**DREW MILLER:** This podcast is brought to you by Lifeway and the Christian Standard Bible

**JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST:** Hey everybody, Jonathan Rogers here. Before we get started, I wanted to mention my new six week online creative writing course called Writing with Caspian. Together, we’ll read through Prince Caspian and figure out how C.S. Lewis works his particular kind of magic, then apply his principles and techniques to our own writing. It starts on February 2nd. You can find out more at thehabit.co/caspian

(ACOUSTIC GUITAR THEME MUSIC FADES UP)

**RUTH NAOMI FLOYD:** How can I not search for beauty in the midst of ugliness, despair, and violence? That is the cross! That’s the centrality of the cross, that beauty and violence collided, and beauty won.

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

(THEME MUSIC CONTINUES)

**JR:** The first time I heard Ruth Naomi Floyd speak and sing was at Hutchmoot, The Rabbit Room’s annual conference. It was a talk called Music for the Broken, and if you search for it at [rabbitroom.com](http://rabbitroom.com) you can hear it in its entirety. I recommend that you do.

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

**JR:** Anyway, the way she talked about brokenness and beauty in the African-American spiritual tradition, and the way she sang — oh, the way she sang — it was obvious that there was a voice we all needed to hear. If you don’t already know Ruth Naomi Floyd’s work, you’re in for a treat. If you do, well, I know you’re looking forward to this conversation all the more.

Ruth Naomi Floyd, thank you so much for being on The Habit Podcast!

**RNF:** Hello, Jonathan Rogers! It’s great to be here!

**JR:** I am really glad this worked out. You know, the first time I heard you speak was at Hutchmoot in 2019. You and Mark Meynell gave a lovely talk, and I remember something you were talking about — and you’re gonna have to help me out here because it’s been a while —

**RNF:** Sure.

**JR:** But you have an ancestor who was an enslaved African in the United States. Where was she by the way?

**RNF:** Thomasville, Georgia.

**JR:** Really!

**RNF:** Yeah.

**JR:** Okay. She had an unusually hard life. But you talk about that she always brought a little flower or a leaf… she was always looking for beauty that she brought in. And I think maybe you had a great grandmother who knew her and passed this on to you. I may be getting this completely wrong, so forgive me if I am.

**RNF:** No, not at all! I’m blessed that my father’s grandmother, my great grandmother, lived to be 109 years old.

**JR:** (laughs) Oh wow!

**RNF:** She was the youngest of my great great grandmother, who was an enslaved African in America. At 6 feet, 2 inches tall, she was taller than any other human around.

**JR:** Wow.

**RNF:** But unfortunately, to break her in every way as an example to the other slaves and communities, they made her become the mule that pulled the plow. So from sunup to sundown, this magnificent, handsome woman… (pause) pulled the plow. And it didn’t make sense because it wasn’t productive. The mule could have done it much faster and more efficiently. By the time she was 28 years old, her spine was in the shape of an S, and she died.

But my great grandmother doesn’t remember much. One of the things she remembers from her siblings telling her was that on the way, her mother — the woman, the human being, the life made in the image of God — walked from that place of dehumanization, the plow, to her cabin, and on the way searched for beauty. Whether it’s a pinecone, a blade of grass, a twig, a flower, whatever it was, she picked it up and put it on a saucer on the butcher’s block — which served as the table — and she would say, “Beauty is everywhere. You just have to look for it.”

I believe in my heart if her life would have been different, she would have been an artist. And I believe she *was* an artist, and she created as much as she was able to under the awful, awful, genocidal system of American slavery. I love that that’s instilled in me. My great grandmother, her daughter, would say, “Why is this young child tied to my apron strings?” I would not leave her alone! I begged to go over to her house. She taught me how to dress a table, how to cook, how to churn butter, how to churn ice cream, how to roll collard greens. But I just had the sense that there was a lot of history. I loved her. She was my favorite human being in the world.

**JR:** Your great grandmother?

**RNF:** Yeah. So finally she just said, okay, I have a twin, and she allowed me to stay with her — which meant get to work!

