

# Sarah Lee Langford Transcript

*CHORUS*

*A min*

*I'm gonna sing, I'm gonna sing*

*G            A min*

*Like a bird upon a wing*

*When I'm fearful Lord I'll sing*

*G    A min*

*I'm gonna sing*

**Meet Sarah Lee Langford, songwriter and teacher.**

**Sarah Lee teaches at the Waldorf School in Birmingham, where they believe in what we believe in, experiential learning.**

**Project-based learning.**

**Learning by doing.**

**They don't even have textbooks, or if they do, they're textbooks that they make themselves.**

**Sarah Lee is here today to talk about songwriting, and to teach us how we might listen to the stories of history that we find.**

**And turn those stories into songs.**

Hi, my name is Sarah Lee Langford, and I am a singer songwriter who lives in Birmingham, Alabama, and I've put out a couple of records and really love playing with the band here in town and all around.

And I'm also a teacher. I teach at Alabama Waldorf School. And there we do a lot of experience-based learning, and the children make a lot of things with their hands, which is what I teach, is the handwork program of how to make textiles with your own hands instead of just assuming that things will just appear for you. And I also have taught music for many years, so it's my pleasure to be here to talk about songwriting today and how one might approach these stories from The Story

Acorn in a way that you can make your own art and my expertise is songwriting. So that's what I came here to speak about today.

**Some might think songwriting is all about lyrics and rhyming.**

**And a lot of it is, but one of the first things Sarah Lee looks for is the story.**

**And to understand the story, it's important to understand sense of place.**

**And she found that sense of place in the story of Ms. Olivia White.**

So, when I was listening to the episode on The Story Acorn about Olivia White, she begins by talking a lot about where she came from, and she came from Alberta City. Granted, many years before I did, but I'm from Tuscaloosa, so when the stories speak about Alberta City or Bryce Hospital or any place like that, it sounds like home to me.

So, I immediately was able to connect with Olivia's story just by having that sense of place. And I was thinking that if one person were at home and trying to think about songwriting, then if you don't have a sense of place when you hear Alberta City or any of these things, you could look up a picture of it and sort of connect with where the place is. You can get a sense of place and you could look up pictures of the people who are telling the stories and the people who were in the Civil Rights Movement.

So, by getting a visual on that instead of just hearing about it, then that can help you create a picture in your mind. So, when you write a song, if you get a picture in your mind, then you take that picture and you tell a story with words.

**The part of Olivia's story that Sarah Lee chose to write about was when the minister was beaten by the Klan for preaching about the right to vote.**

**But let's let Ms. Olivia tell the story.**

*My life changed when I became a teenager, because now I'm a musician, a young musician, and I was playing for Reverend JC Brown. He was teaching the people to register. He was teaching them about the Constitution. He would go on Wednesday night and do that.*

*On one Wednesday night, Reverend Brown and his wife and three children were stopped, and the Klansmen beat him to near death, and the mother told the children to get out and run. She wouldn't leave her husband, so he was unconscious. And Mrs. Brown said to me later that the thing that scared her the most after they had beat him and he was unconscious, someone reached over in the*

windshield and pulled him through all that glass, and when he hit the ground, they just dropped him. And then they all laughed and left him.

That Sunday morning when we arrived at church, the judge was there, the sheriff was there, and all of these deputies were standing in front of the church. And when we drove up, they said, "there's a proclamation," and the judge read a proclamation saying that you will never put foot in this church again. You're hereby barred from this county, and if you wanna live, never come back to this church.

And Reverend Brown said, "well, you almost killed me. And today is Sunday. I'm going to preach and then I'll leave."

So, this song was inspired by the part of the story on The Story Acorn where I heard there was a gentleman who was beaten half to death, and they wanted him to leave and they wanted to arrest him. And he was very badly beaten, but he insisted to preach before he left, and I think that's just a very good testament for faith and strength.

So that's where the song came about.

## I'M GONNA SING

### VERSE 1

A min

I'm gonna preach before I go

G A min

For the Spirit Tells me so

Take the Word throughout the land

G A min

Cause He holds me in His hand

## CHORUS

A min

I'm gonna sing, I'm gonna sing

G                    A min

Like a bird upon a wing

When I'm fearful Lord I'll sing

G    A min

I'm gonna sing

## VERSE 2

A min

My earthly father raised me rough

G    A min

To protect me, he made me tough

Rough and fearless is my way

G                    A min

Why I'm here still today

## CHORUS

A min

I'm gonna sing, I'm gonna sing

G                    A min

Like a bird upon a wing

When I'm fearful Lord I'll sing

G A min

I'm gonna sing

**So, there's the song.**

**Sarah Lee talks about how she studies the story to find the song.**

When you're listening to the story as you're working to write a song, then as you listen to it, as certain words or phrases are spoken, just sort of write down a phrase here and there. And pretty soon you'll have a list of words that inspired you as you came through the story. And then if you take those words, then you can write a prose about it, that's one way you can approach telling the story is by just writing it out in prose and not worrying about rhyming or singability or anything like that.

So, you could sort of tell this story and then go from there and sort of refine it.

**We had heard Sarah Lee came from a musical family.**

**We wondered if that was right.**

Mm-hmm. My parents play. And so, I learned how to play from them. And we played in a bluegrass band when I was young, and I played the upright bass before I could even reach the top of it. And they had me standing on a stool so I could thump the bass.

And then I went on to college and studied music there and got a music education degree and sang in a jazz band and other stuff. But now I have a honkytonk band.

