(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:** Ross King is a songwriter originally from Texas, who now lives in Nashville.

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** He tours a singer-songwriter, but he’s also written for dozens of other performers. He’s carved out a career by writing songs that say things he thinks need to be said, even — or especially — when no one else is saying them.

Ross King, thank you so much for being on The Habit podcast!

**ROSS KING:** Thank you for having me!

**JR:** So glad you’re here. You know, I’ve heard you talk about — I’ve heard you describe your career in terms of just writing honest songs, writing the songs that you felt like, saying what you felt needed to be said, and you’ve found just enough listeners to keep it going.

**RK:** Hmm. Yeah.

**JR:** Um… I just, I wanna hear you talk more about that. I guess, did you have big ideas when you started that you were going to have a big audience? Or did you always say, hey, I’m doing something that’s not really…

**RK:** I mean, don’t we all? I started in the 90s, and Christian music of the 90s was different, and I was all in. I wasn’t necessarily a fan of all of it, but what I liked, I liked a lot. I loved Steven Curtis Chapman, kind of all of the classics. Plus I loved some lesser known stuff. But I was way into it, and I saw all that as that was the thing, that was the goal. Indie music wasn’t what it is now, so I don’t think I had a reference for oh, I could be an independent musician and that’ll work. I just shot for, oh, I’ll be Third Day or whatever was cool.

Pretty early on, I got a lot of low level rejection. You know, not like “you’re awful,” but, “this isn’t what we’re doing.” I would have brushes with somebody who had influence, and I’d show them what I was doing or they’d hear about it somehow and wanna know what I was doing, and they’d get closer and kind of dig deep — and I was so interested in what Rich Mullins and those guys were doing, so I thought that was a thing I could do, you know? And I came up around Caedmon’s Call, and they were kind of doing a bunch of… it was a performance, but they were unashamedly saying you can sit down and have a beverage and enjoy this, or you can stand up and jump up and down. And I thought, oh, I can do the thing where I do a songwriter thing, and I’ll sit on a stool and people will drink a coffee while they listen to what I do. And nobody was interested in that.

And to be fair, I don’t think I was… I had a pretty abrasive voice, just vocally. Like, it’s still pretty unique, but I didn’t know what I was doing, kind of singing wise. And all of this goes back to I was probably more of a songwriter than a performer.

**JR:** Yeah. Are you aware of Seth Godin’s idea of the smallest viable audience?

**RK:** It’s funny, I’ve heard of it, and I think it’s probably pretty close to the idea of a thousand true fans?

**JR:** Probably, yeah.

**RK:** So… yeah. I mean, do you wanna say what it is in case they don’t know?

**JR:** Yeah, Seth Godin says, hey, instead of trying to — and he’s talking about business, but it’s equally applicable to writing of various kinds. But his question is — or the idea is — instead o saying I’m going to be a mass market superstar with this product, figure out what is the smallest audience that you could survive with.

**RK:** Right. So the thousand true fans thing is exactly this — and I don’t know who said what first, but it was this blog that came out maybe 10 years ago, and it basically said, hey look, if you’re a true fan of something — and it gave a bunch of theoretical figures, like a true fan would spend $100 a year on what they cared about if they had the chance to. So John Mayer, if they love John Mayer and he gives them enough material with music and t-shirts and concerts and other experiences, they’ll spend that. And that if you can get a thousand people to spend a hundred dollars a year on you, anywhere in America $100,000 is good. You know?

So yes, I remember bumping into that, and — and I kinda know where you’re going. At some point, I had to realize that I was getting the same people, the same kinds of people, over and over again. And if I could engage them with enough, that would be adequate. I think the problem for me was always I didn’t know how to give them more than just a record every couple of years. You know? And they can’t spend — and that’s where the crowdfunding thing has become so helpful for me. Four Kickstarters, I’ve never gotten more than 250 givers at any of those, but they average between 50 and 100 bucks per person. So that definitely, you know, that ends up covering that for me. It says you can do this album, and you can do it debt free.

