



Photograph: Paul Atwood

BEVERLY
GLENN-COPELAND

Words:
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Half a century on from his debut, the **KEYBOARD FANTASIES** composer is the next big thing.

Forty-five years. That’s how long the Canadian-American musician Beverly Glenn-Copeland spent *not* waiting for fame. Book-ending that period are his debut album, released in 1970, and the 2015 rediscovery of *Keyboard Fantasies*, a record first released on a few hundred cassettes in 1986. In the intervening years, Glenn-Copeland, who goes by Glenn, worked at everything from delivering pizzas to composing for *Sesame Street* and appearing as a regular on the Canadian children’s TV show *Mr. Dressup*.

The one constant was making music in serene obscurity, a process he describes as translating into song the audible transmissions sent to him from the “Universal Broadcasting System.” In the last few years his ethereal music has resurfaced, and his albums *Keyboard Fantasies* and *Transmissions: The Music of Beverly Glenn-Copeland* reissued. He has performed at MoMA in New York and been the subject of a documentary film that covers both his creative journey and his transition to living publicly as a man. But, at 76, he says it is less about the glory than about the joy of being around to witness it.

SEP: I know your father played classical piano at home when you were little. What were some other early musical influences?

BGC: As a child I was listening to the piano repertoire coming out of Europe—18th and 19th centuries. But by the time I was 12, my father was playing jazz records. I heard a lot of Black big-band music. Later, I was listening to music from around the world—Chinese, Indian, West African drumming.

SEP: In the 1970s, you were on the cusp of “making it.” But not long after, the prospect

of commercial success waned. What was that like?

BGC: I went to Los Angeles in my late 20s and had a famous manager, Billy James. He thought he could get me a good record deal. But I didn’t fit into any musical category, so it couldn’t happen. When I realized that I just said, “I’m not going to worry about it. There’s no point in spending time with it.” So, I just continued writing the music that I was hearing.

SEP: What led to your comeback in 2015?

BGC: A gentleman in Japan was introduced to *Keyboard Fantasies*. He wrote asking for some cassettes to sell. I didn’t know where they were at first because they’d been tucked away for 30 years. Well, he sold them in a few days and asked for more. Then he sold those in a week. Then a company in California asked for some—and sold theirs. In about three months, there were several record companies asking if they could put out the album.

SEP: You describe your music more as a philosophy to be shared with humanity than as a sound. It’s interesting that for years you worked without lamenting the fact that you couldn’t share it with more people.

BGC: I attribute that to my Buddhist practice, which I started when I was 29. I was raised Quaker and when I went looking for a spiritual practice [as an adult], I concluded that I needed something out of the East. Most practices, especially in Buddhism, are silent. But I found one where I could make sounds—Nam Myoho Renge Kyo. It suited me perfectly, and it had the

same philosophical underpinnings as Quakerism.

SEP: *Keyboard Fantasies* was made with an Atari computer and a drum machine. Has technology been useful for you?

BGC: The computer allowed me to create orchestral sounds when I heard them but when nobody was there to join me in making them. I was also hearing sounds that could only be made by a computer, like the stars speaking. When this computer came out, I was able to write in a larger scope, things that no acoustic instrument could possibly duplicate.

SEP: Did you feel that you had to contort your musical style when you were composing for children’s television?

BGC: No. I wrote for the shows the way I wrote for myself. But I tried to make things that kids could relate to. The way in which I felt shackled was not musically, but by who I was on the show.

SEP: Because you were living as woman?

BGC: Yes. Because at the time I was living as a female and, once I understood that I was transgender I was well aware that there was no way I could make that announcement. There was no conversation at the time about people who were on the spectrum. You were either heterosexual or weird; straight or going to hell.

SEP: You once predicted that you’d be famous after death. What’s it like now that it’s happened in your lifetime?

BGC: I’m grateful because I can actually be here to witness the effect of these pieces on people, which is what they were sent to me for in the first place. So, I’m very happy about that. I’m thrilled.