I'm Jesse Thorn. It's *Bullseye*.

“Huddle Formation” from the album *Thunder, Lightning, Strike* by The Go! Team.

Ed Helms got his start as a correspondent on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. During his run there, he also booked a gig on a little show called *The Office*. For seven seasons, he played the awkward but loveable Andy Bernard: an insecure Dunder Mifflin Paper salesman, prone to occasional rage and, of course, to a cappella singing.

A Cappella Group: [Singing “tweddle deedle dee”s in harmony; the sound is tinny as though played through speakers.]

Andy: [In the recording.] He rocks in the tree tops all day long
Hoppin’ and a-boppin’ and a-singing the song
All the little birds on Jaybird street

[Music continues underneath dialogue.]

Speaker 1: Is that you singing?

Andy: All four parts. Recorded on my computer. Took me foreveeer.

Speaker 1: Nice job.

Andy: Thank you muchly.

His breakout movie role was *The Hangover*. You know *The Hangover*, probably—a group of guys take a trip to Las Vegas for a wild bachelor party. They wake up with a hangover and no memory of what had happened the night before, as they stumble around Vegas, trying to piece together the details. The movie was a smash hit. It spawned two sequels, which were also big hits. The franchise turned Ed Helms into what Hollywood insiders like me like to call… a movie star. Sorry if that’s too jargon-y.

His latest role is in Netflix’s *Coffee & Kareem*. It’s an action comedy with a bit of a sweet side. In it, he portrays a Detroit police officer named James Coffee. Coffee isn’t particularly good at his job. He doesn’t get a lot of respect at the precinct. In fact, as the movie starts, he just accidentally lost a big-time criminal. But then he’s thrust into action. Coffee has to rescue his girlfriend and her 12-year-old son, named Kareem, after the boy witnesses a murder.

Let’s listen to a clip from the film. Here, Coffee is talking with Kareem. They’re alone for the first time. Kareem isn’t thrilled his
Mom is dating a police officer and Coffee knows that, but he's still trying to bond with him. So, he decides to open up with Kareem about his childhood.

Music swells and fades.

Coffee: I just wanna say, I know how weird this is. You know. My dad wasn’t around, either.

[A car horn honks in the distance.]

Coffee: And when my mom dated guys, I saw it as a threat. But there was one guy that, uh… I just decided, “Hey, I’m gonna give this guy a chance.” And I did. And we became… BFFs.

Kareem and Coffee: [Stumbling in an attempt to speak in unison.] Best—best friends forever.

Coffee: And guess who he is now?

Kareem: [Unimpressed.] Who?

Coffee: [Smugly.] My stepdad!

[Kareem huffs a small laugh.]

Coffee: Yeah. So. The moral of the story is that sometimes a stepdad is a step in the right direction.

Kareem: You were BFFs with a grown-[censored] man?! That’s so sick and [censored]! There’s literally documentaries on Netflix about why that’s so sick and [censored]ed up!

Coffee: I think that’s a different—

Kareem: [Disgusted] You expect us to be BF—[censor] out of my face, man.

[The sound of a door closing.]

Music swells and fades.

Ed Helms, welcome to Bullseye. It’s great to have you back on the show.

It is wonderful to be here! Thank you.

Did you ever imagine yourself as a star of a—playing a policeman in an action comedy?

It's the only thing I ever imagined, as an actor.

Uum. It’s funny, I don’t see this as—I mean, it is obviously a cop—like it’s sort of a buddy-cop comedy, but I just think of it as a comedy, you know? And it feels like, kind of in keeping—this character feels a little bit in keeping with what I do! So, yeah. [Chuckles.] It just felt like a no-brainer.

How would you describe what you do?

I would describe what I do as the art of acting perfected.
00:03:56 Jesse Host
Yeah, no, I’ve thought of you—always thought of you as like a latter
day Uta Hagen type figure.