**JR:** (laughs)

**RNF:** But I’m grateful for her. I dress my table in honor of her. I create meals with no preservatives — not all the time but most of the time — in honor of her. But it was her mother who created within me of my great grandmother finally telling me the story after decades — not decades, but years that felt like decades. I think I was about 13 when I finally begged her again and she said she would tell me about her mother. That’s the memory she remembered. And that’s why I chase after beauty.

I love seeing beauty. Beauty is everywhere. You just have to look for it. And it’s found most profoundly in the ordinary things that we walk by every day.

She also — one thing — had a beautiful by all accounts low contralto voice, and she would sing all the time. And the only words they remembered that she would sing was “One day my children’s children,” but she didn’t use the Queen’s English. She’d say, “One day, my chillin’s chillin.” C-H-I-L-L-E-N, which is, you know, a vernacular of language in Blackness. One day my chillen’s, chillen,” one day my children’s children. So I’ve written a song.

They said she never finished that line. I asked my great grandmother, why didn’t she finish the line? And one day my great grandmother looked at me and said… “How could she?”

**JR:** (pause) That’s such a… this looking for beauty. That’s hope. Or something a whole lot like it as she was in that life… still recognizing…

**RNF:** I don’t think I could have looked for beauty. Being made a mule? We had a coroner go back — given her diet, given her size, given where she was, the climate, what they thought she probably ate, the temperature in Thomasville, Georgia… the weight of the straps. Imagine putting on those straps every morning, taking them off, and pulling… in some ways, I wish I didn’t know the report, but it was an excruciating death. What happens is when a human body is trying to pull that plow that was used at that time, your organs start to shift. But it’s very slowly. It’s an excruciating, horrific death.

I asked her daughter, my grandmother, if she remembered anything, and she said all she remembered was that her mother, grandmother, had… remembers as a child being taken out of the cabin to another cabin. She lived in that cabin for a long time. But every now and then, she could hear her mom crying and screaming. It was a terrible, slow death.

But this is the same woman whose organs were shifting — she felt that, she knew that. You know your body — from that walk, would still search for beauty. How can I not search for beauty in the midst of ugliness, despair, and violence? And more importantly, how can we not? That is the cross! That’s the centrality of the cross. That beauty and violence collided, and beauty won.

**JR:** Beauty won, you said?

**RNF:** Yeah. Yeah…

**JR:** So, Ruth, you’re an activist, right? You actively seek to make the world a better place.

**RNF:** Yes.

**JR:** You’ve been involved in HMA AIDS activism throughout the years, and other kinds of activism. So I want to think about… on the one hand, looking for beauty is a… that’s a — you may correct my terminology here, but that’s passive. That’s receptive. That’s paying attention. Which is a very different posture than activism.

**RNF:** Sure! The tension — living, struggling, failing, enduring, surviving — all of that in the midst of the tension is necessary. It’s what we call the already but not yet. It’s that dance, that — I just read! — that Mark talks about. That distance of darkness into light. And so many writers at The Rabbit Room talk about that tension, you know, between really… I think what Helena said, wrote about. And I hope I’m right. Ohhhhh, my memory’s gone. It’s… I’ll charge it to my age. I love that I can say that now.

**JR:** (laughs)

**RNF:** I’m old! I’m old! I can’t remember! Um, but I think was Helena. Helena said between Advent and Lent, that tension. So yeah. I view myself as an emancipatory artist. I am an emancipatory artist. So, what does that mean? Well, it means a lot of things, but ultimately it means a seeker of truth and beauty. So searching for that truth, and searching for that beauty, and being willing to stand up for that truth, and be wiling to seek after beauty and share it at all costs. So, that’s activism. What does it mean to love your neighbor? What does it mean to love others as yourself? I can translate that and communicate that in artistic language, words, photography, and music. But that also means, what does that mean when I’m not creating, when I’m not actively creating something. In the process of making, what does that look like? What does that seem like? And it means being willing to do both.

