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(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP) **JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I’m Jonathan Rogers, your host.  
  
(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)  
  
**JR:** Claire Holley is a songwriter in Los Angeles, but she’s originally from Mississippi. And you can hear Mississippi and the traditions of Southern storytelling in her songs.  
  
(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)  
  
**JR:** Those songs are literary, playful, meditative, and earthy, kind of like the conversation you’re about to hear.  
  
Claire Holley, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast with me!  
  
**CLAIRE HOLLEY:** Glad to be here!  
  
**JR:** I know you are originally from Mississippi, but you’ve been in Los Angeles, California for a while now, right?  
  
**CH:** A while since November of 2003.  
  
**JR:** Uh huh. But you still don’t have your own reality show. Is that right?  
  
**CH:** No. I feel like I’m in one right now! (laughs)  
  
**JR:** No kidding! So, you and I met because we co-taught a creative writing course at New College in Franklin.  
  
**CH:** Yes.  
  
**JR:** You taught the songwriting portion of things, and I was just amazed at your ability — or somebody’s ability, it was either yours or the students — but I was amazed at the songs that students wrote, people who had never even thought about writing songs before. That you were able to help them do some interesting things and write some really good songs, actually.  
  
**CH:** Oh, some of the songs that came out of New College Franklin, both in 2017 and 2019, were stunningly good. And a lot of it, I think, is just when you pair up people together. I won’t lie, maybe my favorite thing about the class is getting to pair up people.  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**CH:** Um, and I think groups of three can — it’s usually three or four can be really good. Sometimes two can be maybe — of course, you and I were paired up as two, but for people who are starting out maybe, three is a nice number because somebody is going to have a good idea.  
  
**JR:** Yeah, right.  
  
**CH:** Um, but yeah! I get just as surprised and excited as they do, because it’s all kind of new for me too, and honestly at that point, teaching was pretty new. I think I told you that was not something I’d envisioned at all doing. I mean, my dad’s a teacher, but not me. So that was a real — it was a confidence booster to get other people excited about writing and taking away some of the, you know, you have to be Mozart or you have to be Bob Dylan. You just do it.  
  
**JR:** In your songwriting, do you usually collaborate or usually write on your own?  
  
**CH:** Usually I write on my own, but since I’ve been out here, I’ve for sure co-written more than before. And I attribute part of that to this is a town where groups of people make movies, and people are used to working in groups on things. So I’ve enjoyed the collaborating a lot.  
  
**JR:** Yeah. Um, LA, um… fo course, you’ve never worked, lived and worked in Nashville, I guess.  
  
**CH:** No, I almost moved there one time and then did not. But no, I haven’t.  
  
**JR:** I’ve wondered how being a songwriter in LA is different from being a songwriter in Nashville.  
  
**CH:** My guess is that, uh, there’s a lot of the same issues for everybody, in terms of people want to get their songs in TV shows, people want to get their songs in movies, people also just wanna write good songs. And my guess is in Los Angeles, people are talking about movies and TV shows, and in Nashville my guess is they’re talking about songs and did you get a song cut by so-and-so. And a lot of folks have moved from Los Angeles to Austin and Nashville. I think in a lot of ways probably the live music scene there is more friendly to Americana and country, alt-country than out here. But I still think there’s a pretty strong scene for that out here.  
  
**JR:** Uh huh. Well, to return to songwriting, I know one thing when you were teaching songwriting at New College to students, you had some exercises that you'd get them going on, some sort of object… what’d you call it? An object…?  
  
**CH:** Object writing exercises!  
  
**JR:** Yeah! I’m just interested in talking about that a minute.   
  
**CH:** Yeah sure!  
  
**JR:** Just a way of… you know, I’ve never… I loved it as a sort of way to get people started who don’t think of themselves as songwriters. In this podcast, I’m always looking for ways to help people jumpstart their creativity or whatever. So tell us about that exercise.  
  