00:04:16 Ed Guest
Okay. No, I—[laughs] I guess I do—I just like to do comedies in
which I play characters that might seem, kind of, low-status, but
they’re working on themselves and trying to be better people and
maybe, by the end, are—have established some measure of status,
if not exactly high-status. And that’s—that is kind of, to me, a little
bit of my life story. Or how I view it, anyway. And that’s why I love
these characters that are just trying to do better, out there.

00:04:40 Jesse Host
Do you think of yourself as low-status and working on yourself?

00:04:44 Ed Guest
I certainly feel a certain amount of insecurity in just moving through
the world. And I don’t know that it comes off, all that often, but it’s
there. And that’s why a lot of these characters are maybe, like, a
heightened version of that. Right? There are much more sort of
transparently struggling—I’m much better at hiding my struggles, I
guess. [Chuckles.] But this is a guy who, you know—my character
in this movie is—definitely has some work to do.

00:05:23 Jesse Host
You grew up in Atlanta. Did you imagine yourself having an acting
career, when you were a kid?

00:05:30 Ed Guest
I don’t know that it felt very plausible to me for a long, long time. But
it certainly was a—was a… uh, an aspiration very early. I mean, I
can really kind of pinpoint—and this is something I think I share with
so many comedic actors—but early on, it was… it was Saturday
Night Live, and just those things that—those episodes that I would
sneak downstairs to watch when I was eight, nine, ten years old.
And sometimes, at a sleepover, you know, staying up late to watch.
And the—just Eddie Murphy and Joe Piscopo and Phil Hartman and
then, later on, Mike Meyers and Chris Farley and Spade and
Sandler and all these just wonderful… wonder—incredible comedic
actors that were just throwing themselves into these ridiculous,
crazy skits and clearly having a blast doing it.

That was something that—I don’t even think I understood all the
jokes, at that age, but I understood how much fun these people
were having, and I wanted to be a part of it. And it just is something
that stuck with me for forever. And still is with me. Still is a big, kind
of motivating factor.

00:06:57 Jesse Host
Was that something that you shared with your family? Or was it
something where you, like, went downstairs by yourself on Saturday
nights?

00:07:04 Ed Guest
Well, that’s a really great question. I never shared that aspiration
with very many people at all. And I think it’s because in the culture
in which I grew up, it just was not something that seemed
reasonable or practical or even possible to go after. So, I knew that
if I talked about it and if I talked about how much I wanted to be on
Saturday Night Live when I grew up, that I would never get… good
feedback. I would never get, sort of, affirmation of that aspiration.
And so, really for—and on into adulthood—that kind of— weirdly, the
privacy of that goal, I think, kept it sacred to me in a really good
way. And it kept it something that, you know—I was always
somebody who felt like I didn’t wanna tell people what I wanted to
do. I just wanted to show them, once I had done it.
The weird thing is that once you tell people your goals and aspirations—it’s one thing if you’re, like, a manager and you’re trying to run a team of people. You have to talk about goals. But if you’re one person and you’re talking about your personal goals, the minute you share that with other people... you’re kind of giving them an expectation, right? You’re sort of saying to that person, “Here’s what to expect from me.” And then you’re—and if it’s a really outlandish aspiration [chuckles], like joining the cast of Saturday Night Live, after—you know—growing up a thousand miles from show business, in Atlanta, Georgia—then you’re kind of setting yourself up to disappoint that person, in a weird way.

Or, there—or likely to disappoint them. Or at least you’re opening the door to the possibility of disappointing that person. And I was always very precious about that. I don’t know why. And I don’t—I never thought it through this rationally at the time. I just always felt like this was a kind of secret, private thing. And then once I got to New York, in my 20s, that’s when I was able to say, “Oh yeah, I’m in New York to do comedy.” And I could sort of own it. And then I had to kind of cross that next threshold of actually inviting [laughing] my family to come see me do standup comedy! And that’s, I think, a huge—a huge bar for most, uh, most comedians to cross. That’s when I felt like, “Okay! It’s real. This is official. Like, my parents—my family knows. They’ve come. They’ve seen me bomb. They know what I’m up to. I guess I’m legit.”