**JR:** Well, the idea of the Smallest Viable Audience is it’s a way of thinking what is it I need to give to my readers, my listeners, and the idea is if I identify — and he puts it in terms of numbers. And I think for most writers, I think we have to — you know, most writers aren’t gonna, I don’t mean to think of this financially. I think you need to ask in terms of the work I’m doing as a writer, what’s the smallest audience that I would be willing to go to this trouble for? In other words, I don’t think you can even — certainly for people who write prose — very few people are gonna sell enough books and stories to make a living. But the question is what’s the smallest number of people I can write for that I wold feel like it’s worth my time?

**RK:** So it’s a way to narrow down how much of like a salesman you have to be with your art?

**JR:** No, it’s more in terms of — the assumption is if I can identify, preferably by name, here are the people I am writing for. The assumption is that if I create something that their interests and my interests overlap in such a way that it feels like it’s worth my effort. Chances are there are more people who want to read or listen to what I’m making. And so um… and obviously, I’d like to hear your thoughts on this. People say things like, “If just one person is affected by my work, that’s enough.” But you know… do you really? Can you really mean that?

**RK:** No. I mean, not with any kind of economic honesty. I mean, gosh, you have to…

**JR:** Well, but I’m not even talking about economic honesty. I’m talking about, let’s put it in terms of the amount of effort it takes to…

**RK:** No, I mean, I don’t want to make it seem like I’m all about that. I think with my age and four kids I tend to think too much about that stuff. But…

**JR:** And also in terms of the listenership of The Habit, most people aren’t… I think most people write in some way, but they’re not trying to make a living.

**RK:** Right. And so you are saying, gosh, if this only really makes five people happy, or makes five people think deeply, or makes five people feel deeply, right? Or makes one — that would feel weird to me, and I think part of it is we create for different reasons at different times, and there’s sort of different currencies that we think about whenever we’re creating. And this plays into that same, one of those sort of platitudes like, “Well, I just write the best song for myself.” And that happens sometimes, but there’s no truth there. There’s no universal truth in that.

Occasionally I write for therapy, self-therapy, or for devotion, or to express something to my wife or to God or the universe or whatever, and it’s completely about that expression, and I don’t have a sense of will it reach people. But if it’s too long, somewhere in the middle of that process I start to think oh, I wonder if this is worth selling? You know, whatever, right? You always do that. But then there are other times when I’m doing something and I think I’m going to make something as commercial as it can be just to see if I can do it. We can mock commercial art, but it isn’t — if it was easy, we would all just do on — you know, my next free Saturday I’m gonna make some commercial art and make a cool ten thou, right? We would all do that. Why wouldn’t we do that if it was easy?

**JR:** Right.

**RK:** So I think this plays into why we create at certain times, and — I’m probably getting off of your question, but this does fascinate me, because I do write for me, and I do write for my audience, and I do write for CCM, and I do write for film, TV sync stuff, which is totally about just like catchy hooks and meaninglessness and universality, and all of those things ring my bells in different ways and make me happy in different ways and pay different kinds of bills in my heart and in my life, right?

**JR:** (chuckles) Yeah.

**RK:** Am I getting to the heart of what you’re trying to ask?

**JR:** Yeah, I mean I know that you are a — I’ve heard you say before, somewhere, that my work’s, it’s just not for everybody. Which is also, by the way, true of everything that’s been written in the world.

**RK:** True.

**JR:** I mean, Harry Potter’s not for everybody.

**RK:** Exactly. It’s probably a defense mechanism a little bit, it’s probably my insecurity, but it’s also me recognizing that there’s a freedom in realizing oh, I can’t do what Chris Tomlin does. I mean, I went to college with Chris Tomlin, and I was pretty good friends with him, and I realized oh, this guy does a thing I cannot do. Right? And if I’m made about that, and if I’m trying to change — I mean, a lot of this is the way we view a lot of people who do what we do, it can be super competitive and it can be inspiring, but a lot of times I view it as, okay, that person is doing something that fills a space in the world and the Kingdom of God and the church and whatever else that I can’t fill. Right? That exact space. But am I supposed to be seeing what they’re doing as an inspiration to do it like that to also help fill that space? Or do I see it as oh, okay, that’s taken care of. I’ll go over to the other space and find my thing.

