artistic community for its size and there are many musicians who live there. Why do you think it draws so many artists?

I have no idea why it has done that, but it has. There are energies below the earth in various places and they have different kinds of energies. Perhaps the energy in this place is a vortex for creativity. What is so special about Sackville in terms of its history? There's nothing I can think of, but perhaps I don't know enough about it. Somehow its become a focal point to pull creativity of all kinds—not just musicians—of all kinds to this place. There are writers here and there are visual artists here and every other kind of art form that you can think of, plus a whole bunch more that you wouldn't think of, and they're all very attracted to this place.

Your wife is an author and a gardener, how has she inspired your work?

She's an incredible writer. My wife, her name is Elizabeth, she goes by Elizabeth Glenn-Copeland. She is an amazing gardener, her stuff is so wild, and just verdant. She's more like an English gardener rather than a French gardener in the old sense. The French had a tendency to be very, very controlled in their gardens, whereas the English gardens were wildish looking. She tends in that direction and her stuff is just amazing and inspiring to me. She started out as a dancer and she did that professionally, and then she added singing and she did that professionally. She trained as an actress and she did that professionally.

Eventually the writing she was doing since she was little came more to the fore. She's also a scholar in a sense that she reads ferociously and many, many, many books in a week, and she remembers almost everything that she reads. Not only does she inspire me from the perspective of her art forms and also one other thing—she's always been an activist for the benefit of those who have been marginalized.

When I was a child, although my parents were highly educated, I was not a natural reader. I was late learning to read primarily because everybody told me stories. My parents were reading to me all the time, everybody read to me, so I reverted to what I considered to be my African oral learning tradition, which is I want to learn everything by hearing it as opposed to reading it if I can.

Well, aren't I lucky—Elizabeth reads everything, and then she tells me about it. I can't tell you all that she reads because I have a terrible memory, but I can tell you much of what I've learned in the last 12, 13 years has been because she has read something, and told me about it.

And vice versa, how do you think you inspire her work?

You would probably have to ask her that, but based on what she's told me, I'm a turtle. By that I mean I'm very, very slow. I think slowly, I move slowly, and it takes me a long time to do things. I tend to be a bit of a perfectionist, so that's part of the problem or maybe not part of the problem, just part of the reality. But the thing of it is I never stop going to where I'm going ever, ever. She says to me that is incredibly encouraging to her, that way of being. It's not that she gives up or anything, but she says watching how relentlessly I move towards my goals has really inspired her.

How do you know when a song is finished?

I can tell you exactly and this is a really good lesson that I had to learn. The song gets sent in some format or another, and I add to it what I think is mine to add to flesh out what was being sent. At a certain point what I've noticed is if I get into this space where I think "Oh and I need to add this and then I need to add that," which is not really coming from the song, but from my own ego. I don't mean that in a negative way, but just it's just coming from me, it's not the impulse of the music itself, then inevitably it starts sounding terrible to my ears. I've lost a couple pieces because of that. My motto is to try to stay very sensitive to when the piece is expressing what it came to express, and that I have augmented to make sure that it can be understood, but that I haven't taken it off some place that it had no intention of going.

I really believe that everything is alive in some format or another, because there is nothing but the universe and everything in it is alive, and that's just the reality of it when you get down to molecules. It's all alive, it's all moving and changing.

Elizabeth told me a story of a woman that told her the story, this person was a writer and she received what she felt was this incredible story. She started writing it, and then thought "You know what? I'm not really able to do this right now, I have to put this aside." And then a year later she went to a party and spoke with a friend of hers, who said "Oh this incredible story I'm in the middle of writing." And the woman described the story—it was the same story, the same characters. So that is to say that energy was a live energy. At first it went to this person and she tried her best, but she didn't have time and so it went "okay, next," and went to somebody else who actually had the time to take it in and write it.

Are there plans to put out more music?

I was supposed to be in a studio at the end of March, it was all planned, and then COVID happened and we had to cancel it. That was all new music.

How are you adapting to these new challenges? Are you talking with people about other ways you can get this music out into the world?

I'm looking at that, you never know if we'll return to any kind of where we were before, I don't think we will. But recording studios may remain in existence for awhile or maybe for many, many centuries, who knows. If it does, at some point I will record this, the next album. If it doesn't and the internet still exists, well then I'll figure it out along with my management company. We'll figure out how to get it out.

In these times, how do we find and create community when we're not able to be physically together? What advice would you give to young artists looking to find and build community?

Well, that's so on point, because community is really the main gift of COVID. I don't think there's any one way, I certainly don't know of a surefire anything, but I would say-look around you. Who needs encouraging? Inevitably, if they need encouraging, they will encourage you back. Who needs care? Who needs to hear from somebody? Reach out. If you're a young person and you're creating music, you're going to know plenty of people and maybe you're an introvert, maybe you don't know plenty, but then reach out to the ones that as an introvert you've come to love. Just find out how they are and if something you write can give them comfort, send it on, just send it on.

Trust, and I really trust this, that in this time we are establishing community because Mother Earth has sent us to our rooms because we've been bad. In those rooms, we are having the opportunity to realize one, who Mother Earth is, what she's offered us, and what we haven't been paying too much attention to, but also we have the opportunity to look and understand that everybody else is trapped in their rooms. That doesn't mean we can't reach them and they can't reach us. If you reach out, when you reach out with kindness in your heart, the Earth reaches back with kindness in her heart for you, and that will be what we create going forward. And it will turn out to be the greatest currency we have ever had.

Beverly Glenn-Copeland Recommends:

1. Laila Biali's 2008 album *Laila Biali*.
2. Favorite flower - sunflowers that grow to eight or more feet, so you are looking up.
3. Children's book called Maple Moon by Connie Brummel Crook.
4. Visual art is my favorite art expression. The Group of Seven, famous Canadian artists whose work is stunning. My favorite among them is Lawren Harris. Another of my favorite visual artists is Evelyn Wolff.
5. My other favorite art expression is dance. Alvin Ailey is my favorite dance troupe. He is passed on now, but the troupe is as amazing as ever. I saw his troupe when he was alive, and again recently since his passing. Beyond words!

Name

Beverly Glenn-Copeland

Vocation

Musician

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Juri Hiensch