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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:** Andy Osenga is a Nashville music industry veteran. He’s a singer-songwriter, a producer, a session player… now as an A&R executive, he’s deeply involved in the development of other artists. Though, now that I think about it, he’s always been deeply involved in the development of other artists, whether it was his day job or not.

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** You may also know Andy Osenga as the host of the podcast The Pivot: Stories of People Who Have Made a Change. For many years, I have known Andy to be a thoughtful and smart conversationalist, so I love that he’s sharing those gifts with the wider world. If you aren’t already listening to The Pivot, you should check it out.

Andy Osenga, thank you so much for being on The Habit podcast!

**ANDREW OSENGA:** It’s an honor!

**JR:** You’re one of my podcasting heroes anyway. I *love* The Pivot! It’s such a great… it’s been so fun to see — I know I’ve told you this before — to see somebody deep in their career say hey, here’s this other thing it turns out I’m really good at. You’re really good at what you do on The Pivot.

**AO:** Aww, man, so kind! I would say the same for you.

**JR:** Well, thanks! So… “stories for people who have made a change” —

**AO:** Yeah.

**JR:** — is your tagline over there. And as it turns out, everybody’s made a change, right?

**AO:** That’s — I remember when I first — four years ago, not a lot of people had podcasts. I had one friend who had a podcast that did pretty well, and she encouraged me to start one. And I said, “Hey, I got this idea! What do you think about people who have made a change?” And she said, “Are you gonna have enough people to talk to?”

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** And uh… and it turns out the answer is just an overwhelming yes. That everyone — no one’s story is going according to plan.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** And it’s really, really good to hear that sometimes! (laughs)

**JR:** Yeah! And from a… the idea of a story going according to plan… that’s almost by definition not a story.

**AO:** That’s true!

**JR:** If I go to the grocery store, and I successfully find my groceries and pay for them and get back in my car, and if I came home and said, “You’re not gonna believe this story! I went to the grocery store…”

**AO:** (laughs)

**JR:** And I got my groceries and paid for them and got back in my car… you’d go, “That’s not a story.”

**AO:** Yeah! Oh, that’s so good! That’s so good.

**JR:** What have you learned about storytelling, writing… how has doing The Pivot changed your own… cause you’re still writing songs.

**AO:** Yeah.

**JR:** How has it impacted you?

**AO:** It’s hard to count the ways. I’d say the biggest way is it’s taught me how to listen. Because I’m a talker. I come from a long line of talkers, if we’re honest.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** And you know, when you get the Pro Tools file of the interview afterwards, and you see how much they talk in a wav file, and you see the wav files of how much you talk, and you go, oh! I interviewed this person and then talked more than them! That’s not a good interview. And so then I sit in the studio for hours editing out all the stupid things I said, and eventually the lightbulb goes on. I could do this in real time! What if I just didn’t talk as much and listened? And it turns out that helps you as a parent and as a spouse and as a colleague and as a friend. So that’s honestly been the biggest thing that I’ve taken away from this experience.

Um, and then the next — you know, I started it, honestly I started it because, as you remember, I’d lost a job, and I had nothing else going on in my life. And I was depressed — I was more depressed than I realized — and um, and one of the few things I had was some microphones and some interesting friends. So… hey, interesting friends, will you come talk in front of these microphones and just let me try something? Because nothing is working. And it turned out it worked!

And so initially, I was very focused on talking about career, because that was the phase of life I was in. But then gradually… life became a little more normal for me, and as I started talking to more and more people… and even when you talk about career, you realize most the time our career changes are rarely about our career. You know, they’re about our health and about our family and about our faith. The reason you excel in a role or you don’t rarely has anything — I mean, yes, there’s your skill as an employee or whatever, but it’s way more about who you are as a person, the work that you have done or have not done, and that is far more interesting than, “Tell me about your job experience.”

**JR:** Yeah.

**AO:** So yeah! It’s just been fascinating to learn, and it’s been really encouraging. One of the most encouraging things for me was talking to Sally Lloyd-Jones a year or so ago — which is always encouraging, she’s amazing — to learn that she didn’t feel like she was a good enough writer to write her own books for 20-some years. She wrote her first book at 41, and then she wrote *The Jesus Storybook Bible* and sold, you know, what? 3 million copies, when she was 42 and 43.