Did you got to New York specifically with the idea of wanting to do comedy?

Yeees. I had, kind of, two—two tracks in mind. One, I wanted to—because I studied film in college and I was very enamored with, like, the Sundance Film Festival and independent filmmaking and all that. So, New York City was a big hub for that, at the time. And I thought, “Okay, I’m either gonna sorta crack my way into the independent film world and maybe be a filmmaker or... and/or I just wanna do comedy.” And comedy won out. [Laughs.]

It was—it was the thing I found myself drawn to the most. But they were both equally ridiculous.

How did you know about the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre?

So, that started in... I moved to New York City in ’96, I guess? And the Upright Citizens Brigade—and I started doing comedy stuff pretty much right away. I was going to open mic standup nights and I took some improv classes at a little theater on the Upper East Side called Chicago City Limits. It’s weird. I—this was all in New York, but I took improv classes at Chicago City Limits, and I did standup at the Boston Comedy Club. So—which was in the Village. But, uh...

I think we found the hook for this interview, Ed.

[Beat.] Did we?! Alright. Yeah.

Yeah, that’s the headline.

“Helms Admits Unusual Coincidence”.
“Ironic City Names of Comedy Institutions”. But around 1999, I think, I’d just started hearing about it. And I was doing—I was—I had a little sketch group that I was performing with, and we would just see signs up for the Upright Citizens Brigade performances at these different venues. And—I’m blanking on it. There was this little—it was, like, on the 10th floor of some office building, there was, like, a creative space and the—where a lot of comedy shows were happening. Like, underground comedy shows. And UCB was doing stuff there and they were starting to teach classes. And I—I just kinda got on my radar and I thought, “This sound awesome. This sounds like something I wanna be a part of.”

And I went to some shows and then signed up for classes and it was nuts! I mean, it was just the coolest. It was so many wild, weird, wonderful people. A lot of misfits and a lot of really talented, eager, ambitious people. And it was another—another moment of, just, finding like-minded people that made me feel like, “This is possible! This is... this is something I can—I might be able to do.”

Was there something about what in particular you were doing there? Or was it the people that were different? What was the thing that made it feel like it was the—you know—it was a real thing that could really happen?

Well, it was clear that—there was—there was a kind of... intangible excitement about the Upright Citizens Brigade. And it’s one of those things that happens when all of the participants know that they’re part of something special, even if you can’t articulate it and even if the world doesn’t know it, yet. That that just sort of was this little bit of electricity that was kind of running through all of that. And it made it feel special. It made it feel really cool. And again, it wasn’t very long before—well, it’s actually right out of the gate that the Upright Citizens Brigade, themselves—Matt, Ian, the other Matt, and Amy—were all doing sketches on Conan O’Brien. So, he was like—they were like his, sort of, repertory players for the—all the sketches on the Conan O’Brien show.

So—and they were teaching the classes. So, that was, like, a direct link to late-night comedy. And it felt like, “Wow! This is—like, I’m really close to this, now.” And when you can start to see those pathways and see those pipelines and they’re in your own orbit, that’s when it starts to feel real and it starts to feel possible. I just—I always encourage young people to just go... go to the place where you’re in the orbit of people who are doing the thing you wanna do. Had you had the feeling that you have, from improv making music—you’re a pretty committed musician and you’re also, like, you play a lot of music in the kind of folk and bluegrass world, which is very oriented towards kind of community feeling.

Yeah. Well, I think there are a ton of parallels there. Bluegrass in particular is—a is a music form that is similar to jazz, only in that there is a canon of music that most players of that... music know. They know, you know, probably 50 of the same songs, if not more. And so, you can sit down—I can sit down with another bluegrass player who I’ve never met, and we can play—we can just start having fun together, instantly. Just playing songs that we both know. And I’ve had really fun conversations about this, in the past, with—there’s a bluegrass guitar player named Bryan Sutton, lives in Nashville, and he’s kind of widely regarded as just one of the best
bluegrass and country guitar players out there. And improvisation is a big part of that music form, as well. And we’ve had some really fun deep-dive conversations. Not gonna lie, fueled by some whiskey, that uh—[chuckles] just about the excitement of improvisation and, kind of, being in the zone with other people and finding these grooves with people. Both in, you know—in my case, as a comedian and as a performer, as an actor, and in his case as a musician. And some of the parallels and some of the differences between those—finding those zones.