And I think you’re always doing that. You’re always looking at different pieces of art and other artists and saying are they calling me to be — is what I’m seeing and hearing in what they do a calling to be like them and do that thing? I hadn’t thought of that thing as something that mattered to go say, right? Or am I seeing it like, oh good, that’s taken care of. They’re speaking to that audience. I’m gonna go over here and speak to this other audience. So some of that is just me working through those things, and realizing that I didn’t want to have to — you know, there’s a lot of freedom in not having to like say I hope everyone likes this, I hope everyone likes this. I have the benefit of 25 years in this okay, I have a certain kind of person that likes this kind of thing I’m doing, so occasionally I’ll lean in hard and do that for them. And hopefully reach other folks too, but I’m leaning in hard to that person I’ve identified as part of that smallest viable audience.

**JR:** Yeah. And you’re talking about — this topic comes up every now and then in this podcast — the difference between thinking hierarchically and territorially. I’ve got this little patch of ground that’s my patch of ground to tend. And um, and it doesn’t — it’s so easy to put things in terms of looking at somebody who’s sold more records, sold more books or whatever, and putting them in a hierarchy instead of this person has a patch of ground they’re tending, I have a patch of ground I’m tending, and there’s no reason that two farmers can’t be inspired by one another without moving into the other person’s farm.

**RK:** Well let me ask you. How do you work through that? Cause I’m curious. Cause I’ve never heard that exact phrasing and I love that, but I’d love to hear how you process that.

**JR:** Well, it’s… one way I process it is by saying, you know, whenever I do on those occasions — and these occasions are rarer the older I get, because I’m thankfully maturing a little bit — but when I look at somebody else and think gosh, I can’t do that! I can’t do what that person just did. That’s so good. I can’t do that. I also say, but you know what? They can’t do what I do. And that helps a little bit.

**RK:** Right, right.

**JR:** Yeah, how do I… I feel like I work through it the way you just said it. To learn to view everybody as an ally if they’re doing good work. So all I’ve got now are little sayings. As I try to answer your question, I keep coming up with sayings, which isn’t the same as working through it.

**RK:** No, go ahead. If you’ve got a good saying that’s memorable, I’d love to hear that too. Something I can store away.

**JR:** The idea of allyship has meant a lot to me. And part of, you know, just getting mixed up with the Rabbit Room orbit of people who make stuff, it’s been fun to see, even in the last few years as people have found their way into little niches of things that they’re really good at, it’s so fun to cheer them on and see the fact that you are… the fact that Randall Goodgame, for instance, figured out that his calling, as it turns out, has more to do with speaking to children than speaking to grownups.

**RK:** And that was a radical shift, cause a lot of us who knew about him and knew him a little from years past thought of him as a contemplative songwriter writing deep thoughts for smart people, you know? Suddenly he’s making kid music. Which is not, by the way, a step down. It’s hard.

**JR:** Oh yeah. Especially the way he does it.

**RK:** Oh, he’s fantastic. And I actually went and saw him a couple of years ago, and I wasn’t ready for how well put together and sort of seamless and beautiful and multi-media the whole thing was. It was awesome. I was super impressed. But see now you’re stepping into something that I think, um… do you ever think about how occasionally when we’re doing well in an area like this, it might be we’re doing well because of growth? Or it might be we’re doing well because of some loophole or technicality in the whole thing?

So what I mean is this. When I look at somebody who does something so well that I can never do it, I don’t feel jealousy. I only feel jealousy, I only feel envious when they’re doing something I probably could do if I just worked harder. Or if I had the breaks they had or whatever, if I knew who they knew. Like, that’s when I get… that’s the sort of dark part of my heart.