I am 41 right now. When she told me that, I was 39, and I remember thinking… so she’s one of the best in the world at something, and she didn’t start doing that until her forties. What if the thing I’m actually good at, I haven’t started doing that? And whether or not that becomes my story… especially when you’re a musician, it’s all about youth. You know, a 40 year old musician who hasn’t sold five million copies is a washed up musician most of the time. Our career is over. So it’s really nice to think, huh! I wonder what I’m gonna do? Versus ohhhhhh it’s over.

**JR:** Yeah!

**AO:** And every time you talk to somebody, you get a different kind of perspective on that same… that same kind of trajectory. It’s just been really encouraging. It’s also interesting, having made music for 20 years, um, where I present a very polished version of what I want to communicate, now I put these things out where I say very little, but the less I say the better, and the response — I get so many more emails and comments on podcast episodes than I ever do about the records that I make. And people will say things like, “I’ve been listening to you for 20 years, but now I feel like I know you!” And I’m like, “I said less than I ever did on my records!”

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** But there’s something about when you invite people into the story and you invite people into the conversation… that’s how we get to know each other! It’s tell me your stories. Not tell me the facts about you. Tell me your stories.

**JR:** Yeah. And I think one thing about your podcast is it feels like… it feels like you’re inviting people into these friendships that you already have. I know occasionally you interview people you don’t already know, but whether you’re talking a lot or not, to be invited into this conversation… a lot of the conversations on your podcast, your’e just continuing conversations that have been going on for a long time.

**AO:** Yeah. Totally. yeah, we are blessed with a community of just incredible people who have been… even if we don’t get to see each other as much as we like, we’ve been friends for a long time and we will be friends for a long time, and the great tapestry of our community is pretty rich. And I think it’s something… even though I probably take it a little for granted, because I don’t think I realize quite the extent of how unique it is to have this amazing community.

**JR:** Yeah, yeah. Um… I don’t know why I started thinking about this, but just when you were talking a minute ago about the shift from thinking about people’s careers to thinking about how even career changes are often not career changes but personal changes that express themselves as career changes. To what extent — one thing when I talk to writers about storytelling is the difference between, you know, in a story, external forces acting on a character as opposed to something internal, the character changing… something from inside the character impacting how the story goes.

**AO:** Yeah. Hmm.

**JR:** I assume you get both kinds of forces discussed in the changes that people make, right? Sometimes those are external, sometimes those are something going on inside changes their outward situation.

**AO:** Yeah, it’s chicken or egg, right?

**JR:** Mmhm.

**AO:** It’s something in your life changes, and then you have to react to that, which changes you as a person for good or bad, right? The external thing that changes might be good or bad. You react to that, that changes your stance again, which you have to react to…

**JR:** Yeah. I don’t know if we’ve talked about the cycle of desire, choice, and consequence…

**AO:** I’ve heard you talk about it, but you and I have never had the conversation.

**JR:** What’d you say?

**AO:** I said I’ve heard you talk to other people about it, but…

**JR:** Oh, maybe I’m being repetitive then.

**AO:** Oh, nonononono. It’s because I listen to your podcast!

**JR:** Yeah, okay. Well, I’m saying I’m being repetitive on the podcast now, so maybe I won’t.

**AO:** (laughs) No! Please! Go there!

**JR:** No, but, as you said… you choose based on what you want, and then there are consequences based on those choices, and that may change even what you want or what your choices are.

**AO:** Oh yeah, right? That’s like the definition of marriage right there.

**JR:** It is, isn’t it? (laughs)

**AO:** Yeah. (laughs)

**JR:** No, but Flannery O’Connor says, “A story always involves in a dramatic way the mystery of personality…” Oh, what, I said the wrong thing. O’Connor says, “A story is a dramatic event that involves a person because he’s a person, and a particular person.”

**AO:** Mmm!

**JR:** And I think that’s really relevant to the stories that get told on your podcast.

**AO:** Yeah!

**JR:** Not just that this thing happened to me, but the thing that happened to me… (pause) The things that happen to us are common to us, but then the way we react and what we do with it is because we are a particular person.