For me, I am called to do that. I can’t run from it. I can’t hide from it. I’ve never wanted to. But it’s absolutely what I’m called to. We can paint the answers with our paintbrush. We can sing the answer with the notes. We can compose, we can dance the answers, we can sculpt the answers. But sometimes it means how can you do that outside of artistic language? That’s what activism is.

I love what — I was on a panel, and one of the guys knew this, and he was seeing activism and protest as, you know, rage and destruction.

**JR:** Yeah.

**RNF:** And so, I tried so many different ways to get him to understand. Finally, I was like, “What denomination are you from?” And he was like, “Protestant.” And I was like, “Okay… what denomination again?” And he was like, “Protestant.”

**JR:** (laughs)

**RNF:** And I was like… then I said. “Let me get this straight…” And I repeated his definition of protest, and I was like, “So what denomination again?” And he was like, “Ahhhhhhhhh.”

**JR:** (laughs)

**RNF:** I’m like, come on! You know, it goes to where… some forms of protest are sanitized. Some forms of protest are romanticized. And some types of protest are vilified. We really need to examine what that word means and reclaim it as Christians in a powerful way. We have a *stunning*, courageous, beautiful legacy of protest! Luther! The Door!

**JR:** (laughs) Right!

**RNF:** You know! So if we need to reclaim it, yes, but we need to be able to use that lens through different circumstances and historical events and tell the truth about that.

**JR:** Yeah… protest at its heart and at its best is recognizing the difference between the status quo and reality.

**RNF:** Yes.

**JR:** And saying there is something truer than what you see right around you, and there are people who would prefer to keep things the way they are rather than pursue what is true and real. And again, your ancestor that you spoke of… here is a woman who looked around and said “here is the status quo,” but that beauty she collected is a reminder of what’s truer.

**RNF:** Yeah… the matriarch of our family is in her late 90s, and uh…

**JR:** You have some long-lived relatives!

**RNF:** Yeah, sadly I think I have my mother’s genes. But um… (laughs) but she’s going to send that along to me, that same butcher block, to me as a gift — which I’m sure will be controversial. Hopefully none of my family members will be listening to this podcast! But she said you are the one who really understands her the most and has been the most curious and wanting to know her, so you get the butcher’s block. I will weep with joy and sadness because it means our matriarch is gone, but it also means I have something tangible. I have some other things, but I’ll have this butcher block where she places beauty every day, but it will be a convicting and inspiring reminder that will continue to push me to seek for beauty.

And what’s the cost… like, really? This isn’t just an issue. To take justice and try to extract that from beauty, to just have beauty as pretty things, to not tell the truth, to not have truth and beauty aligned? So what’s the risk? What’s the big deal about beauty? (pause) The cost of eternity. The Gospel.

**JR:** Can you say one more sentence about that?

**RNF:** I go back to the centrality of the cross, you know? I look at the steps leading up to the cross. The Garden of Gethsemane is such a powerful place. I grew up in the Rambo era, right? So for me as a little kid at Holy Thursday, I did not like Holy Thursday. To me, I just felt like, “Jesus this is your Rambo moment!” Defy the empire and sit on the throne! I did not like the image of Jesus asking and praying and then, to me, the worst thing was… he’s asking if he has to drink the bitter cup! Like, isn’t that why you came? I just didn’t understand it as an 8, 9 year old, and Holy Thursday was confusing.

So I detached that, and until the first time of brokenness in my life — I didn’t know to call it that, but I knew what it felt like — then I understood the Garden of Gethsemane. And I understood that by him asking the question he knew the answer to — he was the answer. It was not only that he knew the answer, he *was* the answer. But he still asked it. And so, in our despair moments, in our dark moments, he gave us the right to ask the question, but he also helps us to say, “You have to get up. Drink of that bitter cup and follow me to the cross.” Through Good Friday. Through Saturday, the silence of the darkness until joy.

So that dance between unspeakable joy and total despair, that dichotomy. Which Blackness in America never shies away from that. In our food, in our dance, in our music, in our clothes, in our fashion, in our language, in everything… it’s that dance between total despair and unspeakable joy. But how could it not given our history in this country.

