



Photo by Bonnie Schiffman

## *Letting Her Soul Surrender*

Rickie Byars Beckwith Shines

in Brilliant, New Artistic Ways

Kent Rautenstrauss

*Singer/songwriter Rickie Byars Beckwith is devoted to the “song of God.” She shares the intimate and vulnerable process of writing her first book based on the story of her latest songs.*

**“Everything feels real good when a song is born.”**

Being devoted to the “song of God” is the story of Dr. Rickie Byars Beckwith, affectionately known as “Rickie BB.” A world-renowned singer/songwriter of spiritual, heart-centered music and founding director of the two-hundred-voice Agape International Choir in Culver City, California, Rickie BB is now adding “book author” to her extensive list of brilliant, out-of-the-box artistic credentials.

“We all have something to bring to the world. I believe that a gift or talent is given to us so that we may find a way to inspire others with that gift. A gift is not our ticket to ride—it is our ticket to love,” Rickie writes in her debut book, *Let My Soul Surrender: Grace Notes of a Journey*, with a companion CD by the same name. Self-published earlier this year, the book, which she calls her “favorite project to date,” shares the inspiration behind a collection of compelling and deeply personal songs recorded in 2010, or her newest

“babies,” as she refers to them. Every song has a story behind it, and Rickie shares the story with her trademark honesty, humor, and wisdom. Sometimes the stories are exciting and hopeful, and sometimes they are heart-wrenching and full of questions. “From the gate, this work is me,” she said, adding, “I grew up during this project.”

The highly readable book featuring Rickie’s literary “voice” includes eye-catching graphics, layout, and photography. “I wanted to make a different kind of book. I also wanted people to meet a part of me they had never heard or seen,” she said. In order to do this, she enlisted a team of creatives, including visual artist Dudley Declaime Perkins, graphics designers Judi Paliungas and Susanne Abraham, acclaimed photographers including Bonnie Schiffman, Shawn Keane, and Carl Studna, and the work of celebrated fashion designers. The end result is that Rickie’s stories “jump off the pages” visually. “I wrote the kind of book that I would want to read—with pictures and stories—a kind of children’s book for adults. The book feels *good* when you hold it,” she laughed.

The companion CD *Let My Soul Surrender* offers an authentic, yet often underproduced, even

organic sound that is catching the attention of both old and new Rickie BB fans. “The music on this CD is so special for so many reasons. I truly accepted that I get to be me this time. I’ve been recording for many years with incredible producers, but this time, I knew what I wanted to feel and I stood for my ideas! I wrote the music from my heart,” she said, adding, “I could finally feel myself as an artist.”

What else makes the CD so unique? “I love a simple instrument talking,” she said, sharing that the CD is primarily anchored around the electric Wurlitzer piano, which she plays, and the electric guitar, masterfully played by Detroit musician and Parliament Funkadelic’s Ricardo “Ricky” Rouse, who, at the tender age of seven, was a guitarist for young Stevie Wonder. “We set the tone,” Rickie BB stated emphatically. “With me on electric Wurlitzer and Ricky on the guitar, we marked the dynamic grooves for the songs that were so refreshing to my soul.”

Other musicians joined the project, including Grammy-winning project manager John Barnes, who produced and co-wrote with superstar Michael Jackson, and Georgia Anne Muldrow, a talented rhythm and blues/jazz singer who happens

to be Rickie’s daughter. “She is a true genius,” her mom exclaimed. “*All* the players came together,” Rickie said, smiling.

### Listening for the Harmony of God

As a songwriter “forever,” Rickie is often asked how she harvests the harmony of God. “When I sit at the piano, I rarely think, ‘Hmm. This is a minor ninth chord with the ninth on top....’ When I sit, my fingers begin to paint the way out of the lie I have accepted, or paint the way into the truth that needs to be known.” Writing music allows her to slow down and allows her “emotions and feelings to be designed in song,” she said. “I try to capture inspiration immediately....Others listen to God. I’m listening to music!”