**AO:** It’s specific. Well, that’s the Buechner thing, the story of one of us is the story of all of us?

**JR:** Yeah.

**AO:** But the more detail you share about your own story, it gives the listener a better chance to identify. Which is so counter-intuitive. As a songwriter, that’s a thing we talk about a lot, is like… “We Are the World,” you know, the big anthem that’s just kind of… has a bunch of things that kind of say nothing so they don’t offend anyone and can include everyone?

**JR:** Yeah.

**AO:** It’s a song that *no one* actually likes. Cause it’s a song that has no personality. And Christian music is full of that kind of song. A song that just intentionally says the bare minimum so everyone can find their place in it, but it means that there’s nothing to find. We wanna find that connection. We wanna find other people. That’s why *Les Mis* has been my favorite book forever. I’ve never been to France. I don’t speak French. I know nothing about the French Revolution. But it’s because of the characters… I find myself in all the characters because he describes them so well. And the more specific that writing is, the easier it is to be a part, to put yourself in that situation. I know what it feels like to have my heart broken. I know what it feels like to feel like something unjust has happened. I know what it feels like to carry guilt. And that’s where you resonate with each other.

**JR:** Yeah. But what you just said, those are all abstractions and generalities.

**AO:** Yeah, but if you just say… well, okay, so here it is. It’s… the two different kinds of writing is, “I feel ashamed!”

**JR:** Uh huh.

**AO:** … cool.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** Then there’s the, a guy walks into the store and he doesn’t look up, and he does… you know? He shuffles his feet and he mumbles. Why? Ohhhhh when we unpack his story, we learn that he did this and he regrets it. Oh! There’s the shame! And then we identify with that. But the guy that goes, “I feel ashamed!” We don’t identify with at all.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah.

**AO:** It’s show don’t tell. It’s the classic…

**JR:** When you speak really directly about an emotion, it’s really difficult to invoke that actually emotion.

**AO:** Yes!

**JR:** If you talk about sadness directly, I might feel pity for the person who’s sad, but I’m probably not gonna feel sad. The best you can hope for is pity, and you might not even get that. As opposed to when you talk about, as you said, you tell a story and I can feel sadness in a way that talking about sadness doesn’t work.

**AO:** Yeah. And yeah, in the worship music world where I live, it’s like having a song for a conservative white church that talks about dancing.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** (sings) Oh I feel like danciiiiing… (claps) clap on the one and the threeee! No one’s dancing. Like, you’ve gotta… the setting, the tone, everything has to communicate the thing that it is. You have to show people and you have to create space for that energy um, versus just telling somebody in a disconnected way.

**JR:** Um, in the worship music world, what’s the path toward the specific and the concrete?

**AO:** Ohhh, *man*!

**JR:** You know, every now and then I’ll hear a new worship song that’s specific and concrete, and it’s like, this is amazing! But it doesn’t feel like this is now a cascade that now other… more and more songs do it.

**AO:** Yeah. Well, ti’s because of that thing… we’re scared to show and not tell, and it’s because, I think, the gospel — I don’t know how much you like to get into this on here — the gospel is only relevant to people who have experienced pain, right?

**JR:** Hmm.

**AO:** And so good songs about the gospel that show and don’t tell involve darkness and light. But we are a culture of uhhh… at least, a commercial entity, the commercial side of the church that sells products to churches, does not like to deal with any darkness. And so the reason that those songs are few and far between is its’ very rare to have a song that can show hurt and pain that’s still sellable. And when you find them, they’re incredible.

**JR:** Yeah.

**AO:** And there are a lot more out there that don’t get heard, because the mechanism is about encouraging and celebration. But now we’re in a — you know, it’ll be interesting to me — sorry, I’m taking this probably wayyyyy left field of where you wanna go, but this is the world I live in these days. It’ll be interesting to me to see what kind of songs churches sing over the next few years as, you know, 12 million people lose their jobs, couple hundred thousand people die, we’re in fear and angst. Are we going to start singing more songs of lament and sorrow, which also allows us to have more songs about hope and joy that are rooted in something. I hope it goes that way. It’ll be interesting to see.

**JR:** It’ll be interesting, yeah. That song, (sings) “Happy days are here again! Let us sing a song of cheer!” Didn’t that come out during the Depression?