**CH:** Well, I know that object writing is where you take an object — and I actually wanna give a shout out to Rob Seals here. Rob Seals is a friend originally from Chattanooga, and he and I met when my husband was in grad school at UNCG. And Rob is a poet and a songwriter and producer, and he started a school called the Los Angeles Songwriting School, which is actually in Burbank. But I said Rob, I’d love to attend your roots songwriting class, which is kind of his brainchild, and it’s just a wonderful class.  
  
So I saw him do this, and he’s not the only one that’s done it. A guy named Pat Pattison in a book called *Writing Better Lyrics* talks about object writing, I believe. But Rob would put several, like six or seven objects in the middle of the room, and each student was supposed to just take one. And, you know… no, it wasn’t so people fought over them, but sometimes you wanted the same one as somebody else and you had to go for second best. But it might be a pencil or a stick of deodorant or a necklace or any number of things, but you had to start writing to this object. And first what you would do is you would say, you know, if I’m holding this Sharpie here, I would say, Sharpie, you are so black. Your cover is on your, you got your lid on… et cetera. You don’t know what’s going to come out. You try to um… I try to encourage students to use their handwriting because they don’t get the chance to use the delete button on their laptop.   
  
So you write like that for ten minutes, and then afterwards you go around and you find one or two lines that maybe speaks to you in some way. And then the second exercise is you write from the object’s point of view to you. What would this marker say to me? Well, why haven’t you washed your hair today? Or could you please change, um, shirts… or something. And so you start to realize it really is conveying more about the person doing the writing than it is the object. Because if twenty different people would take this black pen and say twenty different things… now there may be some similarities.  
  
We talked about this earlier, Jonathan. That is not normally the way that I get songs written, but I think it’s a really great way to get the juices flowing in a group setting. With some of whom who have never tried that.  
  
**JR:** Yeah. Actually, Willie Nelson’s song “Hello Walls” is basically an object song.  
  
**CH:** Oh!  
  
**JR:** You know, he was — now I can’t remember who his publisher was, but he basically locked him in a room and said, “Don’t come out of there until you write a song.”  
  
**CH:** (laughs)  
  
**JR:** He was way behind on something. And so he just said, “Hello, walls!” And started flowing…  
  
**CH:** (laughs) Yes!  
  
**JR:** And I think that might have been his first hit? I guess I — I wasn’t prepared to tell that story, obviously. I don’t know the details.  
  
**CH:** No, that’s just enough. That is just enough. And lately I feel so much more… if I can just, I’m gonna sound *so* LA. I feel so much freer right now.  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**CH:** I’m sorry. I’m not in some hippie dippy outfit right now. I’m really wearing a blue dress. But you know, I started playing piano, and that’s opened up songwriting to feel… I’m a little less precious about it. I’ll try to write a song in just 15 minutes. You know, my nephew was kind of not feeling good the other day, so I’m just, I’m gonna get this ukulele and write a song to cheer him up. so I really am a firm believer in kind of the… quantity… just trying to write songs and not trying to be so focused on “the one.” Just write as much as you can. And I wanna allow that people have different styles. My husband, for instance, has been working on this novella, and that’s what he works on. I just like to have different things going.  
  
**JR:** I think this was from *Art and Fear*, which is a book that you introduced me to, actually. Um, the idea of the — you can tell me if you remember this — somebody who taught a pottery class…  
  
**CH:** Mmhm.  
  
**JR:** Okay, why don’t you tell the story.  
  
**CH:** Oh no, you go ahead!  
  
JR: No, I want you to tell the story! Because you’re the interviewee.  
  
**CH:** Well, this is a book called Art and Fear by David Bayles and Ted Orland, and Ted Orland is a photographer, and I wanna — maybe David Bayles, I’m not sure, but he may be a ceramic artist. And this is a chapter called “Fear is About Yourself.” I think this is just a wonderfully practical book.  
  