But it is, uh—there’s no question that there’s a... almost this, like—this really joyful spirit that I think emerges when you lock in with somebody. Whether it’s an improv partner or a, you know, somebody you’re playing music with. When you just lock in and there’s nothing said or spoken about the thing that you’re doing, but you both know exactly what it is or—and I say both. It could be three, four, five, six musicians all at once. Or improv actors all at once. And nobody’s saying what it is that you’re doing, but you all get it and everybody’s on the exact same page and it’s this—you know, you get in that flow state that behavior psychologists talk about. And it is incredible! Really, really, really amazing.

We’ll wrap up with Ed Helms in just a minute. Like a lot of us, Ed has been spending a lot of time at home. So, how does he pass that time? The answer’s after the break. It’s Bullseye, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

Shankar Vedantam: We live in a culture that prizes action. But now, former Surgeon General Vivek Murthy says it’s important to make space to just be.

Vivek Murthy: Simply spending five minutes just listening to the birds chirping or to a conversation around you—

Shankar: Solitude and ways to overcome loneliness on the next Hidden Brain, from NPR.

Helen Hong: Hey, J. Keith.

J. Keith van Straaten: Hey, Helen! I hear you have a true/false quiz you want me to finish!

Helen: I do! Here we begin: We host a trivia gameshow podcast on the MaxFun network called... Go Fact Yourself!

J. Keith: True!

Helen: Correct! The show is all about celebrity guests answering trivia questions about things J. Keith enjoys.

J. Keith: False. We sometimes don’t talk about baseball or cats.

Helen: Thank god. It’s questions about things they enjoy! Next, we bring on surprise experts every episode.
J. Keith: True!

Helen: Correct! Final question: It's just the two of us sitting alone with these guests.

J. Keith: False.

Helen: Correct! We have a live audience at the Angel City Brewery!

[Audience cheers and claps.]

Helen: See?

[A bell dings.]

Helen: You can hear Go Fact Yourself every first and third Friday of the month, and if you don't listen, you can go fact yourself!

J. Keith: True!

[Music finishes.]

Welcome back to Bullseye. I’m Jesse Thorn. My guest is the comedian and actor Ed Helms. You’ve seen him in The Office, The Daily Show, and The Hangover movies. His newest film is called Coffee & Kareem. It’s a buddy comedy that just hit Netflix.

Were you surprised when you became a movie star?

I—absolutely. Yeah. And I still, kind of—I still wake up, sometimes. Sometimes it kind of hits you in the face with—in some moment. Somebody says something or something and it still surprises me. On the other hand, it is something that I also started working towards since I was 18 or so. And so, there was a—there’s a sense that... “I think this is what I wanted? I think this what I was working towards?” But you just don’t really know what it’s gonna be like until it’s happening. And even when you’re working towards it, it still feels like this impossible, faraway thing. And even now that—I mean, you just said I’m a movie star. I don’t know if I’m actually...

[A, you know, officially—if I check all the boxes of whatever a movie star is. But there are times that I, you know, I still have moments of deep doubt and, “Am I—am I... good? Am I contributing to the—to the greater cinematic universe in a meaningful way?” And, you know, you don’t always feel like a movie star, I guess.

I think the reason that I asked you that, particularly, is you became a—you know, a household name to the extent that you are when you were in The Hangover. And I remember going to see The Hangover in a—in, like, a press screening. You know. But it was at a regular movie theater and it was also just an advance hype screening. So, there was a lot of non-press people there. It was probably seven out of eight were just people who somebody handed free tickets on the sidewalk, or whatever. And I was excited about it because you were in it and because Zach Galifianakis was in it, and I was a—I was a big fan of both of yours and, you know, I
knew—[laughs] what can I say? I was a comedy nerd. I knew Bradley Cooper from *Wet Hot American Summer*, like most people.

