

00:00:00	Music	Music	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:13	Jesse Thorn	Host	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> I'm Jesse Thorn. It's <i>Bullseye!</i>
00:00:14	Music	Music	"Huddle Formation" from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:22	Jesse	Host	Josh Gondelman is a standup comic and a writer. And he's also really nice. Like, if you say his name to somebody in comedy—if you go up to somebody and say, "Hey, what do you think about Josh Gondelman?" They're gonna say, <i>[excited]</i> "Oh! Josh Gondelman! He's so nice!" When Josh takes the stage, he says that he's like if a cardigan were a person. But Josh Gondelman isn't just nice. He's also incisive. He's a brilliant writer. He's won two Peabodys and three Emmys for writing on John Oliver's show, <i>Last Week Tonight</i> , and these days he writes for Showtime's <i>Desus & Maro</i> . He also has a new book out. It's about learning to be nice and how to not let the nice be the enemy of the good. It's called <i>Nice Try: Stories of Best Intentions and Mixed Results</i> . Before we get into the interview, let's play a bit of his standup. This is from his most recent album, <i>Dancing on a Weeknight</i> , which came out earlier this year.
00:01:20	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:21	Clip	Clip	Josh Gondelman: There's a confidence in a 94-year-old who's doing well that you're not gonna see anywhere else in humanity, right? My great aunt walks around all day like she just won an Oscar on top of Mt. Everest. <i>[The audience laughs.]</i> Just: unbeatable swagger. Oxygen tank. <i>[Audience laughs uproariously for a long time.]</i> <i>[Delighted]</i> The confidence comes out in weird ways. We took her out to lunch. At the end of the meal, the waiter comes over. He says, "Would you like some dessert? We have one dessert special, today. It's a slice of pumpkin pie." My great aunt looks him in the eyes and goes, "We'll have some grapes for the table." <i>[Audience laughs.]</i> He goes, "Grapes?!" She goes, "For the table."

[Audience laughs.]

The waiter walks out of the room—presumably to quit, is what I thought was happening.

[Audience laughs.]

[Dejected] “I’m going back to law school like my dad keeps saying.”

[Audience laughs. One audience member yells “OOOOOH!” before breaking into pinched laughter.]

Comes back, two minutes later, three bowls of grapes for the table.

[Audience chuckles.]

There weren’t even grapes on the menu at this restaurant.
Music swells and fades.

00:02:20	Sound Effect	Transition	
00:02:21	Jesse	Host	Josh Gondelman! Welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . It’s nice to have you on the show.
00:02:24	Josh Gondelman	Guest	Thank you so much for having me, Jesse! It’s a pleasure to be here.
00:02:26	Jesse	Host	Josh, are you a nice man?
00:02:29	Josh	Guest	<i>[Pause]</i> I try!
00:02:30	Jesse	Host	What does that mean?
00:02:32	Josh	Guest	I try to be courteous and helpful and, uh, and pleasant and—and not a monster.
00:02:37	Jesse	Host	Is that something that you aspire to or identify as?
00:02:41	Josh	Guest	Great question. I think it’s both. I definitely aspire to... being—being a good person and being a kind person, but I think I also identify—like, I am a person who has an interest in... being that? And so, I also identify as that. I think there are people who don’t identify as nice. Who are like, “No, I—I’m not nice, because I tell it like it is,” or whatever.

[Jesse chuckles.]

00:03:04	Jesse	Host	And I think I’m like, “Uh, no, I’m pretty gentle.” <i>[Laughing softly]</i> Wouldn’t you say your job, as a comedian, is to be a <u>ruthless truth teller</u> ?
00:03:09	Josh	Guest	<i>[Chuckling]</i> I would say I’m a truth teller with some ruth.
00:03:12	Jesse	Host	<i>[Laughs]</i> And what if Ruth’s in the room? You’re not gonna tell any unnecessarily harsh truths about her!
00:03:19	Josh	Guest	No! What’s funny about this is that I have a great aunt named Ruth who is not the one that that joke is about, but this is just making me think about just talking trash about my great aunt Ruth in front of her.
00:03:29	Jesse	Host	At what point in your life did you realize there might be a difference between being a nice person and being a good person?
00:03:37	Josh	Guest	<i>[Sighs thoughtfully.]</i> I think it’s gotten, like, demonstrably vaster over the last few years? It’s all—it’s been there for, I think, most of my adult life, but coming up on like 2015, 2016—the election to present—it, like, the divide amongst, like, people who are kind of like <u>polite</u> but unkind and—and ungenerous and the people who are

like... actually, you know, actually doing work to make people's lives better, became more obvious to me. And maybe it's a—you know—maybe I came late to the game, on that. I'm sure I did. But, like, it—the—the chasm seemed to, like, split open a little wider around then.