**JR:** Did you have this cued up for this interview?  
  
**CH:** I did. Yes I did.  
  
**JR:** Oh!  
  
**CH:** Because I wanted to be prepared, you know.  
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**CH:** (laughs) But the section is on page 29. It’s called “Perfection,” and the ceramic teacher announces on opening day that he’s dividing the class into two groups, and Group A is going to be judged on quantity, but Group B is going to be judged on quality. And so while Group B was working so hard on one thing — and they were told to work on one thing and make it as good as you can. The other group was just trying to churn out the work. And he says, “Well, came grading time and a curious fact emerged. The works of highest quality were all produced by the group being being graded for quantity. It seems that while the quantity group was busily churning out piles of work and learning from their mistakes, the quality group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay.”  
  
**JR:** That’s so good…  
  
**CH:** You know, I just think that’s really… I find that really helpful. So I quote that a lot, and again, that’s my defense of quantity over quality. But it has been… it has worked okay.  
  
**JR:** You know, when you brought that book to class, I just wasn’t ready for it, and I didn’t really read it. Because I wasn’t getting — I didn’t feel like I was getting much out of it, and also I was a teacher and not a student, so I didn’t have to read it.  
  
**CH:** (laughs)  
  
**JR:** But I came back to it this year, and man, it just hit the spot. What a great book. *Art and Fear.*  
  
**CH:** Well, good. I realize it’s a timing thing. And I realize not for everybody it will not be the right time. But, maybe it’s something they'll come back to. I’m glad you did! (laughs)  
  
**JR:** I did, I came back to it. There were moments in it that meant a lot to me, but the whole thing just felt like a slog at the time. For whatever reason, I thought it was really great this time.   
  
**CH:** Thank you for your honesty! (laughs)  
  
**JR:** (laughs) You know, Claire… a podcast like this doesn’t work if you don’t tell some hard truths.  
  
**CH:** (laughs)  
  
**JR:** Which brings me to some things that I wanna tell about you! Just kidding.  
  
**CH:** Your book choices were slogs, baby!  
  
**JR:** So you said the little object exercise… that’s not really something you use in your songwriting. Tell me about how you make songs happen.  
  
**CH:** I would say most the time, I will be playing something on the guitar or the piano, or a melody comes to mind, but it’s usually an instrument first, and I kind fo hear this chord progression, and then maybe a melody comes to mind. And I try to see what the music is trying to say, if there’s a story that needs to unfold there. And perhaps there will be an idea floating around in my head — oh, I kind of wanna come back to that idea — so maybe I will jot something down that relates to that idea. But often I’ll realize, no, that’s not really the story that needs to be told. That’s something else. And then maybe I’ll have to leave it for a few days or a few months or even years and come back.  
  
**JR:** Uh huh.  
  
**CH:** Lately, it has been really nice to come back to songs that I started three or four years ago or even longer. And it’s almost like having a co-writer in the room.  
  
**JR:** Oh, that’s really interesting.  
  
**CH:** I’m coming at the lyrics a little more objectively. I mean, it’s what I wrote, but now I don’t feel the need — oh, I don’t have to keep that verse. I can just take these two lines and build another song on it.  
  
**JR:** I love that insight, that getting that time gap is like having a co-writer. I love it. But I do have to ask you about something, a phrase that sounds like it means something but I don’t know what it means. And that’s when you say you’re trying to figure out what the music is trying to say.  
  
**CH:** Yeah.  
  
**JR:** Again, what does that mean for somebody… how do you explain that to somebody like me who doesn’t… music is just not my… I’m not conscious of it being my language. I like music, but I don’t really know what you mean when you say, “the music trying to say.” Because you’re saying the music leads you to the lyrics, correct?  
  
**CH:** Yes, yes. Okay, let’s reverse engineer it for a second. So if you’re watching a movie, and the character is thinking back on something, or maybe the character is just remembering his mom who died and you see a flashback. What kind of music do you imagine for that? You can imagine music that wouldn’t work, right?  
  
