(SOFT ELECTRIC GUITAR MUSIC

**LESLIE THOMPSON:** John Barber and Pete Peterson are fascinated, infuriated, and gobsmacked by the art of cinema. In other words, they’re in love with the movies. Join them for the Fixed in Post Podcast: Misadventures in Moviegoing, as they talk about the joy, the disappointment, and the magic of film. Learn more at rabbitroom.com/podcast.

(MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Hey friends, Jonathan Rogers here. Before we get started, I wanted to mention a new online writing class that I’ve put together. It’s called Writing with Hobbits. Over six weeks, starting August 18th, we’ll read The Hobbit together, and we’ll talk about the principles by which Tolkien works his particular kind of magic as a writer. Then we’ll apply those principles to our own writing.

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** I’d love to see you there. Find out more at thehabit.co/hobbits.

Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I’m Jonathan Rogers, your host.

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** Sandra McCracken is a singer-songwriter in Nashville. Her songs and her singing has been a kind of ballast for me for 20 years. She sings like a person who has come through the valley of the shadow and rejoices all the more in the great light.

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** Sandra McCracken was a founding member of Indelible Grace Music. She’s a part of Rain for Roots. If you have kids, I hope you know about that. She’s also written for The Gospel Coalition and Christianity Today. She’s just got a lot going on. I think you’re going to love hearing what Sandra McCracken has to say.

Sandra McCracken, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast with me today!

**SANDRA MCCRACKEN:** Thanks so much, Jonathan! Good to be with you!

**JR:** You know, when I think about what your music has meant to me through the years, I think about formation? So, I first became familiar with your name and your singing through… um, the um… oh, shoot.

**SM:** Indelible Grace?

**JR:** Indelible Grace, that’s it.

**SM:** Yeah.

**JR:** Which has been so… I mean, it was 20 years ago at least when the first one came out. So in case some listeners don’t know what I’m talking about, this is a project that Kevin Twit started when he was — I guess he still is at Belmont. Taking old hymns and… you may do a better job explaining what Indelible Grace is.

**SM:** Um, yeah, so it’s… so, I came to Belmont. I met Kevin when I was in St. Louis, actually, so he was the only person I knew in Nashville when I moved here.

**JR:** Really?

**SM:** Yeah, my first friend here. And um, we both… we both love old hymns. And you know, RUF, Reformed University Fellowship, was a college ministry that Kevin ended up being really key in, and still works with college students there at Belmont. So when I was coming through college, man, it was such a new thing to be in an environment, like in a dorm, having these Bible studies and playing eight verses of old hymns with an acoustic guitar. Some of them were still traditional tunes, but in that process, Kevin would just cultivate this creative process of taking an old hymnal with songs and poems that are out of circulation and adding new melodies to them.

So yeah, some people call them retuned hymns or… lots of different names for it. But it’s this unique blend of old and new.

**JR:** Yeah, I was starting to say, before I got off on the history of Indelible Grace, that in those twenty years, those hymns have been very formative for me. I mean, some of them I knew, but a lot of them I didn’t. And of course, Kevin has a lot to say about how hymns form people. And then I know you did Rain for Roots for little people, which is very much about formation. And I was just curious, do you think in terms of “I’m making this music for the purpose of formation”? Is that something you think about?

**SM:** I think it’s really important. You know, there are seasons where you have the luxury of digging in and absorbing all of that? Studying the theology, memorizing Scripture. And then there are other sessions that you really don’t have that luxury, whether you have young children or you’re in an academic program or whatever. There are times… and then you go through crisis or transition, and you have this formation that you rest on. It’s like a net that holds you in those times.

So I think on one hand, I think the formation was probably, I was the recipient of formation. So as a young kid, both my mom and our church — I mean, so many different ways of learning and studying words and Scripture that has been with me and has been part of that formation. So songwriting for me is the vocational part. It would apply to no matter what your vocation is, right? So if you’re in whatever field of work, that formation that’s happening through discipleship, through being in the word, then comes out in a thousand different ways in the work you do. So for us, it was songwriting, and I think for Kevin, it was even songwriting, cause he was both a pastor and a musician. And that was a tremendous influence on us as a community as we were coming through college.

