

# *Songwriter's Monthly*



*Featuring:  
Sarah DeLeo,  
Melissa Ferrick,  
Paige Nichols,*

*Beth Thornley*



“Nice  
Monkey,”  
Goldilocks

Beth  
Thornley

Beth Thornley grew up playing piano, singing in choirs and basically doing “everything that parents make their kids do.” The difference with Beth was she didn’t rebel.

“I absolutely loved it and I knew I somehow wanted to make a living in music,” she expressed in a delicate yet confident voice. “I just wasn’t exactly sure how I was going to do that. Then I started writing songs and I was like, ‘Wow, I think this is my thing!’ It was like finally stumbling across what you think you’re suited for and it just feels like a warm, fuzzy coat or a lovely pair of comfortable shoes. I thought, *Oh, I may be Goldilocks because this is just right!*”

Beth’s colorful, image-oriented manner of speaking is reflected in her songwriting. Her smart, memorable lines and inventive way of presenting a story or twisting a phrase to make it radiate with a brilliant freshness is both startling and worthy of praise.

“I certainly work really hard on the lyrics,” she noted. “not to say that I don’t work hard on melodies and chord changes, but I’m just determined to make the words a craft as much as the music is. It’s really hard and when somebody notices, I really appreciate it.”

Often, Beth’s hard work is something to

marvel at — the meaning in her words is always clearly evident, but at times it is so cleverly presented that it evokes a smile or that wonderful “ah hah” moment of discovery

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or revelation. However, the true magic of her lyrics is Thornley’s git for knowing the perfect word or collage of words to use. For instance, in her title track, “Wash U Clean,” there is a two word phrase that might seem like a throw away or a filler, but it is so absolutely right for the moment of the song that it has become a kind of cult reference or secret phrase among her fans. In fact, at her CD release party, if you said, “Nice monkey,” at the door, you’d get in for a discount.

Thornley’s ability to create ideas and phrases that truly “stick” with people doesn’t stop with monkeys. In another upbeat, fun track entitled, “You’re So Pony,” Beth is trying to do something beyond just writing a thoroughly enjoyable song.

“I am trying to start a catch phrase . . . and I don’t know why I thought I could do that,”

she laughed. “It’s just such a nice little word and such a happy little word . . . if something is “pony,” then that must mean it’s good! The phrase, ‘you’re so pony,’ popped into my head and for about two years I had the chorus in my head before I sat down to write it because I didn’t know what to do with it. Also, I was working on songs that I thought were far more ‘important.’ Then one day I thought, *Let’s just do this, I want this to be fun, I need to lighten up.*”

Thornley knew she needed to bounce around the music tracks with somebody else, so she asked her producer, Rob Cairns for some input on the music. “‘Pony’ went down really fast and easy,” Rob informed. “We wanted to keep its raw edge, so after a



simple beat, guitars, bass and a fast double-track vocal, we were 90% done.”

“It’s always exciting to work with Beth,” Cairns added. “I know the material is going to be good. And since Beth has the same drive to try to perfect the material as I do, she’s a great person to ‘go into the trenches’

## The Story Behind: “Never Your Girl”

“Never Your Girl’ was probably the second most difficult song from an arranging standpoint – and possibly one of the most difficult from a songwriting standpoint for Beth. There were several different versions of the chorus, in different keys, that were recorded. We did a little ‘focus group’ on that chorus with some close friends whose ears we trust. That was another song where every additional instrument we added just killed the mood for us. The electric guitar was in there from the beginning (The ‘slide down’ effect was actually achieved by Beth adjusting the delay time by turning a knob as I played the part, and then quickly returning it to the original setting before I played the next phrase.), but I resisted the addition of acoustic guitar until the very end. There were also a couple of long nights worrying about whether or not to use hi hats.”

— Rob Cairns

with. Even when we have really rough days in the studio, it’s okay because she understands that making records is sometimes very hard work.”

When asked which track was the hardest, Rob responded, “Every track has its own set of challenges. I would say that ‘Still Can’t Hide’ was the one on which I spent the most amount of effort and time. The basic tracks went down rather quickly, but getting the right instrumental layering took some trial and error. As is often the case with Beth’s songs, the writing is so strong that the simple basic tracks (piano/bass/drums/vocal) are often very satisfying, and my

instinct is to resist adding any instrumentation lest I over-arrange. I tried a version with only tubular bells and timpani in addition to basic tracks, but Beth shot it down.”