**JR:** Sure, sure.  
  
**CH:** Can you imagine, you know, the Surprise Symphony working for that?  
  
**JR:** No.  
  
**CH:** Probably not. So… I think intuitively you probably do know the answer to that. Like, if I played you the guitar riff for “Wedding Day,” which — I think I might have used that for an example in the class — it’s like that droning, drop, kind of bluesy sound, probably not unlike some of the blues songs that Lucinda Williams was influenced by or that Led Zeppelin was influenced by. And I’m gonna say Led Zeppelin because my son is completely in a phase of, “John Bonham is so great! John Bonham is so great!” So he’s been playing me some of their songs, and they do that kind of thing, this sort of drop D chord.   
  
So I was playing this on the electric guitar, and I started singing, “No wedding bells were ringing out.” NO wedding bells were ringing out. And the story unfolds that was not autobiographical, but it was about this kind of… very dismal, simple wedding. And I think if I played you that riff — and maybe we can get out an instrument and play a few things, just to try it — and I gave you multiple choice —  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**CH:** And I said, do you think this song is about a dismal wedding or a circus or uh, blahblahblah. And you would make a very good guess. I think you would.  
  
**JR:** Alright.  
  
**CH:** I don’t know if that answers your question, but that’s kind of what I mean.  
  
**JR:** I certainly understand that music has an emotional content, but where does… I got that, but where does, “no wedding bells” — what was the line?  
  
**CH:** (sings) “No wedding bells were ringin’ out / No wedding bells were ringin’ out.” (pause) That was it.  
  
**JR:** Okay.  
  
**CH:** I do not… (pause) Probably in the same way that when you come up with a line for a character, the thing that comes out of a character’s mouth, I can't explain why that came out. And it wasn’t like it was all given to me and I wrote it down. I had to kind of pull out some of the other lyrics, but that was what came out, and I went with it.   
  
Now, I could have thought the next day, oh, I don’t think this is really… I’m not gonna trust this. I’m gonna go with something else. But sometimes you just get a gut feeling. Like okay, I’m gonna go down this road. I guess, ultimately, I can’t explain why those… (pause) I… (sigh) I think it’s partly about honesty? What we were talking about. We gotta be honest. Am I singing about something that I want to learn more about. Joe Henry calls it abiding in the mystery. When you’re handed, intuitively, some line that you don’t understand, do you go, ahhhh no no no, I don’t like that. That’s uncomfortable. Or do you sit there and kinda let it come, and ask questions about it? Like, why’d that come? What’s being told here?  
  
**JR:** Yeah, that’s interesting. That discomfort is pushing you toward the next line.  
  
**CH:** Yeah! And I think uncertainty can be good, and it can ultimately work for us when we’re working on something. But it’s not always comfortable. We don’t know where it’s going.  
  
**JR:** Yeah. Maryrose Wood — another Angelina — who was a guest earlier, last year on this podcast. She wrote *The Incorrigible Children of Ashton Place*. I don’t know if you’ve heard of those books.  
  
**CH:** Mm-mm.  
  
**JR:** She practices yoga, and she talks about how a big point of yoga is to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. And if a yoga position feels good, you’re probably doing it wrong.  
  
**CH:** (laughs)  
  
**JR:** And even in storytelling… think about the importance of imbalance. Your reader — or your listener — is always looking for an equilibrium, and you keep them moving forward by not giving them that equilibrium. That discomfort of I wanna know what happens next. And if you can withhold that equilibrium toward the end, you can keep them moving.  
  
**CH:** That’s really good. And I’m quoting my husband quoting Robert Frost: “No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.” Like, there needs to be this sense that it’s surprising you too. And I can almost sense it in my body when I have too much of an agenda and I’m trying to stay in control. I mean, there’s a certain amount of control. If I’m doing a livestream and I’m completely not prepared… people are uncomfortable.   
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**CH:** They need to know that I’m kind of in charge here. At the same time, they want me, as David Byrne would say, to walk across a tightrope and cheer me on. But they need to know that I’ve done it before!  
  