00:04:17 Jesse Host
00:04:19 Josh Guest

What do you think is the difference?

I think nice is like polite, easy to get along with, and kind is like doing things that might be uncomfortable for the sake of goodness and generosity. That—that's kind of how I define it, in my mind.

00:04:33 Jesse Host
00:04:35 Josh Guest

What was the first time you did comedy?

I did—a friend of mine had a coffee house that—at a, like, a local rec center, and I did a bit. I was maybe 17 or 18. It was either between—I—it must have been 18. It was, like, right after... ah, senior year of high school. And I remember having this bit that I would do with friends, that I think everyone was probably tired of, about movie theaters that—I'm sure, like, *Seinfeld* has done a better version of this same idea. It's, like, such a picky, little, like, *Seinfeldian* observation—but my joke was bad.

Just about how I was at—went to a movie theater with two sizes of, um, soda and one was medium, and one was large. And I said you can't have a medium without the small and the large to compare it to. And that was basically end of joke. *[Laughs.]* It was just a, just a cranky observation. It was kind of an Andy Rooney—type thought.

00:05:25 Jesse Host
00:05:28 Josh Guest

[Chuckling] Did you do a lot of gesticulating toward the camera?

[Laughs] Yeah, I looked right at the camera that I imagined to be there.

00:05:32 Jesse Host
00:05:35 Josh Guest

You lifted up the cups and said, *[crankily]* "Aaah!"

[Laughs.]

[In an Andy Rooney impersonation] "Back in my day, there was one size. It was called soda!"

00:05:40 Jesse Host
00:05:43 Crosstalk Crosstalk

We both have a really good Andy Rooney impression, by the way.

Jesse: I don't know if you noticed.

00:05:45 Jesse Host

Josh: We're really good, yeah.

We're both kind of gifted mimics. We're real James Adomians, over here.

00:05:48 Josh Guest
00:05:51 Jesse Host

I think we should go on the road as dueling Rooneys.

[Cackles and pulls himself back together.] W-why did you want to do comedy? Comedy is not necessarily a nice man's game.

00:06:02 Josh Guest

No. That's true. I was, uh—"man" was a generous term for 18-year-old me, as well. I'd—I'd done theatre throughout most of high school, and I always played the, kind of, funny parts and—and I really liked that. I felt like I had an aptitude for it, and I would write things for, like, school variety shows, and I really liked doing it. I liked writing funny things. Like—um, performing them. And it—it felt like an extension of that. It felt like a way to bring that—that kind of extracurricular fun, like, into the world.

So, I did that and then I didn't do standup again for, like, probably a year? It was just—I had this opportunity and then I didn't really seek it out for another year or so. But it—I really—I liked having an outlet for that. And in college I started—I was doing improv, freshman year, and it just didn't quite scratch the itch in the same way, because I wasn't good at it.

[They chuckle.]

I wasn't good at improv. And I wasn't, like—I felt—one of the things I like about standup is that you can have an idea. You can script it fully, or—or, you know, take as much as you want of it to an audience. Tell it to them, and then know immediately whether it feels good or bad to do. And with improv, you don't get to, like, recalibrate the same way. You do it and if it's good, then it's good and then it's gone forever. And if it's bad, then it's bad and it's gone forever and you never get to be like, "Oh! What if I did this?"

And so, I—I tried—I started doing standup. Which I—I was better at it, because I could exercise some kind of, like, control as opposed to letting go and trusting other people.

00:07:38 Jesse Host

Are there other parts of your life where you have had to work on wanting to control everything?

00:07:46 Josh Guest

Yeah! I think so. I used to be—I can't remember the—the like—a specific time, but I would remember, like, if I made a plan with someone, if I was like, "We're gonna go to this restaurant at this time." I would be very much looking forward to it, and then the restaurant would be full, or whatever, and I would feel like I let the other person down even though they had no stake in eating at that particular restaurant, or what—you know, stories like that, or—and I would feel—I would be very, like, apologetic and very anxious about not delivering the promised experience. And I think I've gotten better with time.