“Still Can’t Hide” is a masterful song with unexpected, yet appropriate harmonic shifts.

“If I’m going to do something strange, I try to make it feel like it makes sense,” Thornley commented on the somewhat unusual chord progression. “It’s okay with me if somebody notices it, but if it’s so noticed that it takes you out of the song, then I need to go back to do something that transitions everything a little bit better.”

When asked how she achieved such a magical progression, Beth was more than happy to get specific. “It’s in F major, so it starts on an F major chord and then I move the fifth up to a D while keeping the F and the



A in the bottom. In the next chord, I keep the F in the bass, but I add the Ab — which makes it an F minor — and the [top note] goes up to the major 7 [E] . . . which is just strange. For a while I was a little bit afraid of that progression, but completely intrigued by it.”

“Then I realized that it was very difficult to put a melody over it,” Beth continued. “but I was so happy with the sound of it and so much wanted to play with the major and then the minor . . . I actually did sit down and say I’m going to play a chord that’s major and then I’m going to follow it by the minor of that very same

*“I don’t ever want to be weird for weird’s sake, but I do want to try to see what chords can do.”*

see where I can go.”

Lyrally, “Still Can’t Hide” is about: “Yeah, life is hard, and we do hide sometimes. You can escape under the covers for a little while, but then you gotta get up and go out

chord, I just liked the way that sounds. It was hard but I wanted to give it a try so it actually kinda started out as a ‘science experiment.’ I don’t ever want to be weird for weird’s sake, but I do want to try to see what chords can do. Maybe it would be better described as a music experiment? I’m just always playing with that to



and kinda deal with it all.”

Another song with a similar message is the tender track “Everyone Falls.”

“I’ve never really thought of it till this moment,” Thornley realized. “but both songs have the same thread of how hard life can be sometimes and how we just have to keep trying to understand for each other. Life is difficult, but we’re all in this together. There is a little bit of relief in that for me to know that I’m not alone in this, that we all struggle. It’s part of the human journey, we all gotta fight sometimes, but then we all get to be happy sometimes, too.”

When asked about any unifying theme or philosophy running through the rest of the album, Rob Cairns responded, “With all of Beth’s albums, there’s only been one philosophy — which is simply to serve each song the best we can, regardless of where the arrangements and production take us. For me, Beth’s ‘voice’ as a songwriter has such a strong signature that I felt it was enough of an anchor to allow us to musically



explore. Ultimately, we just wanted to make an album that we’d enjoy listening to, and would be proud of 20 years down the road.”



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Speaking of being proud, in the track “There’s No Way” Beth takes on a rather complex lyrical idea and manages to pull it off magnificently. The song is about failing hard just to make a point.

“I was really worried about the entire song because I knew I had

## The Story Behind: The Sax Riff On “Wash U Clean”

“The sax was 100% Beth’s idea. She knew sax was my main instrument at one time, but I hadn’t played in years. She approached me with that riff and said that she thought it would be great on baritone. The problem was that I didn’t own a baritone sax. I was a tenor player. One ebay auction and some repairs later, we had our opening track.”