So I can look at Randall and be like, oh, way to go man. Cause I can’t do what he does. There’s no way. There’s no amount of work or whatever… it just wouldn’t happen for me. But I can look at someone else who’s in the same space I am, but they’re just crushing it and I’m not cause of maybe a few things that feel tangible enough that I’m realizing oh man, if I just had this or that I could get there. They’re a nine and I’m a seven and a half in that area. I bet I could do that.

That’s where I struggle. And I wanna turn that into harder work and deeper faith and stuff like that, but a lot of times it just turns into something nasty.

**JR:** Do you go — are you more likely to go to, um, “I haven’t been working hard enough at this,” or, “That person got some breaks I didn’t get”?

**RK:** Um, there might be a third way, and it would be something like, um, I’m just bad at this and I need to be better. And it has to do with something that is probably deeply insecure about, I could work harder, sure, but I wish I had a little bit more discipline in this area or a little bit more strength in this area. It’s probably tied closer to something about breaks, because it will feel to me like something that is achievable, but I can’t do it. Does that make sense? Like, oh man, if I just had… if ten years ago I had moved here instead of five.

**JR:** Uh huh.

**RK:** Or if… whatever it is! You know, it probably feels like the B of what you said, there’s breaks I didn’t get, but it’s definitely like a combo of all those things, like Ross, why didn’t you work harder? Or you know. It’s insecurity and mostly lies, right?

**JR:** Are you better at dealing with that stuff now than you were ten, twenty years ago?

**RK:** Oh yeah. I mean, much better. But the difference is, I think the struggle I have is I’m figuring a lot of things out in a real sort of late bloomer way. I’ve had easily a dozen people say to me about my last couple of songs, oh, you’re really like dialing in what you were kind of always trying to do. Like, all my artist stuff. You’re really dialing in what you were always trying to do. And I’m thinking… now?

**JR:** (laughs)

**RK:** I mean, really? That feels weird to me. And so I’m definitely better at handling the thing we talked about, but I have this other complicated feeling of, well goodness, I wanna hear people say that age isn’t a factor and God doesn’t see that, but I still feel those things, and I still actually think what if I’m figuring that out now, but it’s just one of those things that doesn’t… um…

You know, you uh, you see that comeback of that aged star, and they’re trying to do a feature with Justin Timberlake or Justin Bieber or something, and you’re like, “Why are they on stage with this kid, who’s young, and they’re trying to do this thing that that kids’ doing, and everybody can see through it?” Those feelings go into my brain, like, I’m way better at believing and understanding what I was meant to do and what I’m good at, but I struggle with is it too late, or is it transparently, um, unbelievable. Like, do people see through it and go, really?

Cause you mean, we talked on the email about “Golden” — and I’m not trying to get into promoting my song — but it’s a very pop song, right? More than I’ve probably been in a long— if ever. And you know, I kind of wonder, am I too old for a pop song? That kind of stuff. So those are probably the things I currently deal with more, is just trying to figure out how to factor age into this.

**JR:** So you ask, “Am I too old for a pop song?” And then what? Can you walk me through the process as you answer that question?

**RK:** (sigh) Well, the answer is I don’t care. Because I just, I’ve like… I spent the first, I don’t know, at least 15 years of my songwriting career caring about lyrics almost completely, only, exclusively. I didn’t know that, but that’s what I was doing. So if you go back and listen, you won’t hear super compelling melodies on songs I wrote by myself, and you won’t hear super compelling performances. Like, I just wanted to write lyrics, put em to music, and then put em out there. And if somebody else could’ve done it, and I could have just written them and put em out there, I would’ve done that. I was just trying to write the best lyric and put it out there.