[Jesse chuckles softly in the background.]

At—at trusting, like, if I'm like, "Hey, there are these great quesadillas you'll like."

And then the restaurant is closed that day, that my friend isn't gonna be like, "Well, uh, you didn't deliver on the quesadillas and we are finished."

00:08:36 Jesse Host

Josh, my parents divorced when I was three and were in legal conflict until I was in my mid-teens. So, why are you like this?

00:08:47 Josh Guest

[Laughs.]

I do not know. I have—I can't trace it. My parents stayed together through my childhood and remain together and are large—are—seem like they're very happy and contented people. Um. I don't know if it's just Judaism? I truly don't know. And I'm like—I feel fairly well-adjusted, but I also think there are, like, ways I'm always trying to, like, do better and let go a little more. O-or, um, collaborate a little better. It's weird because I really love people and working with people and being friends, but I also, like—I am a person who, because of work—'cause I, like, kind of take on too much work, a lot of the time—I'll, like, miss a lot of social obligations for standup or for, you know, for writing jobs.

And so, like, I feel like I'm—I'm an incredibly extroverted person who's also a *[chuckling]* lone wolf at times? And I don't know how to reconcile that.

00:09:47 Jesse Host

[Giggling quietly] Ah, you're speaking to my heart, Josh.

[Josh cackles.]

			Speaking to my heart. <i>[Beat]</i> Um, I'm gonna get into Howard Stern territory, for a second.
00:09:55	Josh	Guest	Please!
00:09:56	Jesse	Host	How old were you when you first had sex? And you're a straight guy, so I'm gonna—I'm gonna characterize sex as... a gentleman part into... lady part. Middle of the body.
00:10:09	Josh	Guest	Sure. Sure, sure, sure, sure. And, right, and then we're talking, like—cisgender gentleman part, cisgendered lady part, for the sake of—
00:10:17	Jesse	Host	This is in this specific case, yeah.
00:10:19	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	Josh: Yeah.
			Jesse: This is in this specific case.
			Josh: For sure.
00:10:21	Josh	Guest	Uum... I—y-yes. I was about to—I was about to qualify, too. But I was 22, which was—like, I don't mean to brag, but, like, it had been on the table, earlier, and I was just like, "Well. You're supposed to wait 'til you know it's the right person." And then I, uh, since then have been like, "You know... there's... what's <u>right</u> ?"
			<i>[They chuckle.]</i>
			"Who can say?"
00:10:45	Jesse	Host	<i>[Laughs quietly for a few seconds.]</i>
			I mean it's not an act that will ever <u>really</u> go right the <i>[chuckling]</i> first few times around.
00:10:54	Josh	Guest	For <u>sure</u> ! And like, the longer you wait, the more of a head start you're giving other people on, like, knowing what they want and what—how to do things that you might enjoy. And so, it, like, it wasn't like I was doing—I wasn't, like, abstaining from all physical touch, until that point. But it was, like—I think by the time I started, like, engaging in, like, fully adult sexuality I was like, "Mm-hm. Sure. Maybe, I—uh... could have <i>[laughing]</i> learned a little something before I got to this point."
00:11:29	Jesse	Host	Were you in situations where you declined?
00:11:35	Josh	Guest	Yeah. I think there were, like—there was at least one situation where I, like, specifically declined and then a couple situations where, like, I think... <u>both</u> parties kind of, like, lacked the vocabulary to get to the point where someone would have to be like, <i>[poshly]</i> "Oh, no thank you. Not for me."
			Um, but yeah. It was like, I definitely had declined.
00:11:59	Jesse	Host	Do you remember what was going through your head, at the time?
00:12:02	Josh	Guest	Yeah! I think I was—it—
00:12:03	Jesse	Host	How—how old were you, for one thing?
00:12:05	Josh	Guest	Probably, like, 18?
00:12:08	Jesse	Host	W-what was the situation?
00:12:09	Josh	Guest	It was somebody—somebody that I'd been dating and I—I think, in this particular instance, I remembered thinking, like, "You know, I—I <u>don't</u> know if I... want to be in this relationship? And I don't want to, like, take another step of—not commitment, but to, like, to make the relationship more serious and more, um, intense than it is, now."