**AO:** Yeah! It did! It was a jingle, man! To sell… (laughs)

**JR:** Yeah, but most of those really cheerful… most of those movies from the Depression are really cheerful.

**AO:** Yeah. People wanna buy… I mean, people wanna attach to something. They want hope!

**JR:** Yeah.

**AO:** (laughs) That’s why it’s hard to read Flannery O’Connor!

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** Even though you know it’s good.

**JR:** Yeah, right.

**AO:** I just read *The Road*, and I’ve never… I remember having a conversation with you about *The Road*, at least once, maybe more than that, about how many times I’ve started that book and not been able to finish it because it’s so bleak.

**JR:** Yeah. Did you make it through this time?

**AO:** I finally did. About three weeks ago, I finished it. I set it down and went, well… it’s even bleaker than I thought it would be. (laughs)

**JR:** Yeah, I have such mixed feelings about that book because I um… (pause) A lot of people just really love it and see a lot of hope in it.

**AO:** It’s extremely well written.

**JR:** Oh, so well written. No question about that. I can’t decide if I’m willing to stand by this or not, but one thing I’ve said about that book is it feels like any hope you find in this book is hope that you brought yourself.

**AO:** (gasps) Ohh!

**JR:** People say, “I saw that book as hopeful,” and I think… I’m not sure you… I think you might have… you’re a hopeful person and you brought it with you, but I’m not sure you found it there.

**AO:** (laughs) Yeah, it’s pretty hard to find a lot of hope in that book.

**JR:** I mean, he’s carrying some fire or something in that story?

**AO:** Yeah, a little bit. There’s some moments of that.

**JR:** Yeah. I guess I never… you know the mother who killed — there’s the mother who killed herself, and I never felt like the book showed me why she didn’t make the better choice.

**AO:** Hmmm…

**JR:** But anyway.

**AO:** Yeah. That one sticks with you, so as much as you wanna talk about it, I’m in that… it’s still present.

**JR:** Um… okay. So you’ve written songs since you’ve started doing The Pivot.

**AO:** I have!

**JR:** That was four years ago.

**AO:** Yep.

**JR:** So… you may feel like you’ve already answered this question, but I’m gonna ask you anyway. How has your songwriting changed?

**AO:** Hmm. You know what’s interesting? I haven’t written lot of songs since I started the podcast. I have helped a ton of people write their own songs. So I spend a lot more energy doing that these days.

**JR:** Because you’re an A&R person.

**AO:** Yeah, because of my job, and just… yeah.

**JR:** Maybe we should say what A&R stands for. And since I don’t know, I’m gonna let you say it.

**AO:** Oh yeah! A lot of people think it’s “Artists in Residence,” but it’s not. It’s “Artists and Repertoire.” So it’s artists and their songs.

**JR:** Mmhm.

**AO:** So it’s a combination of talent scout, manager… you know, uh… what do they call it? Project coordinator. And counselor.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** With probably a little bit of a writing teacher thrown in. So I love it. It’s a really fun, unique, weird, exhausting job.

**JR:** Yeah.

**AO:** Um… but yeah.

**JR:** Your gifts, it seems to me. To encourage and help develop other writers and performers.

**AO:** Well, you’re kind to say that. That’s my hope. But I have started writing for myself again, and it has… it’s the first time in my artist career that I’m inviting people to write with me. That has been the biggest difference. There’s not a song on any of my solo albums that anybody else helped write, which in Nashville is becoming more and more unique, because Nashville is a town of cowriting. So this is the first time I’ve ever ventured into co-writing for myself.

And I’ve been wrestling more and more — not wrestling. But I’ve been ruminating more and more on the thought of legacy and what I leave for my kids. Not just my place in our community, but the work that I do, my children, when they don’t live with me anymore, will at some point go to to figure out who they are, who I was. And so, I’m wanting to make sure that the things that I leave for them to find, the messages in bottles is how I think of it, but the things that are out there for them are the things that I want them to hear me say. So more than anything right now, all of my writing is directed at how do I teach my children the gospel in songs.

**JR:** Is… are there things from earlier in your career, things you’ve put out there, that are less in line with what you hope they’ll find?