**JR:** Yeah. And I think of a song like “We Will Feast in the House of Zion.” Which to me feels formative, and has been formative to me. You’d think I’d be formed at this point, as old as I am, but I’m not fully formed.

**SM:** (chuckles)

**JR:** And that song helps form my desires and my longings, you know? The way that it, um… brings a future grace in the present? I guess when I think about that song, I think about the power of a song to shape our desires and to give us something to long for. I think it’s so… (pause) That’s not a question, that’s a comment.

**SM:** Yeah, I’m with you. I think there’s something in that that you’re talking about, where a song or a piece of art would give us a sense of imagination that’s not just imagination like Disney Land, but that’s gospel imagination that takes us into those promises. Okay, if this is true, then how does it change everything? How does it change where we are now? And I need that too. Even writing a song like that — writing those words, and then having that song following me around all these years. I forget it, and then I sing it again, and then it becomes new for me, and I need that.

Another song like that is a song called “Steadfast,” which is from Psalm 103:3. And there have been so many times that I’ve started a set or performance with those words, “I will build my house / Whether storm or drought / On the rock that does not move.” Because most of the time my emotions are all over the place, but when I sing that line, I have to come back and submit to it again.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah, I know, I feel like so often when we — and this isn’t just true for songwriting. It’s true for all kinds of writing. When you write, you sit down and you have, by virtue of the concentration you’re putting into your work, you see truth. Hopefully, you’re writing it for other people, but then you come back to it later in life, as you said, when your circumstances have changed or whatever, it’s like you’re reading something that somebody else wrote. Like another person wrote it. And it was a version of yourself that had time to ponder what’s really true, whereas a lot of the times we don’t.

**SM:** Mmhm. Mmhm. I was talking to a friend the other day about how the Spirit of God works over the course of our lives in this like… it’s like accumulative. It’s building on itself, where he will bring something to light in our lives and in our spirit and then he’ll bring it up again, and then he’ll bring it up again. It’s not that we forget it entirely, but we need those kind of building blocks and those reminders, those like pulled out points that say, okay, we’ve made it this far. I love that passage that says, you know, “Alll the way that you have gone until now, the Lord has carried you.” Like, “ The Lord your God has carried you as a father carries his son.” And there’s a sense of these reminders are part of being carried. Music has a strange, mysterious way of doing that. And I don’t know that I have any mastery over what that means and how to do that, but it sure is fun to be a part of it.

**JR:** Yeah, right. In the little intro to — I saw a video that you did with a little intro to “God’s Highway.”

**SM:** Mmhm.

**JR:** You talked about working with — did you write that song with Thad Cockrell?

**SM:** I did, yeah.

**JR:** And you were talking about Thad, and you were trying to describe the sort of struggles you were in the middle of right then. And Thad encouraged you instead to — instead of “my feet are tired,” say “my feet are strong.” My, uh…

**SM:** My eyes are clear. Yeah. Like, I felt like I was in a fog, and I was trying to describe that as a songwriter. And he was like, no no, think about how in the spirituals “Carry Us Forward,” they don’t sing about right where you are. They sing about where you’re going. And I think that was the invitation into gospel imagination for me, and it changed the poetry of the song. And it makes that song something I would come back to for that reason.

**JR:** Yeah, one thing I was thinking about as I was hearing that story was you started with introspection, which I think, you know, is an important part of that process. But what made that song work was when you got out of introspection and moved into something else.

**SM:** Yeah. That’s right. And that’s a good point. I think… I think introspection kind of goes hand in hand with lament. So the Psalms also do that very well. The Psalms do introspection. They would give us permission to explore of the more — what we would think of as the negative emotions. And I do think that there’s a place for that in worship. I think the hymn writers would tell us that we have permission to sing that on a Sunday morning too. Anne Steele or Isaac Watts, some of my favorites where there’s clearly a sort of emotional honesty that you start with, and then you work through that.