**JR:** Uh huh. (laughs)  
  
**CH:** (laughs) And that’s just a quote stolen right out of his book *How Music Works*, which I find is one of the better memoirs. Not that I’ve read a bunch, but it’s really helpful and really practical.  
  
**JR:** That’s the real thick, white book?  
  
**CH:** Yeah, it feels like the Bible. I wonder if he told his art director, I want people to feel like they’re reading the Bible.  
  
**JR:** That book has been in my house, but I don’t know where it is now. Okay, so… I would like to talk a little bit about… talk a song through. Again, I feel like I don’t know much about how songs get written. Actually, everything I know about how songs get written, most of it came from you and that class we taught together.  
  
**CH:** And Andrew Peterson probably, too.  
  
**JR:** A little bit. And the um… but can you talk to me about — I mean, I have an idea in my head of a song I want to hear you to talk about, but you might have another song you want to walk through about where it came from and how it took shape.   
  
**CH:** Okay. Can it be something new?  
  
**JR:** Sure!  
  
**CH:** Or do you want something kind of…  
  
**JR:** It’s up to you.  
  
**CH:** Okay. I’ll talk about two. One took a long time, and one took a very short time.  
  
**JR:** Okay.  
  
**CH:** And again, there was that uncertainty, but the one that didn’t take very long, um… I was up in Maine, and I was reading in Jeremiah 31 where it says those who will be scattered will be gathered, and they will rejoice in the bounty of the Lord. It was probably the NIV because that was the Bible my parents gave me, but I thought “in the bounty of the Lord” had a nice ring to it. And so I had my guitar there, and I started writing things that — rejoicing in the bounty of the Lord, uh… laughing — all these different verbs that would go with “in the bounty of the Lord.” And I wrote a couple of verses. The first verse is, “I wandered from my home / My lips are dry, my feet are worn / My eyes are blinded by the dust clouds in the road.” And it actually does sound like a pretty cliche thing. But for some reason when I played it for — oh, and of course I’ve got the guitar. It was a very simple, kind if like, oh, I have it here. (guitar sound)  
  
You know, I capo’d on the fifth fret. (guitar strum) Just kind of, almost like a Carter Family, (strums guitar, sings melody) “I’m believing in the bounty of the Lord.” Now I thought that was a pretty… it was an okay song. I didn’t think much of it at all. At the time, this was 1998, twenty something years ago, I was recording a CD of hymns, and maybe that was why I was trying to write a hymn. Um, because I’d been listening to a bunch of them.  
  
So I took this song to John Flamel in the studio, and he said, nah, I think that’s pretty good! And we brought in a mandolin player and an upright bass player, and something happened when we recorded it with those other two guys. It had a nice little thing about it. And I can’t explain that, because in my mind it was just another song. The other one I was gonna talk about was called —  
  
**JR:** Wait, back up just a little bit.  
  
**CH:** Yeah.  
  
**JR:** I’m sorry. Cause I was gonna ask you about that.  
  
**CH:** No, that’s okay.  
  
**JR:** You said this was a song that you couldn’t hear… when you played it for yourself, you couldn’t hear that it was something special. Is that what you’re saying?  
  
**CH:** That is exactly what I’m saying. And that sounds kind of presumptuous to decide what of your things are special. That’s a tricky thing, and I don’t mean to play God here, but this is a song that people have connected with.  
  
**JR:** Yeah, I love that song.  
  
**CH:** You know, people ask to hear it a lot and… why? I thought it was just kind of another song, but for whatever reason, maybe it had the right blend of there was some universal truths there and then there was just kind of, I was just trying to respond to that line I liked in Jeremiah, and I wasn’t afraid to kind of get in touch with my country roots. I kinda got ‘em.  
  
**JR:** Well, that song sounds true to me, whatever that means. I love that song.  
  
**CH:** Well, thank you!  
  
**JR:** Good job writing that song.  
  
**CH:** It was all Jeremiah.  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**CH:** That sounds like a song. It was allll Jeremiah!  
  