**We know music is important.**

**We listen to music all the time.**

**But we were curious about why music is so important.**

Oh, well, it's hard to put that into words, really, but I think you just feel it, right?

It just feels a certain way and it feels so special when you can express yourself through music, and it doesn't matter what you sound like as long as you're putting yourself into it. But yeah, I've been able to say so many things through songs that I'm unable to put in through words. It means everything to me.

**In the song, you heard the part where Sarah Lee sang, "my father made me tough."**

**That also came from Ms. Olivia's story.**

*So many times, we had to hide the children. Let's be real. Many times, if you bring in a busload of kids somewhere into a hot situation, we had to have foot soldiers that knew how to protect the children.*

*In Butler, Alabama we had to hide the kids in a cornfield so that they would not be visible. Well, we unloaded the children and they said, "y'all can go have fun." And, you know, not singing right now. And they went out in the cornfield and was having fun. I remember Reverend Jackson saying to me, "Olivia, make sure that they can't be seen. Make sure they go way back in the cornfield." And that's what we did.*

*The children never knew why they were in the cornfield, but I knew that we had to disguise them until darkness.*

*Only God, only God, I thank God for having a father who raised me rough. I mean, he was fearless, and I thank God for my dad doing that, and that saved us many, many days, many nights.*

**Now, you could take that story and write directly about the fear in the cornfield,**

**or you could take the theme of fear and write maybe about fear in your own life.**

**Sarah Lee has a song that she thinks resonates with the theme of fear and courage in the cornfield.**

**And fear and courage in her own life.**

You can think of an overarching theme, right?

You can think about dedication, you think about courage. And to me, listening to Olivia White's story, it was mostly about how music helped them get through hard times. So, it made me think of another song that I have written, and it's on a record I put out already, but it's about how music helped me through a hard time.

So, the name of this song is called Watch Me.

## WATCH ME

### VERSE 1

G

C

My grandpa says I got a good head on my shoulders

G

D

And my friends all say I'll be better off in time

G

C

And I believe them, but not a single thing you tell me

G

D

G

I hear you talkin, but your words ain't worth a dime

### CHORUS

D

G

So, watch me, watch me leaving

C

G

D

I haven't used up all my good years yet

G

C

Oh, and someday if you have some feelings

G

D

G

I will be your beautiful regret

So just another way to talk about how music gets you through hard times, so you can take any aspect of the story and sing about exactly what happened and tell the story through song, or you can take just a theme from it and build upon that and put your life into it.

**We asked Sarah Lee what she'd like to say to those of us who might want to write a song.**

### **But are afraid we can't.**

To somebody who was just beginning to write a song, I'd say listen to a lot of music for one. And you start to hear formulas that go into songs. You know, just the basics, like the song that I sang was verse, chorus, verse, chorus. I only used two chords in the whole thing, A minor and G.

And then the melody that I wrote was pentatonic, which means there's only five notes really in what I was singing. So, it's 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 5, 3, 2, 1. And if you work any of those pitches, they all kind of fit together. So, if you give yourself just some simple parameters on 'I'm only going to use these pitches, I'm only going to use these chords,' and start from there, with a basic songwriting formula, verse, chorus.

Like I said before, find some lines that inspire you from what comes from the story and then see if you can build a little rhyme from that. Like, for example, I took almost verbatim from the story "I'm gonna preach before I go," right? So, then I've got the lyric 'go' at the end of the line. So many words could rhyme with go.

And you just take it one line at a time, try and tell a story that paints a picture. Simple is better for when you're starting. So just see how you can tell the story and form it that way.

### **This is not the last time we'll see Sarah Lee Langford.**

**She, and our other teachers, will be coming to us throughout the year on The Story Acron.**

**So, we'll see Sarah Lee again.**

### **Before we go though, it's time for our first assignment.**

So, what you can do at home is first listen to songs and see how they work. See how they are put together and listen to the episode of Ms. White and write down a list of things that stick out to you, whether that be like a theme, overarching theme, or specific things that she said.

And then, if you want to, you can write a prose that comes from that. And one thing that I do when I'm writing a song is everybody, if you have a phone, you have a little voice memo recorder on there. So, if there's a little melody that sticks out to you, you can hum it into your voice recorder and label it.

And then you can work with someone, whether you know them or can connect with them through the internet. And you could even send a clip of yourself humming a little melody, and then maybe you know someone who plays an



instrument, and you can get together and see if you can just put a little back and forth there and see what you come up with.

And you can record it and I can't wait to hear what you come up with.

**Notice what Sarah Lee just said about working with others to make a song.**

**One of the cool things about The Story Acorn is that we can work together on projects.**

**And not even in the same town.**

**Let's say one student finds a story in Selma and records that story.**

**And another student in say, Sylacauga, writes the prose of that story.**

**And another student in another town writes the lyrics.**

**And then three more students in another town do the music.**

**And then another student in another town sings that song.**

**And then not even knowing each other, but coming to know each other through The Story Acorn, we create a song that never existed before.**

**A song that tells a story of history that, had we not saved it, might have been lost forever.**

**Think of all the different ways you can work with others over the internet to make a song or a podcast, or maybe even work on a poem or a short story together.**

**And in doing so, learn about the past,**

**which is valuable because the present,**

**the present we're living in right now,**

**grows out of that past, and if you want to be more successful in the present, it will help you to understand that past.**

**And we can do that together, right here, at [TheStoryAcorn.com](http://TheStoryAcorn.com),**

**Where it's Friday night lights for our future artists, writers, poets, and historians.**