Rickie has been listening to music, and God, all of her life. Growing up in the early sixties at Our Lady of Consolation Catholic Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, the young Rickie felt an intense—even mystical—connection to her spiritual source. “I remember with joy how I would stand outside the convent and listen to Mother Dolorosa lead the nuns, all African Americans (surprisingly similar to Whoopie Goldberg in the movie *Sister Act*), in their Gregorian chants



Photo by Shawn Keane

to God....The voices of those nuns inspired my soul in ways that would later be revealed in my own devotional chants to God,” she shares in the book, adding, “The nine-year-old that stood outside the convent to listen to the nuns sing their prayers had become the woman who listened with the heart of a child for the harmony that is of God.”

*When Spirit’s on the main line I  
am out of space and time  
The love of God surrounds me, the  
answer is everywhere  
Holy Elevation! I am one with  
all creation  
The voice so sweetly speaking, the*

*voice is always,  
Always there.  
Everybody say Holy (Holy) Spirit  
(Spirit) take me up to  
(Take me up to) take me up to  
higher ground.*  
~lyrics from "Main Line"

### **Skinny Branches**

Trusting the inner voice is sometimes easier said than done—just ask Rickie Byars Beckwith. She describes the relatively new process of writing a book as “soul-searching,” not unlike being out on the skinny branches of a tree, adding, “There are demons of doubt that come upon you.” But, “good people kept telling me to keep going.” Doris Houser Byars, “Mama Byars,” gave her a lot of inspiration throughout the writing of the book and was the first person to encourage her to journal in her early twenties when she first set out into the music world. Rickie dedicates the book to her beloved mom, calling her “the most heroic being in my life.”

Other family members pushed her forward—ironically, including those with a lack of faith in her writing abilities. “Everybody mattered. I got to see which way they influenced me.” She then pondered aloud a timeless question, “Why do we want to be loved more than heard?”

Rickie’s long-time prayer partner, the best-selling author Mary Morrissey, offered important advice at a critical juncture. “You are going to stand on this work,” she promised, and told her to never compromise the vision for her book.

But it was her beloved husband Dr. Michael Bernard Beckwith, founder and spiritual director of Agape International Spiritual Center, himself a best-selling author and Rickie’s “favorite songwriting partner,” who most encouraged her. “Michael gave me the idea to write about the songs, affirming there was a writer in me. I accepted the challenge!”

“Throughout all the years of her artistry, Rickie’s passion to totally surrender to that creative urge has made her a finely tuned instrument for catching the sacred sounds and rhythms of the Eternal,” said her proud husband. “The songs and the intimate background story that inspired each one speak to the Magic that is everywhere present, constantly transmitting itself from every corner of creation if we pause long enough to humbly listen....I suggested to Rickie that she write about the personal experiences which birthed each song, not only because I knew this would be inspiring to her many fans,

but also because I am aware of her gift as a writer, which also deserves to be shared.”

“He’s my ‘person,’” Rickie said with a smile. “If I say I want to jump, he says, ‘How high?’”

### **Sharing from the Heart**

The writing “demons” or fears that Rickie initially experienced faded as she worked on the *Surrender* project. “A funny thing happened on the way to completing the stories,” she recounts in the book. “A voice greater than I had known began to speak through my writing...and I gave it permission. I stopped judging myself and allowed the stories to come into being in a natural way. To actually see people laugh and cry as I read aloud of my feelings and inner struggles enabled me to understand that what I had to say was meaningful, and even beautiful, to people.

“What makes my first book so special is that I had to put on the clothes of a writer. It’s not like I was not a writer all along, but in this project, I accepted the voice inside of me. I let go of the chatter in my head that measured my gifts against those of others.”

For the reader, the gift based on Rickie’s personal example is seemingly simple, but it takes some people a lifetime to learn.