00:12:37 Jesse Host *[Beat.]* Do you think you were right to think that?
 00:12:39 Josh Guest I do, in that instance. I think I was—I was right. But also, like, I would have been right to not think that, if that makes sense.
 00:12:46 Jesse Host Can you give me an example of a time in your life when you were not nice? When you think it was the right way to behave?
 00:12:55 Josh Guest Yeah! I mean, I talk about, in the book—this is, like, such a low-impact example, but I made a vow to myself—my New Year’s resolution, like, four years ago was to stop apologizing when other people bump into me.
 00:13:07 Jesse Host *[Humorously]* And you live in New York City.
 00:13:08 Josh Guest I live in New York City! And I was apologizing a lot.

[Jesse chuckles.]

And I was coming out of the train and a guy bumped into me on the way in—which, you always wait for people to get out of the train before you get onto it, because it will not leave until everyone is off it, and then you’re on it and that’s the order of things. We live in a society.

[Jesse laughs.]

00:13:30 Jesse Host And...
 00:13:32 Josh Guest *[Loudly]* There! Are! Rules!
 There are rules! And *[laughs]* attention must be paid. I’m just, like, full Willy Loman.

[Jesse laughs.]

So, I—I was walking into the train. A guy bumped me—not hard enough to, like, hurt, but hard enough to be like, “You’re doing the wrong thing.”

And I said, “I’m sorry,” and then as the doors closed, I yelled, “No! I’m not sorry!”

[Jesse guffaws.]

And, uh, it’s like that kind of stuff. Just, like, the idea of doing that. I’m trying to think—I also, I’ll get a little snotty online, too. And I—and I think—I think that’s part of it. Is like, a thing that is not nice, that is good is, like, saying when things and people are... bull*[censored]*. And I think that that—that’s, like, something I’m really working on doing better, is not, like, letting stuff slide that I’m like, “Oh, that’s a messed up way to be.” Or, “That’s, like, an uncool thing to say.”

And I’m, like, little by little expanding my comfort zone of being able to be, like—you know, it’s easier to let this go, but if I say, “Hey, that’s not cool. That’s, like, a harmful—it’s—that’s inaccurate and harmful.” I’m striving towards more of that.

00:14:39 Jesse Host What’s an example of that?
 00:14:41 Josh Guest Uum... I don’t know if this—this works. The most—the most recent example that comes to mind is when—when David Koch, uh, passed away. I had tweeted... something like, “David Koch has passed away. In lieu of flowers, please develop a shadow network

of shell companies that are technically non-profits and enable donations to influence the future of American politics and deregulate and destroy the environment.” Something like that.

And that’s, you know, that’s fine. That’s, like, a—a joke. And, uh, people would say—there were a bunch of people—I think it got blogged on Fox News, and so a bunch of, uh, people who disagree with me were... would say things like, *[in a low, mocking voice]*, “Hey. You know, someone died.”

00:15:25 Jesse Host
00:15:27 Josh Guest

00:15:29 Jesse Host
00:15:31 Josh Guest

And I would say to them—
Did they tweet at you in that voice?
Yeah. I think they all had that voice. *[Chuckling.]* Men, women, children.
[Laughing] Right.
Um... I just. I—I mean, look. I’m proud of myself for not doing a stereotypical southern accent.

[They chuckle.]

So, and my response to that was—I was more patient, at first. And it happened a lot of times and my wife eventually had to be like, “Why are you still responding to these people?” And I had to pull myself away, a little bit.

But my response was, “Look, when you do a bad thing when you’re alive, it doesn’t go away when you’re dead. And, like, it’s still worth commenting upon.”

And they would go, “Uh, he has a family.”

00:16:04 Jesse Host

00:16:23 Promo Promo

And I would go, “Well, are you gonna show ‘em the tweet?”
We’ve got even more with Josh Gondelman. Don’t go anywhere. After the break, he’s known for giving people pep talks on twitter, and I will have him give one to you, my dear, sweet NPR listener. Back in a minute! It’s *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
Music: Spooky organ music plays.

Maddie Sofia: Maddie Sofia, here—host of NPR’s daily science podcast, *Short Wave*. This week, don’t miss a special batch of Halloween episodes, including one on the terrifying intelligence...

[Sound of a crow cawing.]

Of crows. *[Creeped out]* Ooh. Listen and subscribe to *Short Wave*, from NPR.

00:16:43 Promo Promo

[Music ends with one final, dramatic chord.]
[Sound of a gavel banging three times.]

Music: Upbeat music plays under dialogue.

Speaker 1: Judge John Hodgeman ruled in my favor.

