**HOW WE WRITE**

**Episode 3**

**Interview with Michele Solberg**

(Interviewer: Justin Hatch)(Date of interview: July 2017)

(Transcript edited by Justin Hatch)

[Intro Music]

Alice Batt: Hi, I'm Alice Batt, and I'm here with *How We Write*, the University Writing Center's podcast about how we write just about anything. On our show today we have Justin Hatch, a Ph.D. student in rhetoric and a member of our podcasting team, and he's interviewing Michele Solberg, who is both an accomplished singer-songwriter and the UWC’s Operations Manager. I've had the good fortune to know Michelle for many years. I've seen her perform solo. I've seen her duet with her husband and fellow musician Oliver Steck, and I've seen her as vocalist for jazz ensemble Sammy’s Satin Sounds. She's wise and warm and soulful, and we hope you enjoy.

Justin Hatch: Welcome everybody. You are listening to the How We Write podcast. My name is Justin Hatch. I'm a member of UT Austin’s UWC podcasting team and a Ph.D. student here at UT. I have with me today on the How We Write podcast Michelle Solberg, songwriter, vocalist, guitarist, and all-around musician. Michele has been recording music for the last 20 years and has received awards too numerous to list here. but just as a sample, her Austin Music Awards recognitions include best tape, number two in the female vocalist… You’re giggling at “best tape.”

Michele Solberg: Yeah, that really ages me for sure.

Justin Hatch: Number four in the singer-songwriter category and number six album of the year. She has recorded seven albums and has held the summer residency at Cafe Sin-é where Jeff Buckley got his start. Michele spent much of the 90s touring. She has traveled the world, but she did not travel far for our interview today because we are lucky enough to also have her as our very own Operations Manager right here at the University of Texas’s University Writing Center. Welcome, Michele. Thanks for being on the show today.

Michele Solberg: Thank you.

Justin Hatch: I'd like to begin, if you’re ok, by asking a little bit about your very early and very substantial success as a musician here in Austin. Would you be willing to tell us a little bit about what led to that success and what it was like to be so young and to receive that kind of attention?

Michele Solberg: Well, I came to school here at UT Austin in 1990, and I think there wasn’t an open stage that I did not go to. I was just ready to hit them all, and I had a lot of enthusiasm like many young people do.

Justin Hatch: When we say young, for our listeners here, how young?

Michele Solberg: Um, 18, 19 years old, and I was just really fortunate to, um, be embraced by the Austin music community right away. I mean it was--I now know how, um--what a privilege that was. At the time, I just thought “Of course, that's how it works.” And that isn't how it works, but for me that's what happened. And, um, you know, within a year I was recording an album, and within about a year and a half, two years, I had my first review in the Austin Chronicle. And, yeah it was just, it was a great time. It was super fun, and really exciting to be getting all sorts of shows and reviews and attention, and it, it was--that was good.

Justin Hatch: How did…Um, like, I want that kind of success, Michele, but I can't just go out and start hitting open mikes, you know, [laughter] because I will get laughed off the stage. Where did your musical abilities and interests and prowess come from?

Michele Solberg: Um, well I don't know. I just I grew up in a very athletic family, and I took some guitar lessons when I was nine, ten, eleven, and then I got to be around fifteen, and I really—like a lot of young teenagers--I needed to find my tribe of people. And I found that musicians and artists were my tribe of choice, and I had a natural singing ability. So, I was at a party one night—I must have been fifteeen years old—A guy turned to me and said “Hey, you're cute, can you sing?” And I said, “Yeah. I can sing.” [laughter] And that was my first band.

Justin Hatch: That's all it took?

Michele Solberg: Yeah.

Justin Hatch: Did you, like, did you sing that night?

Michele Solberg: I really don't know that he was all that concerned with my singing ability. [laughter]

[00:05:02]

Justin Hatch: That’s funny.

Michele Solberg: Yeah.

Justin Hatch: Um, were you? It sounds like then that you were kind of initially, um, a vocalist. Where did, where did writing music come in?

Michele Solberg: Well, I think for me it was, it was a little bit of a feminist act in that I found pretty early on that I hated having a room of guys telling me what to do. [laughter] And so, and I had things that I wanted to say, and so I started writing my first songs when I was around 16. Um, so by the time I came to Austin when I was 18, you know, I had some songs ready to perform, and I just I loved poetry, and I loved writing music for people and having my own original voice.

