



B R O A D C A S T T A L K S

# Christian Faith, the Arts and Imagination

by Andrew Peterson



C·S· LEWIS INSTITUTE

**Andrew Peterson** is a singer-songwriter, an author, and the founder of the Rabbit Room, a ministry dedicated to fostering spiritual formation and Christ-centered community through story, art, and music. In 2019, Andrew celebrated the 20th anniversary of his *Behold the Lamb of God* project with an anniversary tour and brand new album recording. Andrew is also the award-winning author of *The Wingfeather Saga*, a four-book fantasy adventure series for young people, described as *The Princess Bride* meets *The Lord of the Rings*. The books have been re-released as collectible hardcover editions through Penguin Random House in 2020, and production is underway on the first season of the animated series through Angel Studios (*The Chosen*), set to release in 2022. Andrew's second nonfiction book, *The God of the Garden: Thoughts on Creation, Culture, and the Kingdom*, was released in October 2021, which follows his 2019 memoir, *Adorning the Dark: Thoughts on Community, Calling, and the Mystery of Making*. Andrew and his wife, Jamie, have been married for more than 24 years and have three children, Aedan, Asher, and Skye.

The following is adapted from Christian Faith, the Arts and Imagination: A Discussion with Musician, Writer, and Rabbit Room Founder Andrew Peterson, a C.S. Lewis Institute (CSLI) livestream event hosted by Joel Woodruff, President of CSLI, on June 18, 2021.

BROADCAST TALKS presents ideas to cultivate Christ-like thinking and living. Each issue features a transcription of a talk presented at an event of the C.S. Lewis Institute.



Q

*Tell us about your roots, your background, your childhood, your family. What was your world like growing up?*

I was born in a little farming community in central Illinois near Champaign. My dad was a pastor. The first seven years of my life I lived within walking distance of the elementary school in the town square and just had this very Calvin and Hobbes-like childhood. When I was seven, my dad took a job in Florida, where he and my mom both grew up. We moved down to north Florida, which is culturally south Georgia; it's deeply southern. I usually say it's like Georgia with a twist of weirdness.

So I have been processing the culture shock for most of my adult life. I'd grown up in a very middle-America kind of place, and suddenly I was thrust into a Flannery O'Connor story. But it was great if you want to be a storyteller when you grow up; the South is a good place to get your start.

I was a pretty nominal Christian, but in the year after high school I kind of collided with Jesus and began to realize that the gospel was true and, most of all, that He loved me. Then I found myself in Bible

college, got a Bible degree. And during that season I started writing songs. I moved to Nashville as soon as I got out of school. That was 24 years ago.

*Q: Can you tell us more about how you collided with Jesus?*

I was in a rock band. The year after high school most of my friends went to college and were going to be teachers or farmers or lawyers or whatever. I was just mystified because I just couldn't picture myself doing any of those things. I grew up reading books and loved fantasy novels and movies, comic books. I loved to draw. I loved music but I just didn't know, in the early '90s, in a little town, that you could say that you wanted to do that for a job. So I didn't go to college. I took what is now known as a gap year; at the time I just thought I was going to be in a rock band. We toured the country and played music, and I kind of lived the quote-unquote dream. I still think I would have told you that I was a Christian, but this was *miserable* and pretty legalistic, pretty lost. The band came home, and I was super directionless.

In that season, after the band broke up, I was at home trying to figure out what was next, and a friend of mine gave me a tape by a guy named Rich Mullins. Rich, for those of you who don't remember, died 20-some-odd years ago in a car accident, but he wrote "Our God Is an Awesome God." I usually say that that's my least favorite song of his, which isn't to say it's a bad song; it's just that the other ones are so much better. He was a very Chestertonian-wit. He was incredibly sharp and smart and incisive, and he loved Jesus and was also broken. And I was broken and didn't believe that Jesus loved me. My friend gave me that tape and said, "Hey, will you learn this song so I can sing it in church Sunday?" because I played piano. I kind of begrudgingly took it and sat up late learning the song on the piano, and, by the time that song was over, something in me had changed. It was like that song was the portal through which the love of God came to me. It was mainly just this realization that Jesus was a person; He was not an idea, but He was a person. I had known Him in the abstract and

believed that there was a God, but I didn't have any real sense that He was a person, that He liked me, or that He loved me, that He cared about me. I was always afraid of Him and then, all of a sudden, I was embraced by Him, and it changed my whole thing.