Speaker 2: Judge John Hodgeman ruled in my friend’s favor.

Speaker 3: Judge John Hodgman ruled in my favor.

Judge John Hodgeman: I'm Judge John Hodgeman. You're hearing the voices of real litigants. Real people, who have submitted disputes to my internet court, at the *Judge John Hodgeman* podcast. I hear their cases. I ask them questions—they're good ones—and then I tell them who's right and who's wrong.

Speaker 1: Thanks to Judge John Hodgeman's ruling, my dad has been forced to retire one of the worst Dad Jokes of all time.

Speaker 3: Instead of cutting his own hair with a Flowbee, my husband has his hair cut professionally.

Speaker 4: I have to join a community theatre group.

Speaker 5: And my wife has stopped bringing home wild animals.

Judge John Hodgeman: It's the *Judge John Hodgeman* podcast. Find it every Wednesday at MaximumFun.org, or wherever you download podcasts.

[Sound of a gavel banging three times.]

Speaker 1: Thanks, Judge John Hodgeman!

[Music ends.]

00:17:39	Jesse	Host	Welcome back to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with Josh Gondelman. He's a writer for <i>Desus & Maro</i> , on Showtime. Before that he earned three Emmys and two Peabodys for writing for <i>Last Week Tonight with John Oliver</i> . He's also a great standup comic with a handful of albums to his name, and he has a book. It's called <i>Nice Try: Stories of Best Intentions and Mixed Results</i> . It's in bookstores, now.
00:18:09	Josh	Guest	I just saw an amazing set that Nikki Glaser did on a Comedy Central roast.
00:18:10	Jesse	Host	Oh, yeah! Very funny standup comic. And I found <i>[laughing]</i> myself wondering—Josh, you've written a lot of jokes for television.
00:18:18	Josh	Guest	Yeah.
00:18:19	Jesse	Host	What would you do if you were asked to write roast jokes? Or have you ever written roast jokes?
00:18:23	Josh	Guest	I've—I've done a little. I'm not <u>great</u> at it. I would've—
00:18:27	Jesse	Host	<i>[Jokingly]</i> Even with your famous killer instinct?
00:18:29	Josh	Guest	<i>[Laughing]</i> I do. When I get onstage, I just see that <i>Mortal Combat</i> , "finish him" come up.

[Jesse laughs.]

But I like—I love writing jokes. And so, like, on one level a roast really appeals to me, but I prefer it to be with people that I have a little better personal knowledge of, because otherwise it's just like, "Look at this person who's an older woman." You know what I mean? Or like, "Look at this person who is, uh, overweight." And,

like, I think that doesn't really appeal to me as much—of just, like, doing that surface level stuff. I did write—I think I can—I think I can say this. I did sent Nikki, for a previous roast, a joke that I think made it into the roast. And maybe—maybe it was even in the promo, which was—it was for the roast of Rob Lowe, and I wrote—the joke was, “As a little girl, I had such a crush on Rob Lowe” or “as a teenage girl, I had such on Rob Lowe, and then when I grew up I realized, ugh, I'd missed my shot.”

[Jesse chortles.]

And it's like a very dark joke, but it's not—but the—the target of the joke is, like, I find rightfully mean, if that makes sense? It's not like, “Look at this woman. She's gay, isn't that hilarious?” It's like, “This guy did this thing and we let it slide and I'm going to bring it up because it's uncomfortable and true.”

00:19:53 Jesse Host Do you ever think of jokes and you think, “That is a funny joke, but it is not something that I would want to do onstage?”

00:20:00 Josh Guest Yeah, for sure. It doesn't happen that much. I feel like I've refined... my voice enough that, like, I mostly think things... that are my thoughts and make them comedic, as opposed to, like, grasping at, “Oh, I could write a joke about this or this is a funny thing to say.” So, I'm trying—I try to do more of that and that helps a lot. But there are definitely things where I'll have an idea and I have to make sure, like, “Oh, this part is funny, but I wanna make sure I'm, uh, not throwing people under the bus in a way that is not what I'm intending.”

Like, I said, recently, you know—I think it's okay to hurt someone's feelings with a joke, as long as you're trying to hurt their feelings with that joke. And what I'm trying to avoid doing is, like, hurting people's feelings for the sake of a joke that is not intended to do that.