Justin Hatch: Um, did that first band, did they—did you get to have them play some of your music?

Michele Solberg: No. I think I recall writing lyrics for a couple of songs, but, you know, we maybe played a couple of times. It was, you know, teenage kids, [laughter] and if we were lucky we could practice in someone's living room rather than garage, and thankfully it was in Albuquerque, New Mexico, so the garages weren't too hot. Unlike here in Austin. [laughter]

Justin Hatch: Nobody is playing this garage.

Michele Solberg: Yeah, no one in Austin is playing in the garage in the summer if they can help it. [laughter]

Justin Hatch: Oh, wow. And when you, when you got here, um, you said you were embraced initially, you know, kind of immediately by the music scene, was, were you just by yourself? Was it just you and the mic? Did you have a band that you were playing with at the time?

Michel Solberg: I started playing with two musicians in a trio called Radio Hairdo, and that lasted for about a year, and then I just, uh, wanted to do solo shows—I had an opportunity to do some solo shows, and then it just kind of went off from there. And I enjoyed having my own band. And I think part of it was because I was a woman, you know, I didn't feel that same camaraderie I think that I would have if I was a male in a band, and I just kind of felt a little bit apart. So I liked the, I liked being able to book a gig and then find musicians to fill that gig, and I could play with really great people, and it didn't necessarily mean that they had to play with me all the time. But, so I would have sort of like a--and you know that's how most people end up working as musicians is they have a group of musicians that they call on to play gigs, but sort of that notion of your eternal family like U2, you know, they've been together forever, that doesn't, you know, work for most people.

Justin Hatch: So if we say that this had a, umm, like a feminist beginning in that you wanted a way to express your voice, then it sounds like your career was kind of like built on that, because if you’re the main act in bringing in band members then you could play your songs and decide what’s…

Michele Solberg: That’s right. Yeah, absolutely.

Justin Hatch: That’s awesome. So, um, there's another thing that I want to bring up early too, and maybe we’ll end up going back to both of these things, but I wanted to ask you about um, about heart gigs.

Michele Solberg: Um, well, you know, I had been playing for a number of years in my 20s, um, you know mainly touring around Texas, playing in cities like Houston and Dallas and kind of doing overnight tracks or as my husband calls them throw and goes [laughter] where you get in the car you drive there, you play, and then you drive back that same night.

Justin Hatch: Oh, wow.

Michele Solberg: Yeah. And my partner at the time, he decided he was going to…He got an offer to work in a studio in Denmark as a partner, and he asked me if I wanted to go with him. And I said “That sounds totally crazy.” And he said, “Well, you can play music over there, you know, you can kind of find out more about the world.” And so I said “yes,” and I was really, when I was living over there, I was really humbled by how people take care of each other. They take care of their musicians, and, you know, arrogance and egotism is really looked down upon. My point being is that when I came back from Denmark I felt the need to really explore music in a much deeper way with an audience, and I found that I was just exhausted from doing the bar scene, the coffeehouse scene, where, you know, you play your music, and at the end of the night it's really about how many drinks you help the business sell. And for me, my relationship to music, I felt it’s, it was very personal, and it, it just was a bad fit. I didn't…I had a hard time thinking of it as a business venture, and I was really craving something larger, I think something transcendent. And so at the time when I came back I started, um, hosting the Cactus Café Open Mic, and the Cactus Cafe is the famous listening room on the University of Texas campus, and, um, that was sort of my first step in getting back involved with the community and giving back to the Austin music community, and I wanted to take it a step further and get those musicians into places where they could play and serving the community as well. And what I found was that my intention didn't necessarily match their intention, but I did find a situation that was incredibly healing for me. I played at Hospice Austin for five years, once a week at their in-house facility, Christopher House. So their patients are in the last weeks of their life. And so I was mainly playing for the families and friends of the people who were there, and it was just really moving for me to see how music could affect people because so much of the time I think in our culture art is just so fleeting, and it gets just dismissed. You know, you can't…It's hard to put a dollar sign on it or even say why it's important. It's just sort of this--floats around, and we don't really understand how it affects us or—but, you know, when people are going through a situation like that, it's, it's like something that they need really deep inside their soul, to hear music and to feel understood in that way or to feel connected.