**JR:** Yeah, okay good. I wanna hear that one soon.  
  
**CH:** Actually, no, the other one is one I just was writing today. And again, as I said earlier, I’ve been playing piano. I’ve had a lot more time to play piano during quarantine. Now, I don’t have a real one, but we’re gonna get an acoustic one from Mississippi and bring it back here next month. But I’ve had this electric piano here, and I’ve been trying to write songs about my upbringing in Mississippi. Like, almost like if I was doing… I’m probably too young to write a memoir, but if I was doing a memoir in CD form, what would those songs sound like? And it’s been really fun to write! Cause honestly, songwriting is not always fun. It is grueling, and you’re doubting yourself a lot. But for whatever reason, writing about my childhood has been a fun thing. Maybe because there are so many memories there.  
  
So, I started writing a song about my mom, who always took photographs. And um… cause I’ve been going through all of her photos lately in these boxes, and I came across one of these four guys who were doing some carpentry work for them. And she was so famous for — not famous, she was just infamous for stopping people and taking their picture.  
  
**JR:** (laughs) Really.  
  
**CH:** And the reason I say I took that for granted is I was reading in a Eudora Welty book of her photographs, and she gives an introduction, and I realized Eudora Welty and my mom were kind of doing the same thing. They were just taking pictures of ordinary people, and when Eudora does it, it’s amazing, but when my mom does it, it’s just… it’s my mom.  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**CH:** But I was able to actually look at these photos and appreciate her more. So the, you know, I don’t wanna read the whole song for you, but the first verse starts, “I took you for granted and your eye behind the frame / A camera in hand for every wedding, every game.” Blah blah blah blah. And then I go on and mention a little something about Eudora, and then in the last verse I talk about the photo of the four carpenter guys. I’m gonna show it to you Jonathan right now.  
  
**JR:** Alright.  
  
**CH:** Too bad y’all can’t see this, but here they are! These are just these four guys, you know… they’ve got dip in their mouth and all this. I couldn’t figure out how to put this in the verse, but you’ll just have to believe me that they do.  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**CH:** Anyway, I think a lot of it is just going with… whimsical. Going wherever your whimsy… is that a word, Dr. Rogers?  
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**CH:** You know, take you.  
  
**JR:** Yeah! I just love that idea of your mom taking pictures and stopping people and making them slow down and say… hey four guys, I don’t know if you think anything you’re doing here is special, but I wanna commemorate this.  
  
**CH:** Exactly!  
  
**JR:** And when you commemorate things, you ennoble them, right? You recognize what’s meaningful there.  
  
**CH:** Well see, that’s a really good way to see it. And that’s a kinder way to look at who my mom was. I just saw it as she was always — in the negative way — she was always interrupting moments because she wanted to catch it.  
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**CH:** And there’s a price you pay. Are you entering the moment when you take these photos? But now I see it more… it’s both. She’s being an artist, and she’s capturing the moment.  
  
**JR:** Is she still around?  
  
**CH:** She’s not.  
  
**JR:** So she’s not still taking pictures. Or she may be, in the New Heavens and the New Earth!  
  
**CH:** (laughs) Right! She died June 3rd, 2013.  
  
**JR:** Oh, okay.  
  
**CH:** Yep.  
  
**JR:** And did you grow up in Jackson?  
  
**CH:** Yes.  
  
**JR:** And did you run into Eudora Welty sometimes?  
  
**CH:** I did, one time. At the Jitney 14… if y’all know the Jitney Jungle… (laughs)  
  
**JR:** I think people who don’t live in Mississippi… I’ve heard about the Jitney Jungle, but I think you have to live in Mississippi to know about the Jitney Jungle.  
  