The way I've usually put it is that it was like I was standing in a dark forest, and when I heard that song I turned around and there was a path. I remember not long after that thinking, if I could somehow write a song that would do that for somebody, that would help them realize that Jesus is a person, that He is God, that He loves them. I asked God if I could sing about Him forever, and I've been trying to sort that out ever since.

*Q: Wow, that's a great prayer. It sounds like God's been answering it in your life. That's wonderful to hear. You mentioned that you came to Christ somewhat obviously through Rich Mullins and through music. Somehow God used music to speak to you. How did music touch you at an early age, and how have you found the power of music and communication and communicating the gospel?*

I was always enamored with music, but not just music; it was really the arts in general. A lot of people love music, but it would never occur to them to try to write a song. For some reason, I wanted to look under the hood. I would hear a song and love it and then try to figure it out. How do they do this? How do they make this music, and why is it moving things around inside me? I wanted to understand what was inside of music, if that makes any sense, and so I started out writing songs, really bad songs, just about girlfriends dumping me or whatever. But I was always intrigued by the power that it seemed to have, in the same way that movies did this to me. I remember trying to make films when I was a kid; I was way into books, so I would try to write books. I was always trying to like peel back the layers and figure out what it was that was the source of the beauty, the source of the power. My tastes weren't terribly sophisticated when I was in high school; it was a lot of hair metal, but there was something to it.

I remember—what Rich Mullins did for me was that it showed me there was a way that you could be poetic and honest and also truthful. There was something about his music that was a combination of those three things, that something locked into place. I was like, “Oh, that’s something I could do.” I think I had a similar experience with the Narnia books when I was in college. I reread them for the first time since I was a kid, and it just leveled me. Once again, this thundering reminder that Jesus is a person, and He loves me, and that He’s God. And I remember saying, “Lord if you let me write a book like this. Gosh, it’d be fun to try; you could use it to move somebody.” What do they say, “Great artists steal”? I’m always trying to emulate the things that moved me in the first place. Whether it was on the screen or in a book or in a song, I was always trying to sort it out.

*Q: In our culture today STEM—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—is really pushed since it adds a lot of value to society, and you also can make money doing it. Have you ever experienced yourself—or seen others who have a love of art, music, and things—being told that it’s really not very pragmatic; you need to find something else to make a living and do that on the side. Has that been something you’ve experienced? If so, how have you dealt with that?*

That is definitely a mind-set that people have, which is partly why I’m so defensive of the arts. I think it was largely because I grew up in a situation where—it wasn’t like my parents or the community I was in said, “Oh, don’t do art; art is bad”; it was just that it was seen as a pastime more than a calling. That’s one of the reasons why I’m defensive of and passionate about encouraging young songwriters and young writers.

There are a whole lot of reasons to give up along the way if you choose this life. You’re choosing to have an unsteady paycheck for the rest of your life. Not only that, but it’s a spiritual battlefield to walk out onto the stage and bare your soul to people. There’s a potential for either your heart to get beat up or for your heart to get tempted by applause, so it’s a minefield that you’re always walking. And so I’ve been pretty



passionate for most of my life about that because I remember, as a young man (I don't know that anybody said this explicitly), but the assumption was that if you wanted to go into the ministry, if you wanted to steward your gifting for the kingdom of God, then you needed to be a missionary or a missionary doctor or a pastor. Those are the obvious things. Even in the Bible college I went to, they had majors (everybody was a Bible major), but you had emphases in different things; so it was like you can specialize in preaching or youth ministry or music. By music they meant, we're going to teach you how to lead a choir in a small church somewhere in America. It was always in this funnel of church ministry. I love the church, but I just assumed that there was not a seat at the table for nerdy, fantasy-novel-loving, comic-book, guitar-player kids. I really want that kid to know that there's a seat at the table of the kingdom of God for him and his gifting. There's a way for him to lay those at the feet of Christ and be more satisfied than he could possibly imagine in the outworking of that gifting.