[00:12:35]

Justin Hatch: Uh, what would, you know, it just seems like such a heavy and potentially meaningful situation in choosing, selecting music, and writing music and performing for those who are in such a tough spot. Like, did you have a goal? Or was it like cheerful songs to cheer them up or sad songs to mourn with them, or did you have, yeah, like a strategy?

Michele Solberg: No, I just really felt my way into it, and at first I brought a lot of different musicians into that situation, and I found that most people didn't really have a sensitivity for playing at hospice. You know, they might be really great in other places, but it just, it was something that really resonated with me. So.

Jusitn Hatch: Maybe, um, the same thing that ignites a crowd--a raucous…right?...decision that ignites a crowd on a Saturday night may not be the same thing that, um, those who are about to let go of a loved one are looking for, right? [laughter]

Michele Solberg: [laughter] That’s totally…yeah, I know, right, absolutely. So it just was a…Yeah, it just felt really healing for me and helped me put sort of my artistic life into perspective, and I felt like a payoff that wasn't monetary…or...with notoriety. I felt like a payoff just, uh, for being able to serve in that way with my art that I hadn't…I didn't get that other places. So as soon as I have more time I’d love to get back to playing at the hospice. So.

Justin Hatch: Awesome. And that was just the tip of the iceberg right? I have it on good authority that you were singing to those in women's shelters and AIDS hospitals, soup kitchens. Is that…?

Michele Solberg: Yeah. Um, I did the University Baptist Center Soup Kitchen. That was really, really interesting and fun. They--UBC is off the Drag. I don't think they have the soup kitchen anymore, but I think it was more interesting for me in that I had so many preconceived notions about the homeless community, and, um, it really sort of changed the way that I thought about, once again, about how people need art or what music gave to that situation, and it also felt like a really good match for me. Um, Safeplace--I had a friend of mine who does children's music, Laura Freeman, and she and I for five years went in and did a show monthly. Um, I just worked as a sponsor. I'm not a great children's performer so, [laughter] and she did that, um. And you know, once again, it was just, it was really moving for both of us, and, you know, the kids that are there at Safeplace with their families…It’s, it just--it’s so normalizing. I think a lot of times to…like, music just kind of [pause and sigh]…yeah, it can be transcendent. That’s all.

[00:16:26]

Justin Hatch: That like, um, they're in a situation that is--and they know, right? —that this is, this is really bad, and their lives feel off kilter. But, like, everyone gets to, like, enjoy music, right? That in that space they can just be, like, somebody who is feeling and loving this music, you know?

Michele Solberg: Yeah, but I think that’s…For me it was interesting to realize in those situations that no matter what is happening to any of us we're still just living our lives, you know, even if someone really close to us is passing or, you know, you find yourself needing assistance from Safe Place, it's like you're still having to get up and do everyday things like brush your teeth, you know, comb your hair, greet the day. And there's--I mean, think about really hard times that you've been through in your life. There's--it's like you kind of can only look back in retrospect and say, “Wow that was the worst year of my life.” [muffled laughter] When you're actually going through it, you kind of are just like going, “Uh, this is hard.” [laughter] But you don't really know until after it's happened because you still have to deal with all the minutia, and I think that music is just sort of this moment where you can feel some sort of celebration in your heart.

Justin Hatch: Even if, even if it's low.

Michele Solberg: Even if you're having like a really dark time, and yeah…

Justin Hatch: There's this moment where you can feel well, right?

Michele Solberg: Yeah, and I think often times when we're going through big changes, and our heart is open because it's been broken open, you know, that's when art affects us the most. I mean, I don't know if you've ever been through a really horrible breakup, and then you turn on the radio, and every single song makes you cry. [laughter]

Justin Hatch: [laughter] Oh, who hasn’t been there, right?

Michele Solberg: You know, but most of the time you're like “Yeah, whatever.”

Justin Hatch: “I would have rolled my eyes at that song yesterday.”

Michele Solberg: Yeah.