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“Be yourself,” she writes. “Tell the story and let it go into the world to be what it shall be. There will always be more to do and become, but there is nothing more glorious than to accept one’s self, to trust the spirit inside, and then—go for it!”

*Let my soul surrender, let my  
soul surrender*

*Greater I shall be for what I  
came to do*

*And what I came to see*

*Let my soul surrender to the  
heart of God*

*Oh let my soul surrender to the  
heart of God.*

~lyrics from “Let My  
Soul Surrender”

### **Surrendering to Spirit and New Horizons**

Rickie Byars Beckwith has been surrendering to Spirit all of her life, and the end result is a remarkable collection of unparalleled artistry. Rickie BB developed a unique vocal sound early on, becoming the lead singer with the New York Jazz Quartet, the Pharoah Sanders Ensemble, and the Ronald Muldrow Ensemble. Her husband calls this unique vocal quality “smoke.” “The ‘smoke’ still smolders in her voice, melting and healing the hearts of her listeners,” he said, adding, “Simply put, this woman can *sang!*”

One of Rickie’s more interesting “trivia” bio facts is that she was a background singer on comedian John Belushi’s first Joe Cocker skit on the television show *Saturday Night Live*. But it is her work as Music and Arts Director of the Agape International Spiritual Center, and her dynamic musical and personal partnership with senior minister Michael Bernard Beckwith that has brought her world recognition. “This is my greatest work,” Rickie proclaimed.

Rickie BB has traveled all over the world with her husband and the Agape choir sharing the joyous “Agape” sound derived from Rickie and Dr. Michael’s musical partnership—including Europe, Africa, Egypt, India, and most regions of North America. Their music is the first choice at prestigious and transformational venues, including the 2008 Democratic National Convention, where the choir shared the stage with contemporary musical greats John Legend and Will.I.Am.

“Spirit encourages me to be a voice of inspiration,” she said, sharing with excitement that she will be the music chairperson for the Freedom Awards in 2012, which will be covered by CNN television. The awards ceremony, created by the Free the Slaves Foundation, honors

modern-day abolitionists who help people to set themselves free from human bondage. She also beams with pride at being the founder of the KUUMBA Foundation, an intergenerational community of artists who create extraordinary learning opportunities for adults and children living in the inner city of Los Angeles.

*The world is calling me to come  
alive immediately*

*To share the good and do my best  
with all my love and tenderness*

*And I am learning how to give to  
those who need me now*

*And I find I need them just as much  
as the flowers need the Sun.*

*So trust the gift within,  
Trust in the love you know  
Move with greater faith  
Into the world just go  
And in these days we have  
There will be time enough  
Time enough, to bring a mighty,  
mighty gift of joy.*

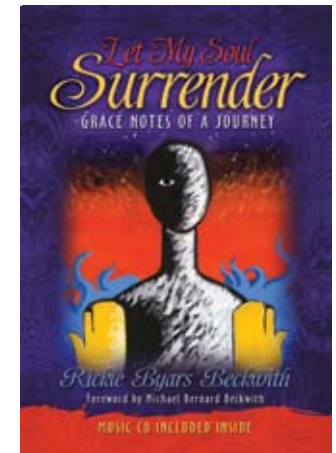
~lyrics from “A Mighty  
Gift of Joy”

### **A Mighty, Mighty Gift of Joy**

When all is said and done, Rickie Byars Beckwith is, as her lyric proclaims, a “mighty, mighty gift of joy.” And for Rickie BB herself, the *Let My Soul Surrender* book/CD is her most recent and most personal joy. “I had the best time, writing

into the middle of the night, revisiting moments of inspiration that transformed my life.”

Her request of the reader? “Please take a chance and read the book—you don’t know me as a writer. And by all means, listen to the CD. I just want you to hear it. Then go out and buy more for your friends. They make a mighty gift!” she said confidently, boasting a broad Rickie smile. ■



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