So yeah, what’s that cost of not searching for beauty, not chasing beauty, not embracing beauty, not trying to capture it in a beautiful way, is eternity. Because if you turn away from the most Beautiful One who became battered and slain and slaughtered for us, so that in turn we can become beautiful, this is what it costs. Eternity.

**JR:** Wow. You described yourself as an “emancipatory artist” and you said that means a lot of different things. What are some other things you mean by that phrase “emancipatory artist”? Why do you use that adjective “emancipatory”?

**RNF:** Because hopefully if I am seeking and chasing after truth and beauty, truth and beauty emancipates us. It frees us. So freedom is absolutely tied to truth and beauty. That freedom to create, that freedom to believe in who we are, to believe we are imago Dei. To believe from identity to how we live our life to what it means to be human, what it means to love, what it means to relinquish, what it means to suffer, what it means to birth something, what it means to bury things, what it means to live, breathe, and ultimately for all of us… unless we hear that trumpet in the sky — which I’m pretty sure I’ll be jazzing at Gabriel.

**JR:** (laughs)

**RNF:** You know, what it means to die, the ultimate relinquishment. So yeah, that’s why I used that word. Truth and beauty and also freedom. And it’s a hard title to have. If I’ve run away from anything, I’ve run away from that. Not what it means and the nuances and the layers. I’ve been present, and I’ve pushed forward with that, that title. And it took a good friend to really call me on the carpet about that, if you will.

**JR:** Huh.

**RNF:** So now I’ve embraced it.

**JR:** What does a non-emancipatory artist look like? Or art that is not emancipatory?

**RNF:** That’s a *great* question. Um… (pause) I wanna be really careful here.

**JR:** Okay.

**RNF:** Um… (pause) can I give an analogy?

**JR:** Sure.

**RNF:** Cause I know… I have artists who are not emancipatory, and yet their work is still valuable, and it’s still beautiful, and it’s still strong. So I wanna be careful. I would say it like this. I think the tension lies in… for me, I was on a panel — I’ll answer your question with a short story. I was on a panel with artists, and we were talking, and what became clear at the end was that those artists who only create — they have no other vocation, they do nothing else as a sense of resource or a sense of, you know, money needed to create, they don’t have a side gig, they don’t have anything else — they’re able to, whether through having a patron or because of whatever — they’re able to create full time. And that’s amazing.

But what became clear to me pretty quickly was that that was elitism, that was the top, that was what everyone wanted to be. So at the end I didn’t say anything, and the older I get, I’m learning to delay response and listen more deeply. And at the end they said, “Well, what do you think?” And I said… there’s value in that. That’s beautiful. That’s extraordinary. But there’s also value in being a teaching artist. And being a teacher who may not create, but also teaches it, or only teaches it, but doesn’t have their own kind of art making process. And I said, I don’t think there needs to be a right or wrong. I think we’re called to different things.

So yes, I love the artists that are able to do that full time. God bless them, that’s beautiful. I love teachers who are able to teach art and music but don’t create, or act and participate in that. For me, I sit squarely in between both. I would not be the artist I am without teaching it, and I would not be the teacher I am without creating it and being creative in it. And so, I’m really grateful I’m an emancipatory artist. But I think in that story lies the tensions and lies the difference that I think at the end of the day comes down to who God calls you to be and who you most feel comfortable in creating.

I would say what it looks like to — really, I’m feeling convicted, I need to answer your question — it’s beauty and it’s creativity that does not go outside of the studio or outside of the composer’s notes or outside of the dance studio in a different way. That does not mean that the work can’t be emancipatory. It just means that the creator of the work, the ones that stay in that creative space and don’t go outside…

**JR:** Sounds like you’re talking about a closed system…

**RNF:** … about issues of justice and truth — and that’s okay. But I want to be really clear. I think my hesitation, where I want to be really clear, is it doesn’t mean the creation or the creative work isn’t emancipatory. They are.

**JR:** Mmhm. Yeah. One thing that came to — even as I asked the question, I felt like that’s a really hard question. I really put you on the spot. Forgive me.