Justin Hatch: Um [Pause] I want to move on. And, like I said, I hope that we get to come back to both of those places, um, but I want to ask you--We are in the University Writing Center, and you know that we are all about process here. So, I wanted to ask you if you would share with us a little bit about your writing process

Michele Solberg: Well, uh, boy, I mean I guess it's been really different over the years. The last album that I put out, I used a theoretical framework of the major arcana in the Tarot deck of the Fool's journey, and I took a card from, 11 different cards from the Fool's journey, and wrote a song sort of based on each card, and that was really interesting because it gave me a little bit of--it was personal, but it, it gave me like a larger reference outside of just myself and my own experience. I guess I was, you know by the time--When did I put that out? --I guess I was 40, so I wasn't really interested in writing about my own experience directly anymore. And so, I wanted something, I don’t know, just to sort of bring me out, and that worked out really well. I had a great time doing that, and sort of, you know it felt almost like a puzzle. “Okay, here’s this card,” you know…For instance, the first card is about the Fool, and the fool starting his whole journey and getting rid of everything and so, um, harvesting new life. And so I wrote a song about a woman who, you know, she was just taking her wedding ring to the pawnshop and selling all of her stuff, and, and even though she had gone through this great pain, she was just hitting the road and kind of celebrating the fresh start.

[00:20:32]

Justin Hatch: So, these are neither, like, your particular stories or, like, exact takeoffs from the story of the card, right?

Michele Solberg: Yeah.

Justin Hatch: But something that you're just using as a creative launching point?

Michele Solberg: Yeah. Yeah.

Justin Hatch: How does that…That seems like a very particular starting place or process. How does that differ from what you were doing when you were younger?

Michele Solberg: When I was younger, you know, it was just, I guess, like a lot of people, you know, we keep notebooks. I wrote a lot of poetry, and so I would just constantly be mining through my work and just kind of seeing what, what struck me, what--I guess I felt into it a little bit more or maybe it wasn't so heady. Um, so I think I wrote from a much more intuitive place.

Justin Hatch: So, for our listeners here, we are in the writing center in Michelle's office. [Laughter] Now you may hear the buzz of the consultations or maybe not--we’re not super busy at the moment--in the background. But it is, um, it is beautiful in Michelle's office. And I remember the first time that I had to come in here to grab a key, actually, and someone said, “You just get in and you get out really quickly so that you don't disturb the feng shui,” or something they said. [Laughter]

Michele Solberg: Well obviously they don't know about my home life of living with the children, with the child and a husband and what that's like.

Justin Hatch: I have a one year old at home too, we should come back to that. It is, it is, it is beautiful in here though. Do you--there's, there's an ambiance. Do you, umm, do you need a particular space in order to write?

Michele Solberg: No. Well, I think having kids will do that to you. [laughter] Like you just have to do, you know, whatever you can when you can. And yeah, sort of that, like, “Oh, that temperature in the room has to be exactly right and it's got to be the right time of day and the sun has to be shining at this…” Yeah, that’s just…

Justin Hatch: And need a little Otis running in the background.

Michele Solberg: Mhmm, mhmm.

Justin Hatch: So, you don't, you don't have any idiosyncrasies, would you say, to your, to your writing process?

Michele Solberg: I don't think so. I think that you know our writing process, our artistic process, is a reflection of our own maturity or what our life looks like on the outside. You know so my, my life now is pretty, umm, pretty busy. You know, I have, I have a daughter, a 10-year-old daughter, and I work full time…and a wonderful husband. So when I, when I do get to do music shows and play or write or think about that type of stuff, it's kind of, you know, far down on the list after everything's been taken care of and I really see it as a place of privilege to be able to do that.

Justin Hatch: I… I… Do I remember you telling me that you are encouraging music in her, also?

Michele Solberg: Yeah. We'll see. She might get the bug, she might not. She definitely likes to do visual art. And she's been taking piano lessons for three years now, and she’s started enjoying performing. But I think that, um--yeah, there's just a point where it becomes like a personal calling and for me it wasn't until I was 15 years old that that happened. So, I don't know, who knows?

Justin Hatch: I was going to ask you how your writing process had changed once the kids come because, um, as I know--as we both know, right?--with my one year old, it's kind of like a crack in the universe once the kids come. But I think that you, um, I think that you addressed that, right? You said writing reflects where you are at in life and, um, once kids come, where you’re at in life is you have to be able to do most things with somebody tugging at you and maybe crying.