You know, I was just thinking about that other day with the song “God’s Highway,” and I have a new song coming out this week actually. It’s called “You Are With Me,” and I wrote that with Leslie Jordan. And in that one, those verses really do describe, like, the fatigue, and the — you know, this is like an anthem for 2020. But the chorus is, “You are with me, you are for me / You’ve been behind me, go before me.” There is an affirmation of what’s true, and there’s also an acknowledgement of the introspection of where we are and looking honestly at that. I guess having that whole dynamic range is… I would say that’s really important, and sometimes we miss out on it.

**JR:** Yeah, I love the idea of um… for a writer, thinking in terms of there are things that are true and things that are truer, and hopefully you’re moving toward what’s truer. Your struggling, your heartache in the fog… you know, that’s true enough. There’s no sense in saying that’s not true. It is true. It’s just not the truest thing about you.

**SM:** Mmm.

**JR:** And I do feel… my favorite songs of yours are the songs that sort of have that movement.

**SM:** Thank you. Yeah, thank you. Yeah, what do you think about that as a writer, the balance between introspection… I mean, you think about Flannery O’Connor or the willingness to go all the way in. I mean, we’re using the word “introspection,” but it’s like the shadow of things. And to tell the whole story, you have to go there, right? And then you have to kind of sit in it and then move through it. It’s not the end point. The thing we’re glorifying is not the emotion. It’s the truer truth.

**JR:** Yeah, when I teach writing, I feel like I’m spending a lot of time encouraging people to look out instead of looking in. Not because… the main reason is I think you don’t have to tell many writers to look within, right?

**SM:** (laughs)

**JR:** That comes naturally. If you weren’t an introspective person, you wouldn’t be writing in the first place. So I feel like as a corrective, I’m always pushing people to look at not what’s going on between their ears, but what’s going on outside. But only as a corrective, right? If I knew somebody who never looked inside and was trying to be a writer, I would say, hey, try being a little more introspective, but I don’t feel like I really need to. I mean, it’s like the advice. People are always giving writers the advice, hey, make sure you do a lot of reading. Like… who needs to tell writers to read more?

**SM:** (laughs)

**JR:** It’s like telling a teenage boy, “Make sure you eat three meals a day and a couple snacks!”

**SM:** Yeah, it’s case by case, right? That is true. Do you find — this is kind of an aside — do you find it’s harder or easier during this time of like, um, stay at home to read more or concentrate on things like that? I’ve been asking people that.

**JR:** Um, I’ve been surprised that it’s not any easier.

**SM:** Yeah, me too. In the beginning I was so excited about that! (laughs) Like, I don’t know…

**JR:** I know. (laughs) I have read more just because I’ve had more time? But I haven’t… you know, whatever percent of extra time I’ve had, I haven’t had that much extra reading. If I’ve got 30% more time, I’ve only done 10% more reading. Something like that.

**SM:** Okay.

**JR:** I’m making up these statistics.

**SM:** No, that’s good. (laughs) I appreciate that.

**JR:** How about you? Have you been reading more?

**SM:** Yeah, but I think there’s some surprising… I’m surprisingly distracted during this time where there is so much space. It’s a real discipline to finish a book or to, uh, not get pulled… and even some of that is even just being at home! There’s so much to do at home! Like when you’re out, or you’re in an office or you’re in those grooves that we’re so used to being in… yeah. I think it really causes us to have to rethink all our priorities.

**JR:** Yeah. On the other hand, I have found it a little harder to write during this time than usual. However, I’ve been so much more aware of what’s going on in my yard? More gardening, paying more attention to the birds… and I think that’s gonna bear fruit.

**SM:** I’m so glad to hear that. Yeah, I think that’s true. Being outside and being together with other people outside too, because that’s the way we’re connecting. That’s very unique to this time.

**JR:** Can we talk about the New Creation?

**SM:** Okay.

**JR:** I know from your connection with A Rocha, I know you’re interested in the Old Creation…

**SM:** (laughs)

**JR:** But the New Creation as well… talk to me about how that shapes the way you think about — and why — you do your work.