**AO:** Yes! Yes.

**JR:** Okay.

**AO:** There’s a lot of 23-year-old navel-gazing that’s out there. Um… there’s a number of sort of songs from — there was a good chunk of my life, about mid twenties, early thirties, where I was very cynical. I was very angry. It’s way easier to look at the people that you perceived have wronged you than to do the work of becoming a better person, and I chose to be angry rather than do that work for a long time, and I wrote a lot of songs out of that. I was the victim. Other people were stupid. And that’s not the subject of the songs, but it’s definitely the subtext. And not everybody might even hear that, but I hear it. When I find those songs now, I’m like, I can never play this song again. Oh my gosh. I’m so embarrassed by who this person was.

So yeah. I’m doing an active campaign in my own life to make sure there’s a healthy body of work that I want them… that I’m proud of them finding.

**JR:** That’s a worthy endeavor. I love hearing that.

**AO:** Aw, thanks man. It’s been a lot of fun.

**JR:** Yeah. Well, that song about… um… what was it, “Beautiful Places”?

**AO:** Yeah, that was the song that opened up this vein for me.

**JR:** Okay.

**AO:** Which was a song about… I mean, ostensibly it’s a letter of direction about what you should do after I die. Scatter my ashes in beautiful places so you have an excuse to go see the world. Obviously, the subtext of that song is go see the world. Go have a life of adventure. Live a life of adventure with people that you love.

And um… (pause) Yeah. Once you kind of have, once you put something out there like that in your own life, now you have to view everything else through that lens.

**JR:** What do you mean? I don’t understand what you mean by that.

**AO:** Once you start, once you have that conversation and go, oh, this song is specifically for my kids to find. I’ll play it at a concert, but it’s not for them. It’s for my kids in a long time. Which means they’re also gonna find these other songs. Which means… what am I doing?

**JR:** (laughs) Okay. Alright.

**AO:** And so it doesn’t necessarily change everything I’m gonna write, but it definitely has pointed things in a different direction. Like, I love the song “Space Pirates” that I wrote.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah.

**AO:** And that’s my children’s favorite song of mine. There’s nothing writing with that, and I’ll probably do more dumb things like that. But do I have a song that my kids can walk down the aisle to? Or that they can, you know… I don’t know. There’s just… it just made me realize most of my music has been very self-centered. It’s about me, what I want you to think about me. And honestly, a lot of my life has been like that. And so I don’t want to be that person anymore. I don’t want to live that kind of life. I want to live a life where people are better for the conversations that we’ve had.

**JR:** Mmhm.

**AO:** And I think that’s just getting older. You just start to realize that stuff… that’s what’s important. And you have to do internal work to be able to do — to do the kind of work you want to do in the rest of the world, you have to do that work in your own self first.

**JR:** Can you put a finger on — or was this a really gradual process? The change from I wanna see what… the self-centered approach to, I wanna write songs that create a certain vision of me, to being a little more others-centered in your writing? Was that a slow process or a quick process?

**AO:** Uh… yeah. It’s definitely been a slow process, and a number of things contributed to it. One is that your children say things like, Dad, why are all your songs sad?

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** And that’s a point of, uh, that’s not a good thing. “You’re funny! Why are your songs sad?” But the fact is six, seven years ago I started this part of my career where I help other artists. And, um… the first couple years of that were very hard, cause… I’m a 4. I’m too special! You need to know how special I am while I’m helping you! And it’s just… you know. The life of any kind of discipleship is you learn more and more to just get out of your own way. So I’d like to think it’s just a reflection of… just, you know… he who began a good work is faithful to complete it more than it is any conscious decision of my own.

**JR:** Yeah. By the way, what is the answer to the question, “You’re funny! Why are your songs sad?”

**AO:** (laughs) Well… when I was in my early twenties — when I started being a musician — it was like grunge had just died?

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** But grunge was still very much alive in my heart.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** You know? Everybody that I just looooved, that I looked up to, were just Pearl Jam and the Smashing Pumpkins. That was what I grew up on. So I thought that to be a musician you had to be this Johnny Depp character all the time. And I was just… ugh! I was just this annoying, obnoxious sad sack. When I look back at those times, it’s like oh man, my friends were having fun, and I was too busy being sad for no reason!