[00:25:13] Michele Solberg: Yeah, like all that preciousness has to disappear [laughter].The preciousness of your process.

Justin Hatch: How about do you see, um…like, what other types of, like…writing is a broad term, of course. So, other than just, like, notes on a page or lyrics, is there other types of writing that you need to, you know, do and be good at in order to, um, you know, survive in the music industry?

Michele Solberg: Well, I think that for me, you know, I've always… Well, I’ve loved poetry. I studied a lot of poetry in college and it's probably like the kiss of death as far as a writer [giggles], because...

Justin Hatch: [astonished] W-why?

Michele Solberg: Because, I mean, at least as a popular writer, you know, most pop songs are pretty simple and--

Justin Hatch: [Laughs] Oh, okay. Yeah.

Michele Solberg: --you know, they're not trying to hit people poetically on lot of different levels. I mean you have artists who of course are able to transcend that, like Tom Waits or Leonard Cohen, but uh...

Justin Hatch: Justin Bieber [Laughs].

Michele Solberg: Justin Bieber [Laughs]. Um… So, yeah, I don't know. What was the question again?

Justin Hatch: I don't know. [Laughs] It's not important.

Michele Solberg: I think that you should just write with your voice, your most authentic voice, and if that's an obscure poetic voice, then fine. If, if, you know, you're a country artist and that's a great…that's what resonates with you, then that's what you do. You know… I think you just have to be as genuine--whatever resonates with you at the time: that's what's most important. To keep you, to keep interested in a creative way rather than, you know, um, focusing on all the wrong things like fame, success.

Justin Hatch: And it’s really, I think--tell me if this is wrong--but I think that maybe especially young people have, you know, maybe even maybe an unrealistic idea of how many people there are in this world that are actually going to get to make a really good living at music. And so maybe if, um, if you understand the improbability of that, that you would need to, like, understand that you need to be getting something else out of it. Right?

Michele Solberg: Well, I mean I don't know. You know, how many people in the world get to go to grad school?

Justin Hatch: You used the word ‘get’. I would use the word ‘have’ to go to grad school. [Laughter]

Michele Solberg: I’m just saying it, I mean, if things go your way and you're performing and, you know, your life path takes you down that road, I think it's great. And if it doesn't other things will come out. I don't know. You know, you can only prepare so much. We don't know what's going to happen tomorrow, so.

Justin Hatch: And you’ll never know, right?

Michele Solberg: Yeah, it's an incredible place a privilege to be able to play music for people at any point. I mean I'm thrilled I've got uh, a couple of shows next week and I can't wait.

Justin Hatch: What’re you going to be doing? Millions of people listen to our podcast, so let’s plug you, your shows.

Michele Solberg: Well, this probably won’t come out, this will be like, come out after the shows.

Justin Hatch: Dang it.

Michele Solberg: But I’m gonna uh play a jazz gig at Central Market on Friday August 4th. I'm super excited about that because the musicians are just so great.

Justin Hatch: People that you know, you've performed with before?

Michele Solberg: Yeah. Yeah. And so that's kind of uh, that's a Benny Goodman group and then, so Swing music. And then I'm going to play my, uh, my own material along with a bunch of jazz standards at the Evangeline Cafe on the first, Tuesday, August 1st. And I'm also playing with two really awesome musicians. So, I think that's one thing that I've been reveling about lately is just the quality of musicians I get to play with are just so amazing.

Justin Hatch: I love the we didn't put a year at the end. That said “August 1st.” So when this comes out, somebody will be hanging out at those places looking for you.

Michele Solberg: I’m sure. Maybe.

Justin Hatch: Um, how about this, this is um, this is… I've got a...I've got like a review. There’s several reviews, all of them positive. I’m gonna read just a little bit for our audience out there. This one was, uh, 2001. “Solberg’s airy”--and this is from the Austin Chronicle--“Solberg’s airy hand-knitted vignettes contain more rootsy elements than her previous work, though it's the kind of rootsy associated with the lonely desert highways she considers traveling down in the whispery ‘Muleshoe.’ Elsewhere, chamber pieces, like ‘Small Symphony’ and ‘Beyond the Blue,’ bask in Solberg’s wistful purr.” These people love you. This is, this is a good review.