*Q: You have obviously been on this journey yourself exploring integration of faith and art, and creating and implementing it into your personal life through your home and all types of things. But you also seem to have a passion for helping others discover some of what you've discovered, the joy of creating and using your faith in that way. Can you tell us a little bit about the Rabbit Room you founded, maybe first of all for those who aren't familiar with it, how you got the name the Rabbit Room, and what this community is all about?*

I was in Oxford and, like every good Christian American, I went to the Eagle and Child. I'm sure you've been there, Joel, and I'm assuming your listeners know this, but it's one of the places where Lewis and Tolkien and their buddies would hang out and have a beer. I think my impression of it from before I went there was—I assumed they were very stodgy, buttoned down, like reading Homer in the original language, this uppity dry situation. Right? Then I went; when you go there you walk in and it's a pub. You're like, oh yeah; that's right;

pubs are full of activity and life and laughter. You go back to the little nook where those guys used to hang out, and that nook is called the Rabbit Room. So there's a little sign over the door that says Rabbit Room. I asked the bartender, "Hey, why is it called that?" and he goes, "I don't know. I think they kept rabbits in there at one point." And so I sat down with my family. We were kind of geeking out. You may remember on the wall there's a signed letter where they raise a toast to the proprietor for the ham because the ham had been good that night; they all signed it. I began to realize that my image of what those meetings were like was not correct. Ultimately these were just buddies. The stories were an excuse for them to get together and have a beer, you know. I was like, oh yeah, that's right, friendship was at the heart of what was going on here, not just a love for old stories or the writing. It's almost like the stuff they were writing was the excuse for the real thing, which was this fellowship.

So Diana Glycer; she's wonderful. She wrote a book called *Bandersnatch*, about the creative community of the Inklings. It's the best one out there. She has all this really practical advice, but she gets into what that friendship was like and how it worked. All that to say, I recognized something in that room, and that was that Nashville is a place where a bunch of nerdy singer-songwriters moved here with this wild dream to try to make a life in music. The best thing about living here has been the friends that I've made. It's been the people that I've found and like. When you get together to write songs, half the time songs don't come out of it; it's just a time to be with your buddies. "Oh, that's kind of like the Inklings," only we're not half as smart. Right?

So anyway, I came back to the States. I bought the domain name [rabbitroom.com](http://rabbitroom.com), wasn't really sure what to do with it. My dream at first was, I'm going to find the money, and we're going to open a bookstore tavern place where people can come together. Of course, that's impossible, it costs a fortune, but blogs were free so I started a blog instead. And so the Rabbit Room was originally just this blog where a bunch of writer friends of mine would contribute pieces, and we sold books and music that we believed in that didn't get attention.

esteem

glorify sing

distinguish cherish

gratitude

celebrate

honor

praise

lift

high

extol

reverence

exalt

One of the things that rankles me a little bit is when people say, “Oh, I hate Christian music.” My reaction is, well, you’re just listening to the wrong stuff. If all you’re listening to is what you hear on the radio, and some of that’s good, but it’s pretty homogeneous and shallow sometimes. I have to be careful because I know some of these people, and they’re good people, but from an artistic standpoint, the waters aren’t super deep sometimes. So anyway, I’m like, no, you just need to listen to this artist or that artist. Same thing with books. People think, I hate Christian novels, and I’m like, well you’re probably thinking of Amish romances, but what about *Till We Have Faces*? What about *The Lord of the Rings*, for that matter?