And somewhere in the last decade or so, I started realizing how compelling a good melody is? And then I would hear songs where the lyrics didn’t matter, almost. They almost didn’t even matter, it was so compelling. O someone would show me some kind of classical sounding piece, like opera or Josh Groban doing Italian, and I would go, why is that compelling to me? I don’t know what he’s even saying! Why is that? And I started thinking about that a lot. So for me, it’s become a search to be a better melody writer, but not to lose the lyrical depth or quirkiness or whatever I’m trying to do. So the answer is I find that mostly in pop. Right now, pop music is the most melodically interesting. It’s also super honest. It’s more honest than most of the music right now, except maybe the most deep dive hip hop. Like, pop is honest. It’s talking about anxiety and depression and racial issues, and all this stuff is coming out in pop music. And I just saw that and was like that’s the medium I have to chase right now, because that’s where all this is happening. I just have to come from a place of faith on it, but I’m writing pop because that feels like the easiest place to chase good melody, still put in a smart lyrics, that… is that making sense?

**JR:** Yeah, sure. That song, since you brought it up, it’s such a smart song, and honest too. I’m interested… I mean, you’ve, I know you’ve seen it as part of your calling to be honest in ways that maybe, you know, radio hits in Christian radio sometimes aren’t.

**RK:** Sometimes.

**JR:** Even that lyric, “I try to follow you but I don’t know where you went.” That’s… I love that line, and I know you’re building from Job there. And you know, the truth is that the poets of the Bible wouldn’t do too well on Christian radio.

**RK:** Oh, gosh no. Or even in Christian circles or gatherings or anything like that. They were mostly misfits and hellions. I just… okay, so everybody has a thing they’re good at that looks like it’s really hard because they aren’t good at it, but it’s easy for you. So you can look really heroic for doing that thing when it wasn’t that hard for you. So what I’m talking about is we adopted four kids. It just happened to be something that mades sense for us, and the more that we got into it, the more comfortable it got? I won’t say easier, but the more comfortable it got. So people are like oh wow, what a faith move. And I wanna say back, well… I just don’t think through details all that well. So when I thought about adopting, I was just kinda like let’s go for it, and I didn’t think about all the stuff that might be hard about it. And I think some people go to Africa to reach unreached people groups or go be in the Peace Corps, whatever… they do that, and we think it’s a heroic thing, but really they maybe just are prone to think it’s not that hard.

And for me, somewhere along the line — I was a part of a church plant that really raised up an ethic of vulnerability and authenticity, and I just got good at talking honestly. And not because I’m so brave or anything. This was the way we did it. And there’s other things — I’m all for that — but that thing isn’t hard for me, and I realize it is hard for people. I would notice that I’d sing people that felt really fairly normal for me to say, and I would get response, it was like whooooa, this is so honest, and they would thank me for being brave, and I would think no… I don’t wanna let you know that wasn’t… I didn’t feel that brave. It wasn’t that scary to me. But I realize okay, if this is working for people, and they need this, and it’s unique, then I need to keep doing it cause it’s not hard for me. I actually… there are times whenever I do something, when I record a song and think wait, did I just say that? That might be a little much. But for the most part, it’s not that difficult for me whereas other things might be.

So, I mean, there are things that like… you know, Andrew Peterson and Andy Gullahorn do with lyrics that are just really impressive, that I would have to work really hard to do that thing, right? And but this isn’t hard for me. So speaking, I just try to find ways to say the most… not being odd for odd’s sake, but I try to say the most off-putting, you can’t unring that bell once you ring it thing that I can, because I feel like that’s part of my niche or whatever, right? That’s what I think I’m supposed to be doing. And like you said, it isn’t being done a lot in Christian music.

**JR:** Yeah. Well one thing I think I’m hearing there is you — I mean, I love this idea of you embracing what’s not that hard for you. I think we spend so much time thinking I gotta get better at what I’m not good at, and I’ve got to really identify my weak points and shore those up, but there’s a whole lot to be said for saying this is what I’m really good at and I’m just gonna double down.