**CH:** Okay. The Jitney Jungle is a grocery store chain, and the Jitney 14 was a particular Jitney in the chain that was on, you know, Fortification and State Street or something, kind of near downtown. And I went in there for some reason, and my dad said, “Do you know who that is?” And I said, “Uh huh.” And what I remember was how tall she was…  
  
**JR:** Really!  
  
**CH:** She seemed to me very tall, but that may have been because she has a large presence. Ironically, she was very herself, and it’s not like she was surrounded by people trying to get her autograph or she wasn’t, you know, there were sunglasses on, incognito. She was just getting food, like anybody else.  
  
**JR:** A friend of mine was at the Green Hills Kroger buying a birthday card for her husband, and also in the aisle there was Alison Krauss. And she said, well, my husband loves Alison Krauss, so she said, “Alison Krauss, can you sign my husband’s birthday card?” So that year he got his birthday card signed by his wife and Alison Krauss.  
  
**CH:** How did Alison react to that?  
  
**JR:** She was apparently very friendly about it, very welcoming.  
  
**CH:** Ohhhhh my goodness.  
  
**JR:** Isn’t that sweet?  
  
**CH:** That’s a great story!  
  
**JR:** Alright, so… (pause) Would you play a song? You brought your guitar. I wanna hear you play a song, if you’re alright with that.  
  
**CH:** Well… oh, sure. And I did wanna say… should I play the song that we wrote? Or should I just play… (laughs)  
  
**JR:** (laughs) Sure!  
  
**CH:** I don’t know, let’s see. Will I remember it? (strums guitar) Alright y’all. Here we go. This is a song that I wrote with Jonathan Rogers, and I just have to say, my dad — he’s no longer with us — he would have loved. This. Song. Loved it. (strums guitar) And if I mess it up, it is not Jonathan Rogers’ fault.  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**CH:** So, I wanna just say that Jonathan gave me, like 18 verses or something, and said, “We’re gonna write about timber rafters.” I said, ooooookay. Okay.  
  
**JR:** (laughs) It’s amazing that there’s not a whole genre of timber rafting ballads, as far as I’m concerned!  
  
**CH:** (laughs) Shoot, well, maybe we should do a whole album where you invite your Nashville friends and all write timber rafting songs. This one is called “The Ferry-Keeper’s Daughter,” and I printed out the lyrics, okay?  
  
(strums guitar) There’s a wonderful little riff in here that I can’t remember, but it was a really hooky riff that I can’t remember. But when I record it, I’ll do it.  
  
(strums guitar) (sings)  
  
Isom plowed the bottomlands

Along the River Green

He loved the ferry-keeper’s girl

He called her Sweet Eileen.

When he asked Eileen to marry him,

She turned her head aside

“You’re too poor and I’m too young

I cannot be your bride.”

So Isom joined a timber crew

Some thirty miles upstream.

He worked and drank, tried not to think

About the girl Eileen.

You got time on a timber raft

To think most anything

And Isom found that all his thoughts

Went back to Sweet Eileen.

She must be a mother now,

At least somebody’s wife.

And so Isom resigned himself

To a timber-rafter’s life

And then one year the waters rose

And Isom rode downstream.

He passed the ferry-landing,

And there he saw Eileen.

She stood alone on the riverbank

A lonesome look in her eye.

But the rushing water rolled him along

And he disappeared out of sight.

He thought about the past

The day she turned aside

But now he thinks he's seen a sign

From that look in her eye.

He floated to the sawmill

Beside the salty sea.

He sold his raft and took the cash

And headed back upstream—

She was standing at the landing

Like a timber rafter's dream

He said, “If you ain’t married, Dear

come away with me"

She cried and said, “Oh Isom,

I’m not young any more.”

He said, “It don’t matter none,

‘Cause, honey, I aint poor.”  
  
And then there’s a really cool instrumental that will end the song! We’ll hear it another time!  
  
**JR:** Oh, I love it! Thank you, Claire. That’s so good. Thanks for bringing that to life.  
  
**CH:** I have to say, I kinda like when it says, “And so Isom…”  
  
**JR:** (laughs)  
  
**CH:** And so Isom resigned himself… it’s not very often that you get to use the word “Isom.”  
  
**JR:** That’s right. Well, it was about 13 stanzas too short in my opinion., but other than that, it was really good.  
  
**CH:** (laughs)  
  
**JR:** So, I forgot to warn you about this question, but I always end these conversations with this question. Who are the writers who make you want to write?  
  