**SM:** It’s a big question… and so I will avoid a theological answer and say, just today when I’m hearing that question, I think of Psalm 104, and I think of God’s, um… (pause) his governing over all things. And then I think about how if you watch a National Geographic special or flip through the magazine, there’s so much inherent cruelty in our experience of creation now. Right? It’s hard not to… it’s important to pay attention to that. So when I think of New Creation, I think of we will not need to lament the cruelty of things as they are. There will be wholeness even to the cycles, and to the way that — you know, yes, that God is providing for all of us. And there is the cycle of life, there’s the Ominivore’s Dilemma. Like, there are all these things to convert to that, as far as our food and our use of the land in the Old Creation, as you would say. But when I think of the New Creation, my hope is even there we are looking ahead to a day where this will have wholeness and there won’t be a need to lament or to experience pain or suffering or tears.

Because it’s not only our personal story. It’s the creation story too, and from that passage in Romans where the creation groans in expectation… that, I mean, there is a longing that when we have our own personal longings, we’re echoing something that’s already going on around us. So we participate in something that’s larger than ourselves. And I guess going back to what you said about looking outward, that’s a way that I have found it very helpful to look outward, as someone who’s inclined to look at myself. When is step out in the woods or out West, and the sky’s really big, there’s just reminders in that that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves.

**JR:** Yeah, that’s such an important idea. I think one thing a writer of any time is doing for readers they care about is placing their story within a bigger story. Saying to the reader or the listener, whatever your story is, it’s part of something bigger.

**SM:** Yeah, that’s true. And we’re drawn to characters in writing that not only help us find ourselves, but to enlarge our empathy for the other. Like, I think like Les Miserables — that’s one of my favorite stories. We were just talking about it yesterday, and I think that dynamics of those stories and how interwoven all the characters are, some of the greatest stories remind us of that connectedness.

**JR:** Yeah. Pete Peterson talks about stories as signposts to New Creation. I don't know that he originated that idea, but he talks about it. And again, I think that’s one of the things I love about what you do. It feels like these signposts to a kingdom that’s coming but here and all that. And I do think that’s such an important… I don’t know where I’m going with that. But it’s… the idea of the New Creation and giving readers and listeners a vision of what… again, where we fit. In a story that turns out to be a comedy. It looks like a tragedy from where we sit, but it turns out to be a comedy.

**SM:** Yeah, and I think if we’re paying attention to Scripture and seeing that this kingdom is going to be manifest right where we are, you know, there’s a lot that shifts for me around that. So um, in other words, heaven’s not just out there and it’s like little cherubs on harps, but it’s this renewal that we’re talking about. It really changes the work we do now, because all of that participation is meaningful toward that kingdom coming.

**JR:** So you are working on a book now…

**SM:** Yes. (chuckles)

**JR:** Is this the first time you’ve ever…

**SM:** Yes! Yes, it is.

**JR:** You haven’t written a book… I mean, you don’t have any unpublished books out there?

**SM:** (laughs) No, no in fact, I’ve been really shy about it in a way, cause I’ve done songwriting for my whole life basically, and that feels comfortable to me. That’s something I understand and I can move in and out of. But thinking of myself as a writer is something I’ve always held at a distance, and I have tried to practice it and do more of it, but this is the first time I’ve ever said yes to something of this volume. So, working on a book, and this has been providentially a good year for it with time off the road. (laughs) I just finished an album that’s coming out in October, and I found that it was actually really difficult to do both, so I shifted into music and from march through just this last month, finishing up an album and now kind of digging headlong into writing. So yeah, I’m trying to push that forward, and I hope to have a good draft of it by the end of the year.