**RK:** Right, and people like Seth Godin, that’s their whole thing. It’s like, what are you already doing that’s working? Do more of that. What’s taking you tons of energy and giving you hardly any results? Quit doing that. And I just think I do wanna — and I’m sure you do too — I do wanna improve and shore up the things that can be shored up, or the things that kinda have to be shored up. Occasionally you realize, oh man, this matters in my medium and I’m not good at it. I should be good at it or hire someone to do it for me.

But you’re right. I um… one thing I’ve been doing is we homeschool our kids, and I realized years ago that the curriculum we’d been using needed a lot of memorization tools, so I started writing memorization stuff for this little co-op I was in. Just putting music to words. And I just found that it was easy for me to do it, and it didn’t require a lot of energy, and as soon as I did it the people who needed it bought it and paid me back for my time, and I was like, oh okay, this is how a lot of this should work. There should be a lot of this stuff that’s um… I had this principle that I called “Flu Shots,” and it’s basically this idea that, you know — and this is probably either a really timely metaphor or a really untimely metaphor.

**JR:** (laughs)

**RK:** But the idea is that during flu season, a doctor gives a ton of flu shots. It’s not hard for him, he’s not passionate about it, and it doesn’t give him any kind of thrill. And he could teach us to do it, right? But he’s legally qualified for it. So during flu season, he makes a lot of money, reaches a lot of people, helps a lot of people, by doing a really easy thing that is not sexy or rewarding.

And I just think a lot of people, especially creatives, need to find some flu shots. Things that they do that aren’t gonna give you a charge, are not gonna make you look good to anybody, but you’re uniquely good at it. Randall turned kind of that on its ear and was like oh… and again, I’m not mocking. I think he’s good at this thing that he does, and it’s easy for him. And he just like leaned in hard and turned it into something really beautiful, right? And of course, you know Randall, he’s like the most joyfully committed guy in the world. He’s not at all cynical about it the way I might be.

**JR:** (laughs)

**RK:** I might be like, yeahhhh I’m writing songs about boogers or whatever, you know. He’s just smiling all the way through it, you know? And he’s got a puppet on his left hand and he’s playing a mandolin on his right. So Randall, this podcast is basically us just praising you.

**JR:** That’s right. Yeah. No, and I think that along the… this feels… now I’ve lost the thread of how this fit in, but it felt relevant, so I’m gonna bring it up.

**RK:** (laughs) That’s my fault.

**JR:** Yeah, it’s all on you. Um… nobody is mad at you about what you can’t do, right? Nobody’s listening to your songs and saying, yeah, too bad this guy’s not dancing around like Justin Bieber. They’re just glad you’re bringing what you do have. And I think that’s an important thing for people who make stuff to know. People are just glad… and unfortunately, this isn’t… in other parts of our life, in our house, sometimes people need stuff from us that we don’t have to give, and they’ve got no other place to get it. But when it comes to what we make and our work, you know, if my electrician doesn’t do a good job, I’m not mad at him. I just get another electrician.

**RK:** Or you certainly wouldn’t ask him to do your plumbing.

**JR:** Yeah. That’s right. Yeah. And this might be an answer to your question about how I work through um when I see people who are good at what I do. I am, I have come to understand that all the world needs from me is what I actually can do. What I’m good at. Nobody’s disappointed that I can’t dunk a basketball.

**RK:** (laughs)

**JR:** I’m a little disappointed, but I’m sure nobody else is.

**RK:** And if I found out that you could, and we’d been talking this whole time and you’d not shown me, I’d be angry.

**JR:** (laughs)

**RK:** No, that makes a lot of sense, and I have wondered if the fact that we have so much access to people doing stuff through social media and the internet is part of what really exacerbates this. You know, I can see a person doing something that maybe isn’t even impressive as much as it’s monetized, and you think “Why didn’t I think of that?” And your’e mad. And then you start going down the path of maybe… cause for me, it’s more about I wanna be a responsible provider.