**RNF:** No, that’s okay!

**JR:** But as I started answering the question for myself, one thing I thought about was there’s a kind of art that only gives people what they already think they want, and that’s not gonna set anybody free. That’s doesn’t emancipate anybody. If I already know what I want…

And then there’s a kind of art that says, you didn’t know you wanted this, but here’s what you need.

**RNF:** Yeah. Yeah, there’s an art that provokes, that pushes. James Baldwin goes pretty strong. He says, you know the role — I’m paraphrasing — the role of the artist is to vomit up all the anguish.

**JR:** Hmm.

**RNF:** And usually that’s the emancipatory. That’s what you’re touching on. To tell the truth. Not that it has to all be dark, but… yeah. Yeah. But I would say even in the midst of that, I think that… (pause) even if it’s art, we all go to music we like, something that doesn’t necessarily push us? But I think even in those nuances, at the end of the day it’s not… we don’t judge art. Art judges us. And I think even if it’s subconsciously buried deep down inside, we know which art we stay away from, and we know why.

**JR:** (chuckles) Yeah!

**RNF:** And so continuing to view the same art that makes us comfortable is rejecting that, like you said, of wanting to be pushed or inspired to go further.

**JR:** So you were talking a minute ago about this anguish and despair on the one hand and joy on the other. It sounded like you were talking about the blues. (Laughs)

**RNF:** Yeah.

**JR:** Which — and now I’m going back to your Hutchmoot talk in 2019 — you pointed out that all of American music grows out of, or is in some way descended from, the African-American spiritual. And I’d love to hear you say more about that. Specifically, one image that really stuck with me — we’re now ell over a year away form that conversation, but I’ve thought about it more than once since then — but it’s what if those enslaved Africans in America could know what their music has given rise too.

**RNF:** Jonathan!

**JR:** Rock n roll music, and jazz, and… and everything. Country music, for that matter.

**RNF:** We just lost Charlie Pryde. Devastated. I just did a lecture on him.

**JR:** Oh really?

**RNF:** Yeah… (claps) Jonathan! I escaped by not — probably you can hear it — not crying. Now you’re really gonna make me fail!

**JR:** (laughs)

**RNF:** (deep breath) I can’t say that statement without tearing up. Um… (pause) You know, besides the lynchings, besides the stripes on the back, from the whip. Besides the scraps that were fed to them, besides the hard labor, besides their bodies bearing that anguish, that violence, that trauma, that assault on God. That assault on the first and greatest artist who created out of nothing… (pause) besides all that… (pause) they would not stop singing. And if you know African culture, you understand why. But they would not stop singing.

You know… archives told us most of the masters thought, oh, they’re singing, they’re happy. Aren’t I good master? I’ve done well. I mean, I’m rough on ‘em, but they understand. They’re happy. They’re singing. And Frederick Douglass has this famous quote, “Slaves sing most when they’re most unhappy.” So these dirges, these melodies, these harmonies, these… (pause) creative layering of notes and assembly of notes, becomes the root of almost all American music. From the most despised human being on American soil. It’s extraordinary, and it’s terrible. I wish they could hear how their melodies turned into blues, jazz, rock n roll and country. Part of folk music, not all. Because we know as the Scots came they brought their stunning… ancient melodies with the Irish, the Italian. So folk music. But that’ll be the root of almost all, if not all, American music.

And not so much just American. You can’t turn on the radio without hearing their music embedded in the genres. But around the world… I’ve been blessed that my music has taken me around the world. So even in the midst of not being viewed and seen and valued as equal in justice issues, or even because having to ask that question, “Was that done because I’m an African-American?” In the midst of that, swirling around in the airports, swirling around everywhere we go, is the essence of their music, of their creation, around the world.

So yes, it’s extraordinary that, as America — I guess maybe we’re entering, or mid-stage, or maybe exiting our toddler years in comparison to the other countries or nations — that birthed on the soil, in darkness, one of the most terrible times in American history — that God again brought beauty out of that! And that it touches worldwide. These genres aren’t just only in American soul. It’s around the world. You look and see what is Asian rap sounding like?