And um, when I met my… well, my wife and I had been friends for a long time before we started dating. But when we started getting closer, you know, and started dating, um… she’s really funny. And when I was with her she sort of brought out this funny side in me. And I”m not saying I’m like some hilarious dude, because Lord knows…

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** But I found a sense of humor, you know? Which turns out it was probably a pretty big part of who I am, and I just had no idea it was there.

**JR:** Yeah.

**AO:** And then when you’re a dad… you know.

**JR:** Dad jokes!

**AO:** Dad jokes are the greatest!

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** You have this audience that’s stuck with you.

**JR:** (laughs) That’s right.

**AO:** And they don’t get *anything*! And you just say the dumbest things, and you make yourself laugh. And then you can’t turn it off, and you become that person in the office, and you become that person at church and… it’s just way better.

**JR:** Yeah. (laughs)

**AO:** Also, I’d say the other part of it is that — why do the songs turn out that way — part of it is that’s what I brought to the songs, and the other part of it is most of the creative people I know only write when they’re sad.

**JR:** Yeah.

**AO:** And that’s because when you’re happy, you’re with people, you’re outside, and you’re doing fun things. I’m not gonna stop playing badminton to go write a song about how great badminton is. I’m gonna write a song when I see my friends on instagram playing badminton and no one called me.

**JR:** (laughs)

**AO:** And so, um… I know this from my own experience, but now that I’m the person who people turn songs into, that is the game that I play. Did they write this during the day, or did they write this at night? Because if they wrote it during the day, they wrote it for their job. And if they wrote it at night, it’s gonna be a song they really want on the record more than the other one, and it’s probably gonna be sad.

**JR:** (laughs)

AO: And so that’s my first question. When did they write it? And I always ask, okay let me guess, before lunch, after lunch, or after dinner? And I’m pretty much… I’m in the 90%

**JR:** Oh, that’s hilarious.

**AO:** It’s pretty easy to… once you start looking for it, you can tell really easily. And the truth is you need some of all those things. There are those moments of inspiration where things hit, and you just feel it and you’ve gotta stop what you’re doing and go make something. And sometimes I think — and when I’m in a healthier place, that can be out of a place of joy or a place of wonder or a place of passion. But at least when you’re young, more often than not it’s a place of sadness, because I think that’s where we start to learn that this is an outlet for us. And then as you get better about it and you have more feelings, and you have more varied feelings, you find more interesting ways to create. But there’s also a lot to be said for, to quote you, the habit of just making time and writing. And that is the difference 100% between my successful artists and my frustrated artists. Cause my successful artists are the ones that get up and do the work.

**JR:** Hmm.

AO: They may not always be the most talented artists, but they’re 100%… across the board, they’re the ones that are doing more, are pushing more. And they’re really proud of the music of the music that they make. In my world, you burn a lot of things. You write 80 songs to find the 10 that go on the record. And the artist that puts in the time can build the 80 songs to pick the best from. And even if they’re not the best writer, they’re gonna have more… there’s no way you’re not gonna find some great songs in there, versus the tortured soul that’s gonna give you ten, and three are okay.

**JR:** Yeah, I mean, so much of the writing work you do is just learning how to do that small percentage that’s actually really good.

**AO:** Yeah. And you never know when it’s gonna hit, right? That’s the thing you can’t control, when the magic’s gonna strike. And sometimes it’s the slog. It’s the days that feel like a slog that end up you come back to, (gasp) that was really good! But the days that you’re super passionate and you feel great about yourself, and you’re like, yeahhhh killing this! Then you’re like, ehhhh that was okay.

**JR:** It’s like the hilarious joke that you tell in your dream, and then if you can ever remember that joke…

**AO:** (laughs)

**JR:** … you’re wake up like, that was NOT even funny at all!

**AO:** (laughs) That’s amazing! Well, also in the world of performance where you play a lot of shows… there are shows where you just nail the show. You play 100%. Not only do you hit every right note, but all of your phrasing and your timing and everything just clicks, and the audience is like, “Eh!” But then there’s the night where you just… you’re forgetting words, and you know, stopping and starting and making huge mistakes. And then at the end people come up with tears in their eyes going, “I needed tonight. This was just the perfect thing.” And you go… I was terrible tonight!