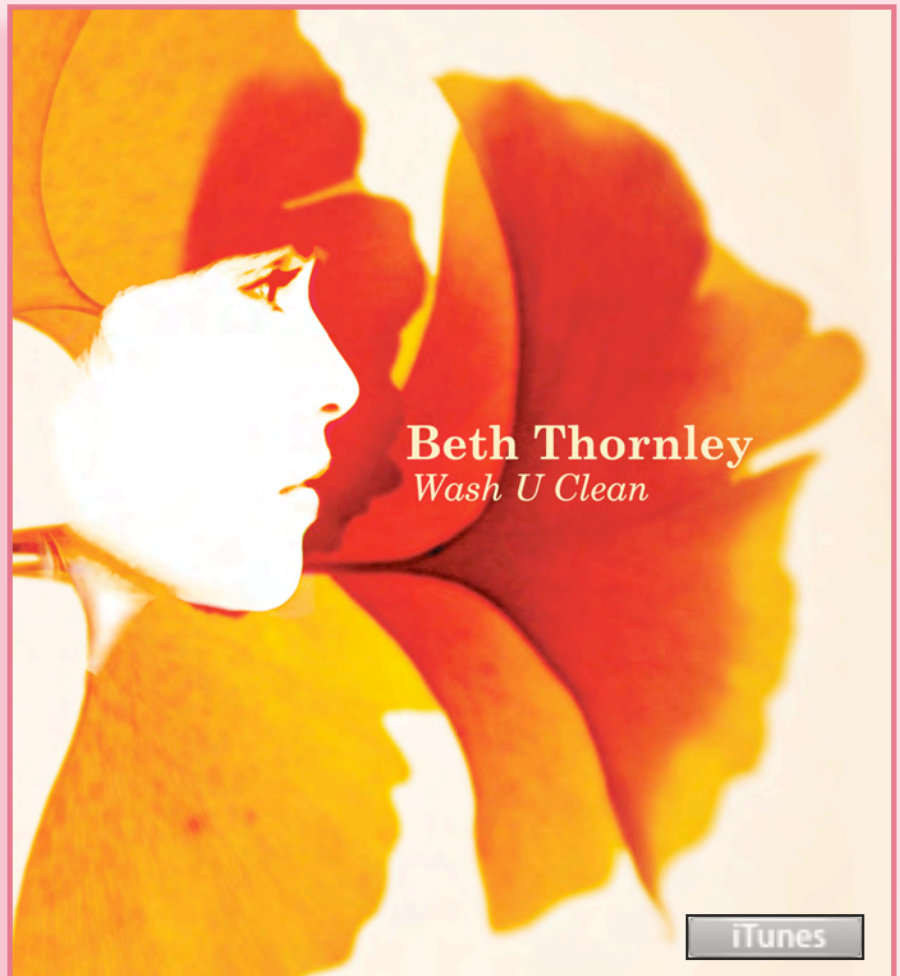
— Rob Cairns

tackled a kind of upside down and backward’s concept,” Beth expressed. “I have learned in the past that it’s best — when you only have three minutes — to keep the concept rather simple . . . and there’s nothing wrong with simple. There’s a difference between simple and simplistic and I try to really pay attention to that.”

“If you’ve got more than one or two twists it’s just too much for three minutes,” she continued. ‘There’s No Way’ was a challenge for that very reason. I went through an earlier part of my life when I was just so down, not like terrible horrible bad things were happening or anything, but I think you can get to a place in your life where you don’t know what you want to do and you’re not sure that anybody believes in you, so you just think, *I’ll show them, I’ll fail big!* It’s not anything that makes any sense, but it’s what happens to people, they give up. ‘I’ll show you that I can’t learn, I’m going to crash right here!’ It’s just a real backwards way of

trying to get back at somebody and trying to hurt somebody, but I think the thought crosses a lot of people’s mind’s. I kinda figure if it crosses mine, it must cross other people’s, right?”

“And not only did it happen to me,” she noted, “but a friend of mine was telling me a story about a friend of his who is just under the thumb of his incredibly strict father. His father wants him to go to med school, but this guy is an artist at heart and he is struggling in a way that is just really, really hard. He’s got the pride of the entire family resting on his shoulders based on whether or not he goes to med school and becomes a doctor. I felt for him so much because he’s at that place in his life where he may fall off the edge just to show them. I don’t think going to med school is the answer, but I also don’t think falling off the edge and completely crashing is the answer either. Yet, he’s riding those extremes



right now: go and be the savior for his family or crumble from the pressure.”

“I don’t know what he’s going to do. I hope he finds his own path. That really is the harder thing, but it’s also the best thing . . . if you can find it. When you’re in that situation, it’s the harder path to take because it’s not marked. Yeah, you can crash, everybody knows how that path looks, or you can go to med school because everyone knows how that path looks, too, but finding your own way, man, there are just no road signs.”

Thankfully, Beth Thornley has found her path . . . and she’s well along her chosen road. Songwriting is a good fit for her because not only does it seem comfortable for Beth, but she’s a warm, fuzzy coat for her audience, as well. Thornley is a wonderful musician, a clever composer, and a nimble lyricist with a remarkable ear for arranging. As far as music is concerned, Beth is, indeed,



Goldilocks because it truly is just right for her. To check out Beth’s latest album and learn more about this gifted artist, visit:

<http://beththornley.com>