And I think that, like, one of the reasons that it was so successful as a film, like artistically, is because of how… what fundamentally sweet performers you and Zach are. Like, I don’t think anyone would ever be surprised at Bradley Cooper being a successful movie star. He’s gorgeous and funny and a great actor. You know what I mean? Like, he was on a—he was on a rocket ship to space one way or the other. But the two of you—like, I certainly never imagined Zach would star in a movie. And you were so wonderful in the movie I was like, “Good gosh! I guess I should have just been imagining Ed Helms being in—being the star of movies, this whole time.”

*They chuckle.*

00:22:20 Ed Guest

Well, how dare you not imagine me starring in movies? [Laughing.] What were you thinking?!

00:22:29 Jesse Host

So, I—but I also remember, like, walking out of that movie and people—the people around me were, like, flipping out over it. Like, totally flipping out over it. Rarely have I walked out of a movie where people were so pumped about it. But also, like, some were, like, [chuckles] toxic bros who really seemed to be taking the wrong messages from the film. And I immediately was like, “Wow. What a weird—what a weird thing I have seen that has seen these, like, wonderful, alternative performers—like Ed Helms and Zach Galifianakis, you know—Galifianakis in particular, especially at the time. Just—who was making the weirdest work in the world, other than that film and was wonderful at it. Just totally great. And like what a weird hair shirt [chuckles] to be in a movie and you’re like, “Okay, so everybody in the movie was good. We did a good job and I think it’s a good movie. And also, it’s huge and exploding my career into the stratosphere. But also, maybe, like, part of the people that like it are… like it for weird reasons?” [Laughs.] You know what I mean?

[Ed agrees.]

00:24:03 Ed Guest

That is—so, it’s such an odd way to become a—like, if that was your fourth movie that you were the star of—you know, well, you know, it’s just one in a long string. But when it’s the thing that is, in a way, a big break, what a strange situation to be in. It’s a special movie. I think it’s some—what’s unique about that movie is that it really allowed all different kinds of people to see themselves in it. And to, kind of—

[Jesse agrees.]

00:24:03 Ed Guest

You know, to derive joy from it. And I—I’ll never forget being in the lobby of a—at a motel or a hotel in Maryland, or someplace, like, not long after it came out. And there was—there were a… there was a little bevy of older ladies, like—you know—in their 60s or 70s. And they were—they were telling each other scenes from *The Hangover*. This was, maybe, a month—a couple of weeks after it came out. And they were telling each other scenes from the movie and laughing about it. And I couldn’t believe it! I just couldn’t believe
that these, like, old ladies were just chuckling about this movie. And then the more I thought about it, the reason that that movie kind of has its cake and eats it too is because it’s a story of these guys being really decadent and debaucherous, but then they get this—sort of—backdoor, because they’re all so horrified by it, right?

So, the next day, as they learn what they’ve done—which, to like, you know, frat bros all over the country, they’re just like, [gutturally] “Yeeehaa! Those guys are the best! They had a crazy night out!” But then the grandmas see the next day, when they’re horrified by all the stuff that they did the night before. And they find that charming. And so, the formula of that plot, I think, was a little bit of a magic trick. Because it gave everybody something to latch onto. And I don’t think those movies come along very often. I can’t believe how lucky I was to be a part of that one.

When you unexpectedly became a movie star, did you have some—like, were you ready? Did you have some idea of what you wanted to do with that thing that had entered your life?

I don’t—what—I don’t know. I don’t know if I was ready. [Laughs.] I’d kind of like it to come back around again and just, uh, be able to have a little more fun and roll with it. It was kind of an anxious transition for me. And I—that’s not—I think it is for a lot of people. But, looking back, I do kind of wish I’d just kind of rolled with it a little more, had a little more, just, fun and cut myself some more slack.