We didn’t get into all this and we don’t have to, but I went through a season of depression and anxiety for about four years, and a part of that I’d come back to was, I’m failing. I’m failing. I’m not providing. I’m not doing… because, I wasn’t in a great career place when it started, and then because I was depressed I wasn’t being a great husband and father. And so there’s just a lot of, when I go back to a cynical kind of money place, it’s never like I wanna get rich. It’s am I taking care of these people in a way that they kind of… I think about one of my sons after I’m gone saying, “Yeah, my dad didn’t provide very well.” Or you know, weird stuff like that. So for me, it’s less about, I wanna be good at that so I can show off. Because honestly, I’m an introvert, and I’d just rather write songs and have someone else sing them, and you know.

I had a brush with a reality television thing years ago. I won’t get into it, but it was a thing where someone sought me out randomly because of a skillset I had to be on TV, and I fought it so hard, cause I thought, whewwwww…. I have a stutter, which is pretty low level, but I have a stutter, and the camera adds ten pounds. All that stuff, I don’t want to be any part of this. And all that to say like, I just think we look around and see the things people do that we can’t, and we think, well if I could’ve done that, I could probably provide better, or I’d have a little better of a nest egg. You hear about these friends that have a side hustle that’s incredibly lucrative? And you’re like mad that they’re known for writing this cool thing, but they also run a business that’s just killing it, and you’re like what? Why don’t I—?And so to me, it’s less about jealousy about I wanna do that. It’s more that why didn’t I… why am I not the person that’s prone to have this multiple kind of personality where I’m a business guy, and I’m artsy, and I also know how to do networking, you know? And I’m handsome, whatever. I think that’s my struggle more, is looking around and see those things thinking, what does this say about my providing versus theirs?

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah, I know.

**RK:** And there I go being honest again.

**JR:** (laughs) No, I’ve definitely been through all this. I was never really hoping to become rich and famous from writing, but I was hoping to make sure my family didn’t starve and the bank didn’t come take my house away.

**RK:** Right. Right.

**JR:** There have been plenty of times where it wasn’t at all apparent that I was going to be able to pay my mortgage.

**RK:** And I think because our jobs do have people that are rich and famous… it’s not that that part necessarily tempts me. It’s that I get nervous that people think — and this is how layered my insecurities are, probably — but I get nervous people think that’s all I’m trying for when I do something that’s monetized. I’m like no no, you don’t understand. This is… it’s a different world for writers, both print and music. We’re not — it’s the 1% of the 1% that’s actually doing pretty well with this. The rest of us are just living month to month and whatever. And I get nervous that it looks like I’m chasing something, and I’m like no, no, I’m just chasing the mortgage.

**JR:** I promise that I’m not failing to get rich and famous! (Laughs)

**RK:** Right! Exactly.

**JR:** You can’t fire me! I quit!

**RK:** That’s right.

**JR:** Well, there were about 15 other things I wanted to talk about, but we’ve had too much fun talking about what we did talk about, and now our time is almost up. But I gotta ask you one more question, and that is who are the writers that make you want to write?

**RK:** Yeah, um… and I want you to answer when we’re done too. You probably answer every episode. But I will say I have two kinds of writers that inspire me, and they are musical writers and print writers, because I love words. And so on the print side, there’s some reputable stuff and there’s some like trash stuff, like some guilty pleasure stuff. Like, on the reputable side, I love Leif Enger, and I love uh… I was really impacted as a kid by stuff like Mark Twain, and I go back. Or like A.A. Milne.

**JR:** Really.

**RK:** I still read Winnie-the-Pooh a lot. I just like it, you know? And it’s really funny, and it’s kind of too smart for what it’s doing, which I think is really fun. But I legit read A.A. Milne, like, we as a family will have read-alouds, and the kids still like it even though they’re older.

And then kind of on the less impressive side, like… my dad was a voracious reader, but he read mostly detective novels and spy novels, so I got way into stuff like… there’s an author named Robert B. Parker who died a couple years ago, who wrote these Spenser novels, and they’re kind of the… if Mickey Spillane is the godfather, this would be the next generation of that. It’s have dialogue, very funny. These two kind of guys that are kind of bros that are just working through things. It’s so well-written that when I go back and re-read them… I’ve read all of them like a dozen times, you know, and the dialogue makes me laugh out loud, and you know, that.