[00:30:17] Michele Solberg: Yeah, he had some opportunity to use his own poetry. [laughter]

Justin Hatch: We should be asking him about his writing process, also.

Michele Solberg: [laughter] Probably.

Justin Hatch: What I'm, when I… what I'm getting at there, is that we didn't really talk about your genre, generally but…

Michele Solberg: Yeah, it's pretty mellow generally. And um, I mean that the jazz group I've been playing with it's, it's all dance music. So, that’s upbeat that's super fun to sing. But as far as the things that I like to write, you know, it's a little bit darker.

Justin Hatch: I'm going to ask you…there was, there was, there was a progression. I was trying to frame performing as writing because I really wanted to ask you this question, and this question is “What's the most fun that you ever had performing in public”?

Michele Solberg: Oh boy. I think it may have been… last year. I was at the Evangeline Cafe playing and I finally, at the age of 45, got to a place where I just did not care anymore what people thought about me playing. Like the self-consciousness that has plagued me for my entire life was just gone for moments.

Justin Hatch: That is a good moment.

Michele Solberg: And I said to my husband, I said, “I can't believe it.” That was just… I had so much fun. I just felt this incredible amount of joy that I was there at that restaurant playing for a crowd of people eating and, yeah, there was--It just, it just was, it was wonderful.

Justin Hatch: How about this one? What's your favorite song that you've ever written?

Michele Solberg: Wow. I don't think that I have a favorite song. I mean there are certain songs that I'll play because they just feel really—they’re like, you know, comfortable shirts. I was at the Kerrville Folk Festival recently, and I was in a song circle and I pulled out a song and I realized it was 20 years old. I couldn't believe it. I was like “Oh my gosh, how did that happen? I wrote this 20 years ago.” And it still seemed relevant and it was still a powerful tune. So that was it. That's a pretty good song. It tells the story of my great aunt, Ione, who used to play music in North Dakota.

Justin Hatch: Was she an inspiration for…

Michele Solberg: Oh, she was a horrible musician, just the worst [laughs] you know.

Justin Hatch: Um, you know with, with great personality you can get away with a lot, maybe?

Michele Solberg: Yeah, I don't know that she had, uh--she did have a lot of personality. That is true. Do you--I can play you that song. My guitar is over there, right?

Justin Hatch: That would be… that would be awesome.

Michele Solberg: Thank you. Alright.

Justin Hatch: So, what are we, what are we about to hear?

Michele Solberg: It's called, uh, “Ione.”

Michele Solberg: [strumming and singing] She got the organ in 48. Though all the songs sound the same. You can hear her across the North Dakota plains. Oh, and she played. Oh, and she played. Oh, and she played. Life is quiet here and it is easy to hear the country gospel cords when they are sounding near. Oh, and she played. Oh, and she played. Oh, and she played. The tornado took the barn back in 72. Well, you never know what God is gonna do, and so she played. And so, she played. And so, she played. North Dakota has the straightest roads I've ever seen. Time is worn away, all the old concerns and old families. Music keeps us alive but blood or water, we’re just passing hours. Looking for a good polka on the radio. Oh, and she played, Oh and she played. Just a closer walk with thee, beyond the sunset and morning has broken more times than I can count. Oh, and she played. Oh, and she played. Oh, and she played.

[00:37:16] Justin Hatch: Wow, that was beautiful, Michele.

Michele Solberg: Thank you!

Justin Hatch: Maybe, maybe that's the best place for us to, to leave this thing.

Michele Solberg: Yeah.

[crashing sounds]

Justin Hatch: Maybe that's even better.

Michele Solberg: Maybe. There you go.

Justin Hatch: Thank you so much for being here with us. This is the “How We Write” podcast and we've had Michelle Solberg here with us. Thanks so much.

Michele Solberg: Thank you.

Alice Batt: That was Justin Hatch with Michelle Solberg. Just a reminder that “How We Write” is a production of the University Writing Center at the University of Texas at Austin. Our theme music was created by none other than Michelle Solberg. I'm Alice Batt. Until next time, keep writing.

Justin: Nailed it!

[laughter]