00:20:54 Jesse Host *[Josh agrees intermittently as Jesse speaks.]* My experience is that... comics are generally pretty generous with each other. Particularly because they—they know how hard it is to be a comic. They know how hard it is to make someone laugh and they also... you know, I think you don't become a comedian without a... a relatively thick skin and also a—an immense respect for someone who can make a good joke—whether or not the good joke has the target that you would—yourself would choose or the, uh, content that you yourself would choose.

Like, there's a kind of fundamental respect for that. I also, kind of, wanna stipulate that, like... the stuff that's going around about, you know, there being a comedy civil war is... not reflective of what comics—the way that comics that I know generally talk about each other.

But... as a guy who thinks of yourself as nice, and obviously prioritizes that, in your life—prioritizes taking care of other people... do you see comedy that upsets you?

00:22:09 Josh Guest *[Pauses thoughtfully and sighs.]* That's a—that's a very good question. I definitely see comedy that I don't like. And... it's tough—I think in addition to the, um... the other things that you said in

			reasons that comedians are generous with one another, right? I think it's also—there's the fact that, like, we are coworkers.
00:22:33	Jesse	Host	Right.
00:22:34	Josh	Guest	And there's no, like, real HR? So, it's tough—I think that there's, like, a letting things slide or, like, a self-selecting into or out of certain communities that... um, that happens. That I know—you know that I'm a—that I'm a part of, like—I think every joke that I'm like, "Man, that jokes bums me out, 'cause I—it seems like it's—it's mean spirited or, like, hurtful." I don't feel comfortable, every time I see that, being like—putting somebody on blast.
			And it—but it's like—there are, like, places where I do and don't work, or, um—you know, standup and, like, other parts of the industry, just because I'm like—you know, I don't feel comfortable being in—you know, even implicitly, like, endorsing a lot of the stuff that happens here, even if I'm not gonna go out on a limb and be like, "I think this person or this joke is, like, not good." Does that make sense? I'm a little rambly.
			<i>[Josh agrees intermittently as Jesse speaks.]</i>
00:23:34	Jesse	Host	No, that—that does make sense. When you're working, essentially, as always an independent contractor on a day-to-day basis—you know, you're going and doing ten minutes for, you know—in a good room, maybe a couple hundred bucks.
			And you're hitting the road and making a few thousand, how do you decide where to draw the line about what space you do and don't wanna be in when it's also your job and you have a, you know, you're married. <i>[Chuckles.]</i>
			You live in New York.
00:24:07	Josh	Guest	Right. I get to pick and choose a little bit more, because I'm in writer's rooms so much and that, like, so much of my income comes from that. That's, like, I mean, I think that's the easiest way to get to go, "Oh, you know what? Like, I don't really feel comfortable doing this show or whatever, just 'cause, like, I'm not super into the general vibe of it." And I have that liberty, I think. It's not even that I begrudge other people for doing it. It's just like, "Oh, this isn't super comfortable for me. So, it's not something that I'm gonna pursue."
			And having that, like—a little more flexibility is helpful. It's also, like, one—I mean, truly, like, one of the things that I think about, like, one of the criteria—it's not like, "Do I think these—this person is a bad person? Do I—I do I think their act is bad? I will avoid everyone who's, like, comedy isn't for my sensibilities." 'Cause there's, like, plenty of very good stuff that is, like, not for me. But it's like, if someone came to see me and they watch the show, would they feel like... happy and enjoy it and feel like, you know, safe? Or would they feel like, "Oh, this was, like, kind of a hostile environment, to me."
			So, that's something I, like try to think about.
00:25:20	Jesse	Host	Do you think PC Culture has gone too far?
00:25:22	Josh	Guest	<i>[Laughs.]</i> Let's get into it. Um. I don't know, I think—I will say the thing I think about this, very sincerely, with—you know—without trying—without trying to be buzzwordy about things, is I think it's

important that comics are mindful of the things they're saying and, like, consider what they're saying and the impact that it has on people.

And there are comedians who... push... the envelope in ways that they—that this, maybe, controversial or confrontational, and are, like, fully accepting that, like, that's—that people are going to be... turned off. And then I there are times people go, "Well, I should be able to say things that are upsetting and then reap the full benefits of everyone liking me."

[Jesse laughs.]

00:26:24 Jesse Host

Which feels, um... *[chuckling]* counterintuitive? But I think—I think it's good to, like, think about what you're doing and what—what you're saying. 'Cause, again, it's like, you're talking to a lot of people and it's like a—it is kind of a big responsibility.