**JR:** Oh, great. So tell me about that. Making that shift from writing songs to writing a book length manuscript.

**SM:** There’s a documentary out, Joni Mitchell talking about her life. And she’s also a painter, as you might know. Both a songwriter and did a lot of her own cover artwork and self-portraits. But she talks about the season of recording an album and painting as crop rotation? So she’d put one thing down and pick something else up. So it’s a little bit like that, and trying to shift into something else just feels like letting one thing rest, and I can feel that shift where I don’t really need to write songs right this minute and I can take a little breather from that, and trying to be more disciplined with just sitting at the computer for writing and to close everything out, you know? Shut down the email so I can focus.

**JR:** So um… I don’t write songs, so it… from where I sit, it feels like it would be the difference between running sprints and going for a long jog. Is that a fair… is that the way it feels to you? Like I said, this is total imagination.

**SM:** No, that’s a good question. And maybe… I could probably let you know in six months if it feels like that. I think some songs come very quickly. For me, it’s probably just familiarity with the craft. So whereas I feel the comfort of songs because I’ve done that for so long, and then with the writing, the self-doubt that comes in when I sit down to write something that’s a long chapter is something that I have to wrestle with. It’s more like okay, I just wrote this whole thing. I don’t know if it matters! It’s that question of self-doubt that comes in right after that’s probably the biggest obstacle in writing.

**JR:** Just because you feel like you’ have enough experience with songwriting you feel like you know what’s good and what isn’t?

**SM:** Yeah… that’s probably it. Like, I can still write bad songs, but I can identify them pretty quickly? (laughs) So those still happen regularly too, but maybe just the confidence around it? Confidence is a big thing in terms of whatever your work is. It’s not something we talk about a lot in church circles? I don’t know why? Is that funny? I don’t know, but I’ve been pondering it a lot, that there is a very strong case to be made that confidence is part of how we’re wired to flourish and to do the things that we were made to do.

**JR:** I wanna hear more about that. That confidence is part of — I think that’s exactly right, I’ve just never thought about it before. Confidence and flourishing.

**SM:** Yeah. Yeah…

**JR:** The floor is now open, Sandra. (laughs)

**SM:** (laughs) I don’t know! I think I have more questions than answers. But when I think about flourishing, I think about acknowledging our limitations and when we acknowledge the limitations, you can actually flourish within the space you’re given. The boundaries are set around us. Like, if you’re teaching writing — is it like that? Where you give parameters, it’s so much easier to write within parameters, right?

**JR:** Absolutely. My students can't… if I say, hey, just write whenever you feel like it, just wait for the extension requests to start coming in.

**SM:** Yes! (laughs)

**JR:** One thing I love about the way you’re framing confidence is — or the way you first framed it — was I know when I’ve done something that’s not any good.

**SM:** I think you’re absolutely right. Like a personality thing I’ve thought about over the years is what is the difference between humility, false humility… like, genuine humility is the ability to say hey, this is good. I’m proud of this. Without having to play up kind of the “aw, shucks,” like awwwww really? I mean, you know… (laughs) I think some of that is just temperament. Some of that is Southern culture that has been, you know, I’ve been swimming in those waters for a long time. and I think that confidence — growth in that —is a way of moving forward. And it’s so important as we learn to give what we learn and everything we’re holding in our hands to the next… you know, hand it over to somebody else. Like, we keep handing this on. So, I don’t know. But you gotta know what it is that you’re holding to be able to give it to the next person, to share it.

**JR:** We have a friend who will show up every now and then to say, “I made this chocolate cake. It’s AMAZING. You gotta have some.” Yes!

**SM:** (laughs) That’s it! That is exactly it. Yeah, and there’s like a little bit of a… like, you can stand outside yourself. There’s a seines of looking outward enough to be able to say, “That chocolate cake is really good! I really enjoyed making it.”

**JR:** Yeah. I enjoyed making it. Doesn’t necessarily make me a genius or brilliant, but I made this good chocolate cake. It’s just this thing that’s good, and I wanna share it.

**SM:** Yeah. Let’s celebrate it.

**JR:** And for some reason in the arts, we don’t have the same distance from the chocolate cake that we have with the things that come out of our brains or whatever.