**JR:** (laughs)

**RNF:** Blues in Prague! Country music in Russia! It’s extraordinary! And it’s a testament to America, but it’s absolutely, positively, without a shadow of a doubt, homage to those that endured, to those that were not free. I wish they were here to hear their music.

**JR:** I love that image of walking around the airport and hearing these voices. That’s so great.

**RNF:** Yes, yes.

**JR:** Okay, one of the big questions I wanted to ask — which we’re not gonna have much time to explore, but maybe you’ll have a couple of things to say about it — since you were like the professor of jazz at… I’m sorry, how do you pronounce it? Car…

**RNF:** Oh, Cairn! Yes!

**JR:** Yes, Cairn. So you’re a jazz… professor, jazz whiz. Talk to me about the idea of jazz as an improvisational art. Can you make connections with the creative process for non-jazz art, right? Because I think of writing — this is a podcast about writing, I know we’ve been talking about music the whole time. But you think of writing — or I tend to — as being the opposite of improvisation. You sit in a room by yourself, you take your time, you make sure it’s real… but I’ve also learned that improvisation… writers have a lot to learn from improvisors. So can you talk about that a little bit?

**RNF:** Sure.

**JR:** I say writers, but really anybody who makes art of any kind.

**RNF:** Right. Sure… you know, what is jazz? We could go down the road of history. To sum it up, jazz was birthed in protest. It’s the music of protest, so we talked about that. It’s extraordinary just by that alone, right? But really, what jazz is is a conversation. It’s a democratic music — (singing) not the partyyyyy — but it’s a democratic music in the way that everyone has a voice in it. So there’s a theme, and everyone plays the theme or helps bring that theme to the forefront or accompanies it. And everyone at every moment in time has a chance to expound upon that theme — these are my thoughts, and here are my thoughts — so it’s a conversation. It’s a language. It’s a communication. And then we all come back to the theme and it ends. So it’s really powerful, and it’s a way to create. You can be part of a community, part of a team, part of an ensemble, but you have a chance to really also then talk about what you feel and your feelings on it. And sometimes, like be-boppin, you don’t have to connect to what the person said behind. The music is there so the foundation is there. But it’s really about that sense of, in a sense, to create on your own and to create in the moment. You don’t sit down and write out your solo. You *feel* it. So what you have to say changes each night. Sure, the notes are there because you have to stay within the chord structure and everything else, but you’re able to create and say the same things over and over again.

I always think of Billie Holliday. How do you sing “Strange Fruit” each night? You know? And then, you know, just the subject of that, and how that changed the tune. It helped emancipate people from what they thought was going on with lynching and stuff. But what would you do if you had to sing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” every night? You would change it. You would change the meter. You would change the key. You would change the approach. You would change the dynamics. You would change how you sang it, how you would articulate it, your volume, all those things. So that’s what really jazz is. But in the sense of improvisation, we as Christians should own jazz.

You know, I had the honor of being director of jazz studies at Cairn University, and it was really powerful for me, because it meant Christians were able to create in an improvisational way. But then also there was this sense there was a place to improvise, to create on the spot, in the midst of this theological community and this place in study. And that’s why I said yes. That’s why I became a professor there 15 years ago, and that’s why I was willing to take the helm, because we need that improvisation. In love, in truth, in beauty, and certainly in justice.

But we look at the Bible — in the beginning, God created, improvised with the greatest jazz solo. I love Coltrane. I love Miles Davis. I love Sarah Vaughan. I love the new jazz musicians who are here doing powerful work. But the greatest jazz solo ever, performed, but more uttered, demonstrated, was the cross. Because Jonathan, it should have been you and I there. And God said, no. I’ll go down and die.

And so… you know, I get in trouble with theologians. “But it was prophesied in the Old Testament that it would happen!” And I was like, look. He was there and it should have been us. So throughout all of Scripture when you think through it, there is so much improvisation, that Christians should be the ones that are embracing it. And I’m not saying that every Christian has to embrace jazz, but that feeling of improvisation should be there.