But I think I was very preoccupied with doing it right, you know? Being a good guy through all of it and not losing touch with my roots and all those things that stars, whether they’re sports stars or movie stars or whatever, get criticized for—getting too big for themselves or getting, you know… just losing touch and all that sort of stuff. I was very… adamant about, kind of, doing it right, or something. And I—but I didn’t even know what that meant. And I think it made it a little bit—I was a little bit hard on myself, or it made it a little bit more… I just was, sort of, cutting a tougher path for myself for no reason.

You know, really, if you can just navigate any of this stuff with some measure of authenticity then you win. That’s all it takes. And there’s so many pressures and forces on you to, kind of like, either perform in some way or be a little bit different than, maybe—just to be inauthentic and to deliver on people’s expectations of you. And… in a way that may not be organic to you or natural to you. And that’s when you start to falter. And… is when you start trying to meet those expectations.

But I’ve been—I’ve been, kind of, in and out of all of those modes and struggled with different aspects of it all. You know. I guess I’m still—still have some measure of common sense left, I’m trying to cling to.

[Chuckling.] I think we’re all trying to cling to something right now, Ed.

[Ed laughs.]

I think you’re doing a great job.
Thank you. Yeah. We are, aren’t we? Just grasping for anything.

Do you play music around the house? Have you been, extra?

Yeeees. Yes. All the time. Aaall the time. I have guitars on different walls in the house that I can just grab at any given time. I don’t play banjo around the house very much, ‘cause that’s—well, as you know, banjo is extremely irritating unless you’re the person playing it.

In which case it’s—it’s really, really fun. But—

I was gonna offer “an acquired taste”, Ed.

Okay, sure. That’s a nice way to put it. For anyone within about a quarter mile radius of a banjo, it’s a—it’s a waking nightmare. And so, I tend to do that more in solitude. But, yeah, I play guitar all the time. My two-and-a-half-year-old daughter is obsessed with instruments, which thrills me. Obviously. She’s—she can really play a ukulele. She can’t make chords on it, but she can really strum it and it’s just so fun to sit there. She—and try to make her dance with guitar songs and whatever. Bluegrass, if—whether you like bluegrass or not, and it is—it’s not for everybody. It’s definitely for all kids. Kids love it. For some reason, it just always makes kids dance.

Ed, I’m so grateful that you took this time to be on Bullseye. It was really nice to get to talk to you.

It’s always a pleasure, Jesse! I really appreciate it. Thanks for having me.

Ed Helms, folks. Coffee & Kareem is streaming now, on Netflix.

That’s the end of another episode of Bullseye. Bullseye is currently being produced out of the homes of myself and the other employees of Maximum Fun Incorporated, in and around the Los Angeles area. Here at my house, the most exciting thing that happened this past week was a delivery of hams from Father’s Country Hams. Always exciting, but particularly exciting when you’re not leaving the house very much. Thanks to Father’s Country Hams of Brennan, Kentucky! They didn’t give them to me for free. I bought them. I just—you know, I got all of the cracklins and ham and bacon and… biscuits and, aw man, I gotta go eat.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson. Jesus Ambrosio is our associate producer. We had help from Casey O’Brien and Jordan Kauwling, at Maximum Fun. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, aka DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it.

And we have so many interviews in our back catalogs. I talked with Zach Galifianakis about his part in The Hangover. He had a very different perspective on how the movie changed his life. You can listen to that conversation at our website, MaximumFun.org. I also once interviewed Scott Armstrong, who helped write The Hangover and The Hangover 2, which if you have not seen The Hangover 2, it is—uh, it is a—almost like a horror movie. [Laughs.] It’s really intense! I asked him why he did that, too. So, you can grab those in your favorite podcast app or at MaximumFun.org.
We're also on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. We're @Bullseye on Twitter, so go follow us there. You can search for Bullseye with Jesse Thorn on Facebook. And all the interviews on this show are on our YouTube channel, so you can go grab them, share them there, subscribe there if that's how you prefer to enjoy radio interviews. And I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.

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

[Music fades out.]