The culture shift that I see—and I'm running a half-baked theory past you here, Josh. But the culture shift that I see is that I feel like there are a lot of comics, including great comics, who... came into comedy being told that audience response represents the ultimate judgment, ultimate truth, and ultimate good.

For those comics... part of—for many comics, including others—like, one of the big appeals of comedy is if the audience laughs, you're doing good. If the audience doesn't laugh, you need to change something. You find out right away and you can do something different or do something the same, on that basis.

00:27:33 Josh Guest

And I feel like when comics are complaining about people being upset that they're doing a joke that upsets people and some people walk out, or whatever, often what those comics are complaining about is that they feel like they can no longer trust that value system that they put a lot of energy into.

I do—I do think, and this is, like, no particular shade at any particular person or, you know, not looking askance at anyone specific, but I do think when people make the complaint that audience—and there are times where I am in front of audiences where I'm like, "Come on. Grow up." Like, that's truly—that's a feeling that I have, and I wouldn't necessarily, like, put it on them. You know, if you—like, I think Jerry Seinfeld has famously talked about not liking the sensibility of college crowds, right? And I have, myself, been in front of college crowds and not found them too PC—ah, that's, like, not a rubric that I really think about—but I have been in front of college crowds and been like, "Oh, their life experience is such that they don't relate to this kind of, like, dark thing that I'm saying or this kind of, like, grown up thing that I'm saying. And they have maybe a more—a delicate sensibility around certain things."

And it's like, that's their prerogative. And, like, ultimately, if when you—complaining about audiences in general being too sensitive is like, you're kind of telling on yourself for just bombing the lot. 'Cause, like, when an audience is sensitive and doesn't like what you're doing, that is what bombing is. It's the same as, like, if I went into a room and people are like, "You're not talking enough about

how you hate your wife and she's dumb!" Right? And I'm bombing. That's—it's bombing.

And so, like, I do think if you're going to say that audience laughter is the ultimate arbiter—which I don't think it is—you also have to acknowledge that, like, when you are in front of different audiences and they are not laughing, that it's not that they aren't on the same page with, like, the one true comedy. It's that you're eating *[censored]*.

00:29:14 Jesse Host *[They both chuckle.]*
I think there's a secondary thing, too, which is that... if you presume that the audience's laughter equals success—purely, without exception—

[Josh agrees.]

—you put yourself in a position where, for many crowds that you perform to, there may be very different kinds of responses within the crowd; and if 90% of the audience is laughing, you are doing very well by the rubric “if the audience laughs, you're doing well,” no matter what is going on with the remaining 10%. And I think that, for me, the point that drove home that that was a fallacious way of thinking of the world was jokes about rape and sexual assault.

So, in my mind, when I was maybe in my 20's, I thought, “Look, jokes have a target. If the joke is—has a clear target and the clear target is not the victim, it's okay to do a joke about this.” Like, if I'm not picking on someone, if I'm not punching down, it's okay to do a joke about that. If it's a good joke, whatever. And that was obviously coming from a place of immense privilege that I've never, in my life, had to be concerned about sexual assault, for myself.

And then someone very nicely *[chuckles]* explained to me that, given the proportion of people who are victims of sexual assault, any room that I'm performing for or audience for whom I'm performing, there are people in that audience who have been victims of sexual assault. And the impact on them is extraordinary, if someone makes light of it. Even if the target is not victims.

00:31:07 Jesse Host

[Josh agrees.]

Even if the target is perpetrators or it's completely abstract or it's about, you know—it could be about a horrific dictator, or something, that's the target of the joke. But just including it in there really could hurt people. And that's something that I feel like some of those older comics want to cop out of, entirely. Something that I see, where they're like, “Well, I got most of the people there to laugh at me.” And I under—*[stammering]* like I said, I understand the impulse, because I've—I'm, you know, I'm a nice enough guy, but, like, I—I constructed systems to describe why I wasn't punching down, if I said something about that.

But it's something that I see sensitivity to in many younger comics and sometimes the absence of sensitivity to in older comics. Both in this specific case and more generally.

00:32:05 Josh Guest Yeah. I think, again, it just—to me, it comes back to being mindful of what you're saying and the kind of impact it has on people. And it's like—it doesn't mean... like, agreed. Fully agreed that, like, when 90% of the audience is laughing and you're a comedian and your job is to make people laugh, right, and it feels like you're doing almost as good a job of your job as possible, it's hard to hear, like, the 10% of people in this room—you know, we're just going with this 90-10 split—the 10%, their feelings supersede or could supersede the response of the other 90%.