So the Rabbit Room existed to draw attention to the good work that was being done. After a few years of this blog and this kind of growing online community, we had our first conference here in Nashville we called Hutchmoot; let’s live in a hutch. It’s a weird name, but it connected deeply with people. They sell out in five seconds; people come from all over America and beyond. It’s not a conference where we sit around talking about how great the old days were. Honestly, a lot of the talk isn’t even about—there aren’t sessions on Narnia or the Inklings. It tends to be a celebration. I call it a weekend-long feast where we celebrate the way God speaks through story, art, and music. And so we just geek out together over good meals, and we talk about the ways that creation is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof. So it has grown. We’ve published about 40 books now by authors that we have discovered along the way, and we have more coming. We have a whole podcast network, and we finally realized the dream of having an actual place. So after all those years of the Rabbit Room being this, having a tabernacle, so to speak, we finally were able to build a permanent place, and I’m sitting in it right now. This is called North Wind Manor, which is a little nod to George MacDonald. Nobody lives here; it’s just a house that’s made for gathering and getting people together. The fireplace behind me—we acquired the fireplace from Tolkien’s house in Oxford, so that whole gray thing is from his bedroom at his house in Oxford. We’ve got a couple other really cool museum-type

things in here to kind of say, hey, in the spirit of the Inklings; we're trying to emulate some of the good work that they're doing.

*Q: That's fabulous, that's great. It's so good to see a place for Christian artists, songwriters to come together, and to have been able to create this space and give people that chance. I think there's probably real hunger for that. And for our audience, Andrew, how would you encourage them, for instance, parents, to help their children consider their integration of art and faith or in their churches, to integrate art? What are some ways—if maybe they can't be a part of the Rabbit Room today—how could they in their own communities foster this approach?*

To answer that question, first, the mission statement of the Rabbit Room is the Rabbit Room curates and cultivates story, art, and music to nourish Christ-centered communities for the life of the world. That's our goal, so we really believe that by curating some of these things and creating works of art and encouraging people to do that, then that is nourishing Christ-centered communities and that is then nourishing the world, right? And so you can be involved in the Rabbit Room if you like. Just go to [rabbitroom.com](http://rabbitroom.com); sign up for the email list. There are all kinds of ways to get involved and tons of resources. It's not a localized thing; it's broader than that. And so that's one answer.

The other answer is—all three of my kids are involved in the arts in one way or another: my oldest son is a visual artist; my daughter's a songwriter; my middle son is a record producer. Part of that is because they grew up in Nashville in a really healthy Christian community where the arts were valued. But I think part of it—my wife and I do take some of the credit, because it was seen as a matter of course that God gives us giftings and that those giftings ought to be stewarded for the kingdom of God. I'll put it this way: one of our mentors said somebody asked him as a pastor, if his family had, and how did they do, family devotions. I know that there are families who do this. They'll have a time of singing, they'll read the Bible together every night,



whatever it may be. And this pastor, I loved it, he said, “You know what? We just never did it.” In effect he said, “We would try and then we would fail and then we’d feel guilty. We’d feel like bad parents.” And then, “I’m a pastor. My kids are at church all the time. We don’t need more Bible stuff in their lives. We just need to be together as a family.” So his answer to that question was that Christianity ought to be as ordinary in your home as dirty laundry and cornflakes. Isn’t that a great quote?

With us that was how it was. It was like it was an ongoing conversation; it wasn’t like, now we’re gonna do Jesus stuff. When we’re listening to a Paul Simon record, we’re talking about, oh, where’s he coming from? It’s one of the first questions that kids would ask when we listen to music, “Is this guy a Christian?” I’d say, “Oh, I don’t think so. What made you ask that?” We would have these great conversations, so the kids learned to engage the world with the idea that Jesus was a living presence and that everything was affected by that. The same thing was true of music and the arts. It was just like, well, why wouldn’t there be art? Why wouldn’t you want to play songs? Why wouldn’t you want to write poetry? We are inherently creative beings made in the image of the Creator, so this is just a part of the deal.

That’s what I would encourage parents to do, just don’t make a big deal out of it. Just leave guitars lying around, you know; I guarantee, the kids are going to pick it up. They’ll gravitate whether they make a career out of it or not. Everybody ought to be doing something, you know, adding to the beauty.

[Video of the complete version of this talk, including Q&A, is available at: <https://www.cslewisinstitute.org/art>. For additional information about Andrew Peterson, go to: <https://www.andrew-peterson.com/>. The website of the Rabbit Room is at: <https://rabbitroom.com/>.]



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