But then on the music side, right now I’m mostly inspired by stuff like, um… a lot of pop writers that are saying honest things? It just impresses me. These people who aren’t Jesus followers, they’re not… they’re in their twenties, a lot of them, and they’re saying these super honest things. There’s a writer named Julia Michaels who I love a lot, who has a filthy mouth but says a lot of super honest things. There’s a kid named Alec Benjamin who’s just telling stories and kind of bringing back stories. He’s kind of bringing back the songwriter. There’s this guy Jon Bellion who’s a real kind of innovator. So I’m doing a lot of listening to young people and to pop, because — and of course I’m going to tell you I’m deeply influenced by Tom Petty and James Taylor and Billy Joel, you know. Classics. And in my field, I’m going to be super impressed with Andy Gullahorn and Andrew Peterson and that crowd. So it’s, it’s like a wide variety of stuff. But all those people make me want ot be better.

**JR:** Yeah. Yeah, right.

**RK:** And I do love how reading print changes the way I write music. I think that’s a cool thing.

**JR:** Well, I have to say going to a concert — like a sort of singer-songwriter concert — I think that, more than any other book writer I read, makes me want to go home and immediately write something.

**RK:** Right

**JR:** There’s something about the cross-pollination of different arts that’s even more effective in many cases, making me want to go —

**RK:** Have you ever — can you remember a time when you literally did that? Did you come off of a concert ever and then have —

**JR:** Yeah! I mean, it’s often just a blog post. I’m not saying I’d go home and write a novel.

**RK:** Sure, I know.

**JR:** But event that uh, the thing that every other Tuesday night concert thing that The Rabbit Room was doing.

**RK:** Right.

**JR:** Now I can’t remember what it was called — Local Show.

**RK:** Yes.

**JR:** The Local Show always makes me want ot go home and write something.

**RK:** Well, those are great because those are like the greatest hits of that artist, right? They get two songs, and they’re going to play their very best thing and you’ll get super inspired.

**JR:** Right.

**RK:** Well, that’s cool.

**RJ:** Um, and you were wanting to know from me… the answer I always give to this is Charles Portis, the guy who wrote True Grit.

**RK:** Oh.

**JR:** And Dog of the South. That’s… he really makes me want to go sit down and write, because the thing he does is the kind of thing I want to do, just a little — he’s better at it, but it’s not Faulkner, you know. It’s very much in the wheelhouse of the kind of thing that I would like to do. So. Alright man —

**RK:** And one thing I love about that — sorry, just real quick — is that for what you get to do? There didn’t used to be a way for someone to put out like two paragraphs of that.

**JR:** Yeah.

**RK:** And I love that in our world now, you can put out two paragraphs of that.

**JR:** Yeah, that’s right. That’s a great point.

**RK:** Like, we couldn’t do that before. You weren’t going to bump in— you wouldn’t have a book of short writings or something. But now you, a guy like you or even a guy like me, we can do something and say, here’s— I had a friend write a post the other day about a hurricane coming through Texas, and he was relating to how Hurricane Alisha, when he was a kid, came through and scared him really bad, and he just wrote this thing. And he’s a musician friend of mine, but it was two paragraphs on Instagram of all places, and I just wrote — and this is like Garrison Kellior and William Faulkner like, got together and wrote a play about a storm they — it’s really cool what you just did. And I just love that that’s available now, these little bites of genius. And you wouldn’t have had that any time until now.

**JR:** Yeah. Well, Ross King, I have so much enjoyed talking to you, and I’m so grateful you’re putting things out in the world that nobody else can do. Just you can do them.

(THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**RK:** Thank you.

**JR:** And so, thank you and uh, I hope we can talk again soon.

**RK:** Yeah, thank you for having me. I really appreciate it.

**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](http://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](http://TheHabit.co).

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(THEME MUSIC OUT)