So, I fully understand the idea of, like... having to craft an hour of material or a career-full of hours of material that appeals to 100% of the people in any given room, is thorny. And, like, maybe not possible, but I think, like, again—having that mindfulness of like, “What am I saying? Who am I saying it to? And, like, what impact is it having on people?” It's, like, a—a very reasonable, but difficult responsibility to undertake. But, like, the responsibilities that you're, like, not undertaking when you do that for a job, is like—getting up at 8AM [*laughs*] and, uh, you know what I mean? Like you're doing—these are a different set of responsibilities than people who work in other kinds of jobs may have to think about.

00:33:31 Jesse Host Do you feel like your career as a comedian is good? Do you feel good about your choice of having gone into that field of work?

00:33:42 Josh Guest Not as a good as, like, if I had stayed as an educator, probably. But I've gotten to work on a bunch of things that I feel really proud of—from *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, to *Desus & Maro*, and I try to do standup that I feel like is increasingly a source of joy and comfort to people, and, like, diminishingly, kind of just like, a collection of words to get people to laugh so I feel good about me?

[Jesse chuckles.]

And I'm not, like, a big believer in, like, you know—*[monotone]* “comedy, it's the most important thing in the world, 'cause people need to laugh.” But I am like, “Well—I'm not an arms manufacturer.”

[Jesse laughs.]

So, there's a spectrum.

[He waits while Jesse laughs.]

And I try to be good outside of work, as well. I think, like, living a whole human life, uh, is more important—or it's *[stammering]*—you can live a whole human life that includes what you do for a living that isn't fully defined by it.

00:34:38 Jesse Host You will occasionally offer pep talks on Twitter. You'll take a ten-minute window of your life and offer to say some encouraging words. And I've seen you say encouraging words both to total stranger and to friends and colleagues, in that context. We have some people listening on National Public Radio, at the moment. I wonder if you have it in your heart to offer them one of your signature pep talks?

00:35:04 Josh Guest Absolutely. I'm trying to think of the broadest one that is still meaningful.

[They both laugh.]

'Cause I'm talking to a bunch of disparate listeners. Um, I—I think something that I find to be—it sounds platitude-ish, but it's also true and helpful to hear articulated sometimes, maybe—is that lots of things are bad. That's not the peppy part. Is that lots of things are bad, but, like, there are people working to make them better and you can be one of those people and there's, like, love and support for you, even when it feels like there might not be.

00:35:49 Jesse Host

Well, Josh Gondelman, I sure enjoyed your book, *Nice Try*. I'm such a fan of yours and proud to be your pal. So...

00:35:55 Josh Guest

Thank you!

00:35:56 Jesse Host

Thank you very much for coming on *Bullseye*.

00:35:58 Josh Guest

Thank you for having me.

00:35:59 Jesse Host

Josh Gondelman, everyone. One of the funniest guys out there. His book is called *Nice Try: Stories of Best Intentions and Mixed Results*. It's out now. He also put out a great standup album, this year, called *Dancing on a Weeknight*. For his day job, Josh writes on *Desus & Maro*, on Showtime—which airs Mondays and Thursday nights, at 11.

00:36:21 Music Music

Bluesy music plays.

00:36:25 Jesse Host

That's the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is produced at MaximumFun.org world headquarters, overlooking MacArthur Park in beautiful Los Angeles, California—where this week was spotted: a turtle... riding a sofa cushion around the lake.

Nature in her majesty.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio is our associate producer. We get help from Casey O'Brien. Our production fellows are Jordan Kauwling and Melissa Dueñas. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Our thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it.

And we've got all kinds of past episodes of *Bullseye* that you should go check out. Not just in your podcast app, although your podcast app is a great place to look, but also on our website, on Facebook, on YouTube. One example—Josh Gondelman, who has appeared in several of our end-of-the-year, best standup comedy specials—you can check those out in any of those places. Josh is hilarious. You can also find *Bullseye* on social media. We're @Bullseye on Twitter, you should follow us there. We're at [Facebook.com/bullseyewithjessethorn](https://www.facebook.com/bullseyewithjessethorn). We'll probably be on TikTok, soon. I'm working on my clown transformations.

I guess that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.

00:37:47 Promo Promo

Speaker: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]