I’m thinking of that quote from, ah… and I’m sorry. I’m going on. You can tell I’m passionate about this. But I remember as a young person, a young artist, barely out of my teens hearing the older artists… they were struggling with “can I be a Christian and an artist?” I thought that was so bizarre! I would go to all these talks and say why are we even bringing up this dichotomy, this tension? Like, God first introduces himself as an artist. Not as Savior, not as Lord, not as Father — as an artist! So why is there this tension?

Now that I’m older, I understand why. But I would say Francis Schaeffer said it best: “The Christian is the one whose imagination should fly beyond the stars.” And so I hope you love jazz. I hope the listeners will run towards it. But if not, certainly run towards improvisation in terms of imagination.

**JR:** Improvisation requires some faith. It requires me not having this all figured out before I utter a syllable.

**RNF:** Absolutely. And that’s what jazz is, especially when you improvise a solo. You’re jumping off a mountain without a parachute. Now, you have tools, you’ve studied, you know music theory, you know jazz theory, you know how it works. But still, it’s a risk, because it’s not on the printed page. It’s a risk, and there’s joy in that. That’s why I love that quote, because if we’re gonna fly beyond the stars, like you said, we have to have faith that we can and that we can flap our wings and, by God’s grace, we’ll get there.

**JR:** Hey, tell me — real quick, cause we’re running out of time — but this project you’ve been on, Frederick Douglass Jazz Works, can you tell me about that a little bit?

**RNF:** Sure, um… Frederick Douglass. I’ve studied, I sing African-American spirituals, I sing gospel, I sing jazz, and I really wanted to go to the root. And in studying the race issue in America — I knew it in the sense of the historical timeline — but I thought, I need to go to the root. I love James Baldwin, and I love all those great, amazing — Langston Hughes, and all those, those cats if you will. But I thought I need to go to the root. And certainly you could think of the root as Harriet Tubman, but she didn’t have a lot of writings. And I started with Frederick Douglass, just trying to find a different layer — the different layers and nuances of this race issue in America.

Well, Frederick Douglass is amazing, and so his words are prophetic. It’s as if he’s still living here today, and no one can run away from the touch of his words. After studying him for 8 years — and it was just independent study and research, and I do mean research. Like, research around the world, going places, talking with scholars. All that, I thought, oh, I’m gonna tidy up. So long story very short, music started coming to some of his words. Like, what’s this?

**JR:** Wow.

**RNF:** And ahhhh… put 3 songs together, and I thought that was it. Well, it kept coming. So we have the Frederick Douglass Jazz Works where everything I sing is the words of Frederick Douglass. And it’s not like a musical, like — nothing wrong with musicals — but the life and times of Frederick Douglass. This is actually, actual words he is speaking, that he speaks. And so it’s powerful. It’s powerful because it’s as if he was still here. It’s extraordinary. His prophetic voice… just an amazing man. An amazing man that speaks to, I would say, every single person in America. He has something to say that would convict you and encourage you. Extraordinary.

**JR:** Well, I’m glad you’re giving us another reason to revisit his work.

**RNF:** Yeah, it’s in process.

**JR:** So are you recording… are you currently recording it? You’ve been performing it, well, I guess pre-COVID.

**RNF:** Yes.

**JR:** But there’s going to be a recording available to people in the future, correct?

**RNF:** Yes, COVID interrupted! We had our world premiere at the prestigious Barnes Foundation, then had a West Coast premiere at Biola University, then took it abroad to the UK a little bit. Then we recorded the first round of recording, and that was amazing! And then COVID hit. So we’re hoping when it’s safe to go back in to do the second round, we’ll be doing violin, banjo, additional voices, fife, and a couple other things. Woodshed— um, is that what it is? The laundry? What’s it called?

**JR:** Oh yeah, the washboard!

**RNF:** Washboard! Not woodshed, sorry. Washboard. Yeah. So we’ll do that, then we’ll mix and master. I’m hoping, I’m hoping… I’m hoping spring or summer probably, realistically, now knowing the numbers, what’s going on, vaccines and all. Hopefully… hopefully! By the fall. I feel like I’ve been… pregnant for 19 months. (Laughs) I’m ready to give birth to this! Cause you know, it’s been an 8 to 10 year journey of just research.