**CH:** Eudora Welty for sure.  
  
**JR:** And can you tell me about that? What is it about Eudora Welty that makes you want to sit down and write something?  
  
**CH:** She has this wonderful combination fo being hilarious and very… serious in the sense of like she takes human emotion seriously. And a story like “The Whistle”… I wouldn’t say that’s a funny short story, but that’s very… you feel for these characters. She has this way of writing that makes you feel for her characters deeply. And I have to say her book One Writer’s Beginnings, which of course started as a group of lectures… a group of “lectures.” She doesn’t really lecture. She jsut talks. But, they start as a group of talks up at Harvard, and I highly recommend the CDs. They’re just so entertaining.  
  
I think she remained really humble throughout her life. She… I think she said, “I was awarded too much.” If you go to the Welty house in Jackson, they found all her awards in her closet. And I’m not saying every award you get you need to put in your closet. Maybe some of them you need to hang on your wall for encouragement. But she was a very humble person, and had a group of friends that she kept up with regularly and ate and drank with. So she’s one.  
  
Um… I love *Middlemarch*. I’m not saying I wanna be George Eliot, but that book… wow. To write about characters in that way with so much, um… she was just brilliant. Yeah. But those are two writers who come to mind.  
  
**JR:** What about songwriters? Who are songwriters who make you wanna write something?  
  
**CH:** Paul Simon. On the album Graceland, to me, one of the best lines, you know, “The Mississippi delta was shining like a national guitar,” because you know he’s in an airplane. How else would he know?  
  
**JR:** Yeah.  
  
**CH:** Stevie Wonder’s voice makes me really happy. Certain singers do that. Joni Mitchell is one I listen to a lot, and I still do. Lately… lately I listen to a lot of soundtracks and enjoy hearing film scores, and I like The National.  
  
**JR:** Really? You listen to film scores just to… to do what? Like as you go about your day? Or do you sit down and listen to film scores?  
  
**CH:** Well… (laughs) It would probably be nice if I sat there and gave them all my attention! But for instance, if I’m going through photographs of my mom’s and trying to throw away or save or put into categories, it’s really nice to listen to instrumental music.   
  
**JR:** And you mentioned The National? You like The National?  
  
**CH:** I do. And my son — we got Jack — this is the son who likes John Bonham so much — we got him a record player because, you know, to be able to listen to music in your room without having a phone or a computer in there, so you have a record player. And he has really gotten into it. So he bought The National… the one with the song, “I Need My Girl.” That’s such a sweet song!  
  
**JR:** I need to link to your cover of that National song from *The Warrior* that you did at Laity Lodge.  
  
**CH:** Yes. “Start a War.”   
  
**JR:** Yeah. I love that song, and I love your version of it.  
  
**CH:** Well, thank you. And I liked hearing what you said about the movie. (laughs)  
  
(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)  
  
**JR:** (laughs) Yeah, what a movie. Um, alright. Claire, thank you for being here. It’s always so much fun to talk to you. I hope we get to talk again soon.  
  
**CH:** I hope so too!  
  
**JR:** Alright, see you later.  
  
**DREW MILLER:** The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We’re so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville.   
  
Special shout-out as well to Jess Ray for letting us use her song “Too Good” as part of this podcast. Visit jessraymusic.com to hear more of her beautiful songs.  
  
**JR:** The Habit Membership is a library of resources for writers by me, Jonathan Rogers. More importantly, The Habit is a hub of community where like-minded writers gather to discuss their work and give each other a little more courage. Find out more at TheHabit.co.  
  
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(THEME MUSIC OUT)  
  
(ACOUSTIC GUITAR MUSIC)  
  
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(MUSIC FADES OUT)  
  
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