**JR:** How do you account for that? Can you account for that?

**AO:** Well… I think we all see ourselves in humanity more than in perfection.

**JR:** Yeah.

**AO:** But it just proves further that it’s not about us and we… how we present ourselves to people. It’s all about how they connect to us, and then we invite them in. So yeah! But all that to say… I’m now in a place where I get to assign writers, hey. I need you to write. I’m gonna send people to your house who are gonna write with you, cause I need to get stuff from you. So ten o’clock, you have to write.

It’s fun to watch… I’m a better writer because I have to push people through that, so I know what it means, and then I get to edit a lot of people’s writing. Which is so helpful for yourself to go, oh my goodness, the things that I’m constantly correcting and suggesting for other people… just like the podcast, I can do that in real time when I write too. I’m so much less precious than I used to be, which is why I feel like for the first time I can bring other people in. I realize, I don’t always have the best things to say, and other people good things to say, good things to contribute. I would love their help. And… I don’t have to feel like I’m the contributor of every great idea for it to be good, which is really something… I took a lot of pride in having every good idea. Now I’m realizing, they’re not all that great!

**JR:** Man, if you can push through to selflessness or self-forgetfulness… it’s like a whole new ball game.

**AO:** It really is!

**JR:** And it’s so hard to get there. Alright! Last question. Who are the writers who make you wanna write?

**AO:** Um, do they have to be book writers?

**JR:** No.

**AO:** Okay. Paul Simon, hands down. The greatest of all time. Bruce Springsteen. Not the E Street Band Bruce Springsteen, but Bruce Springsteen when he’s alone in his garage. My favorite record of his is this record called The Ghost of Tom Joad. Very few people have really heard it. It was not successful. But it just has some of the most incredible songs! And the whole thing feels like it was the second take, you know? It was the first time he got through the song completely and they were like, “Yeah! Good enough.” And they’re just… amazing.

**JR:** Hey, do you know about the time that Bruce Springsteen sent a fan letter to Walker Percy? Do you know this story?

**AO:** Noooooo?

**JR:** Yeah.

**AO:** Please tell me.

**JR:** So he loved Walker Percy. Sent him a fan letter. Walker Percy, you know, I don’t know if he read it or didn’t read it, but it indicates he didn’t respond. Maybe he didn’t know who Bruce Springsteen was, I don’t know.

**AO:** (laughs)

**JR:** So, after Walker Percy died, his kids are going through his stuff…

**AO:** Uh huh.

**JR:** And his son finds this letter from Bruce Springsteen and he’s like, whhaaaaaat?!

**AO:** (laughs)

**JR:** And so the son started a correspondence with Bruce — or at least wrote him back. I don’t know this story all that well. I’ve now told you all I know about this story. But just that idea of this connection with Walker Percy, and… anyway.

**AO:** That’s amazing.

**JR:** I’m sorry. You’re the one answering this question. I interrupted you.

**AO:** No, no! I just… that’s so great! Yeah, I love his writing. Um, and then I’ve gotten really into westerns the last number of years. I’ve been reading a lot of westerns. I don’t think that’s ever gonna be a part of my personal writing, but yeah. And I really like short story writers. That’s kind of a lot of what I read, whether they’re science fiction, western, modern stuff, Mark Twain… I love the short story. I think it’s probably a lot more like songwriting, so it feels very native to me. And theres a writer named Ted Liu — L-I-U — I think he’s American, Chinese parents I believe? But he writes the kind… it’s almost *Black Mirror* kind of stuff?

**JR:** Really.

**AO:** But way more hopeful and beautiful. Beautiful writing. But there’s this short stories where every… in every one, there’s something about the world that is fundamentally different, and then here’s a moral question or a really poignant personal story in this world where there’s some crazy thing that’s completely different about this world than our world. And it feels very… there’s a very Asian sense to it. It’s really fascinating.

**JR:** I’ll have to check that out.

**AO:** *The Glass Menagerie*… I’m gonna make sure I said this name right. Um… (keyboard clicking sound) Oh no, *The Paper Menagerie* is the book of short stories and that… story made me cry and cry. (pause) Oh, it’s KEN Liu. K-E-N L-I-U.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** Okay. Great. Alright, Andy Osenga, always a pleasure.

**AO:** I just rambled at you a bunch, but thank you for having me on!

**JR:** Well, we’ll do it again soon.

**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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