**JR:** I’m sorry, you’re talking about fall of ’21 for release, or for just…?

**RNF:** Yes, release.

**JR:** Okay, releasing. Well I hope. Here’s hoping.

**RNF:** Oh, please pray! (Laughs)

**JR:** (laughs) All right.

**RNF:** Can I just say one quote that I love from Frederick Douglass?

**JR:** Oh, please do!

**RNF:** And I encourage everyone please, please, please… yes, his story is extraordinary. But you really get to know Frederick Douglass and you really get to know America in this issue of race through his writing. So he has three biographies, and he has so many… but it’s really his speeches. Here’s one that I love.

1862, before the Emancipation Proclamation, this is what he says: “There is a prophet within us forever whispering that behind the seen lies the immeasurable unseen.”

**JR:** Mmm.

**RNF:** I think that’s what we’ve been talking about in some ways through this whole conversation.

**JR:** Yeah. Well Ruth, my last question I always ask is, “Who are the writers who make you want to write?” For you, we can adjust this. Who are the artists who make you want to make art?

**RNF:** (sigh) Well, I grew up in a household where we were only allowed to listen to European classical music instrumentally, and then also opera and gospel.

**JR:** Oh wow.

**RNF:** And uh… so, I will give an example from each. You know, I grew up, and my father’s favorite singer was Leontyne Price, and I used to listen to her all the time, as well as other opera singers. You know, Beethoven, we’re celebrating 250 years of him, but I also love Rachmaninoff. He’s one of my favorites. Dvorak. Writers… in the sense of jazz I named some. Certainly Mary Lou Williams.

And then finally, as for writers, you know it’s gonna sound so corny but I looooove Shakespeare!

**JR:** Yeah!

**RNF:** I was able to go to the first theatre in the UK where he was first performed in his hometown. Very profound. And I guess, um, obviously Frederick Douglass. But if there’s a a writer that really continues to have us glance back at the past and push us forward, it’s Jimmy Baldwin. James Baldwin.

**JR:** Ahh. Yeah.

**RNF:** He is an artist who refused to not live in the tensions. He took them straight on. So I think Christians can learn from him in a really profound way.

**JR:** Yeah. Ruth Naomi Floyd, this has been so much fun. Thank you for making time for me, and I just love talking to you.

**RNF:** Well, I’m a fan! I became a fan of yours a while ago, but now I’m a real fan.

**JR:** (laughs)

**RNF:** So I’m glad to meet someone I really admire and love. Thank you for what you do. You feed us — I’m really serious about that.

(THEME MSUIC FADES UP)

**RNF:** It may sound like a compliment, but in reality it’s the truth. So thank you for feeding us.

**JR:** Well, thank you Ruth.

**DM:** This podcast is brought to you by The Rabbit Room, where art nourishes community and community nourishes art, and all our podcasts are made possible by the generous support of our members. To learn more about us, visit [rabbitroom.com](http://rabbitroom.com), and to become a member, [rabbitroom.com/donate](http://rabbitroom.com/donate).

Special thanks as well to Taylor Leonhardt for letting us use her song “Diamonds” as the theme music for Season 3 of The Habit Podcast. You can learn more about Taylor and follow her work at [taylorleonhardt.com](http://taylorleonhardt.com)

**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).

(THEME MUSIC FADES OUT)

(PIANO MUSIC FADES UP)

**DM:** *Every Moment Holy Vol. 2: Death, Grief, and Hope* is a book of liturgies for seasons of dying and grieving. Liturgies such as “For the Scattering of Ashes,” “For the Loss of a Spouse,” or “For the Wake of a National Tragedy.” These are ways of reminding us that our lives are shot through with sacred purpose even when — especially when — suffering and pain threaten to overwhelm us.

(MUSIC FADES OUT)

**DM:** You can preorder *Every Moment Holy Vol. 2* at [store.rabbitroom.com](http://store.rabbitroom.com). Orders will begin shipping in February 2021.