**SM:** Yeah. (laughs) It’s true.

**JR:** To say, “Here’s a song I wrote, and your’e gonna love it.” (laughs)

**SM:** (laughs) Yeah. Well, and I think that probably goes hand in hand with the way we experience social media, and the way that there’s… you know, as an artist, there’s like this unnecessary… like, you share it. You are presenting the chocolate cake, like… kind of every day, all the time. (laughs) Through social media or whatever you’re doing to promote the work. I know that feels weird for me and a lot of other artists, but it’s also… there’s a way to do it that’s authentic and that’s celebratory and that’s grateful, knowing we were given gifts and we’re given those to build each other up.

**JR:** Yeah, right! We’re given gifts, not for ourselves, but for others.

**SM:** Yeah.

**JR:** And also, as an extension of ourselves. To, uh… to enjoy — I mean, that phrase “enjoying ourselves.” To enjoy yourself, and not just… I don’t know. It’s an interesting phrase, enjoying yourself.

**SM:** I mean, it is funny that, um… that makes me think about Jesus’ command to love the Lord your God, and just this idea of loving others as you love yourself, cause it’s implied that we’re already gonna do that. (laughs)

**JR:** Right. Um… well, okay. Sandra, I always end these conversations with this question…

**SM:** Okay.

**JR:** Who are the writers who make you want to write?

**SM:** (pause) Hmm. I like that question. Um… I have a stack of books right now, and um… you know, I’m trying to… okay. (pause) Who are the writers who make me wanna write? I would say Flannery O’Connor. Currently, I’m reading Ronald Rolheiser. And uh, I’m reading a Rich Mullins book, which it has been a little while since I thought about that.

**JR:** A book by or about?

**SM:** Um, it’s the one… (walks away from computer, distant voice) It was actually written by… let me see. (book sounds) Right here. James Bryan Smith. This is the one that’s like all of these narrative published writings that sort of explore his life and story. Um, of course, C.S. Lewis. I know that’s such a cliché, but every time I go back to Lewis, I… there’s just so much there. And his nonfiction especially… I mean, I think his storytelling is brilliant, but there’s so many ways that he describes things. I have *A Grief Observed* on my bedside table, because it’s such beautiful question asking. And I have an old tattered copy that I just pick up and read a few chap— you know, a few paragraphs. Just love it.

So um… yeah, that’s a good starting list for now. I need to read more fiction. I need to revisit *Gilead*. That’s on my list.

**JR:** Yeah, you better revisit it soon! Cause there’s another one in the series coming out in September.

**SM:** That’s right! And you’ve had some, um… you’ve had uh… how do you say his name? Leaf?

**JR:** Oh, Leif Enger.

**SM:** Leif Enger. Yeah. I think *Peace Like a River* was one of my favorites. And really enjoyed your conversation with him too, by the way.

**JR:** Yeah, what a sweet guy.

**SM:** Yeah.

**JR:** Yeah.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**JR:** Well great. Well Sandra, thank you for taking this much time to talk to me.

**SM:** It was my pleasure! Thank you!

**JR:** Talk again soon!

**SM:** Alright. We’ll do it. Take care!

**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.

**DM:** This podcast was produced by The Rabbit Room, where art nourishes community and community nourishes art. All our podcasts are made possible by the generous support of our members. To learn more about us, visit rabbitroom.com, and to become a member, rabbitroom.com/donate.

(THEME MUSIC OUT)

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR MUSIC)

**DM:** This episode is brought to you by the Christian Standard Bible. Here’s Russ Ramsey on what draws him to the CSB as a pastor and a writer.

**RUSS RAMSEY:** So, here’s a couple of verses from Psalm 16: “Lord, you are my portion and my cup of blessing. You hold my future. The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.” I love the rhythm and the cadence of, “The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places.” There’s something just lovely about the structure of that sentence that conveys not only the content of what’s being said, but the poetry of it, you know. So there’s a very faithful diligence to conveying the poetry of the poetry books, while also conveying the specific content of them as well.

(MUSIC FADES OUT)

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