

00:00:00	Music	Transition	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	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “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.
00:00:20	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. My guest is John Cameron Mitchell. John is a director, a writer, an actor, and a singer. He’s directed the movies <i>Shortbus</i> and <i>Rabbit Hole</i> . He’s acted on shows like <i>Shrill</i> and <i>Girls</i> . But he’s probably best known for <i>Hedwig and the Angry Inch</i> . <i>Hedwig</i> , as it’s known for short, started as a stage musical in the late ‘90s. Then it became a movie in 2001. It was written by Mitchell and composer Stephen Trask. It’s a unique, difficult to describe story. It follows an east German rock singer named Hedwig, played by Mitchell in both the stage and movie versions. Hedwig is assigned male at birth, falls in love with an American soldier, gets coerced into have gender reassignment surgery, marries the soldier, moves to Kansas, loses the soldier, and starts her own rock band. And that is like <i>[chuckles]</i> that’s like the first act. It’s a story about queerness and identity, about the threads rock and punk music share with other live performances like drag and cabaret and Broadway. It is one of my all-time favorites. If you haven’t seen it, you should. Lately, John Cameron Mitchell has gotten back to writing and recording new music. He’s put out an ongoing benefit, called <i>New American Dream</i> , in which he collaborates with Ezra Furman, Xiu Xiu, and Stephen Trask—the co-creator of <i>Hedwig</i> . Let’s hear a song from that project. This one features actor and singer Nat Wolff. It’s called “Call Me Joe”. “Call Me Joe” by John Cameron Mitchell. <i>Sometimes it seems to come from a great height Hope you’ve laid your burden down Lay it down ‘Cause it’s a diamond in your crown In your crown You can call me someone whose number You once used to know But darling, when you’re up there Think of me down below</i> <i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]</i>
00:01:54	Music	Music	
00:02:30	Jesse	Host	John Cameron Mitchell, I am so happy and excited to have you on <i>Bullseye</i> .
00:02:34	John Cameron Mitchell	Guest	Well, thank you so much!
00:02:35	Jesse	Host	It’s a total dream to have you here.
00:02:37	John	Guest	It was a—it was a—I just happened to be here and it was perfect.

00:02:41 Jesse Host *[They laugh.]*
I'm glad you knocked on the door!

[John agrees.]

00:02:48 John Guest Before you became a famous rock musical guy, were you a rock guy?

00:03:00 Jesse Host I was. You know, when I was kid though, sometimes rock and roll was the music of the oppressor, even though it was initiated by my brothers and sisters, like Little Richard. *[Chuckles.]*

00:03:03 John Guest What are we talking—we're talking about maybe the '70s?

'70s! You know, so it was like Kiss was very aggressive and—you know, Zeppelin was ascendant and, uh—it's hard to deny Zeppelin. Of course. Yeah, I couldn't help but—you know, feel it! You know, when rock and roll hit. But I realize I was—I had to go—I had to come out. I had to find myself before I could find my rock and roll. And mine came out of Little Richard, David Bowie, Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, as opposed to the usual classic rock realm. Though, of course, they're as classic as anybody.

So, to me, I had to find myself before I could actually find—you know—punk and rock and roll the way I loved it. And then I didn't wanna turn back and I got annoyed when my fellow queer people would downplay rock. Probably because it was, you know, when they grew up, something that was—you know. They just—in *Hedwig*, we have a joke. A punk rock gesture versus a heavy metal gesture. And a heavy metal gesture is—you know—spitting on the audience. And the punk is spitting on yourself. You know? So, it's the direction of the aggression that defines the art.

So, to me, it was—you know, Iggy famously cut himself. You know, Robert Plant would never do that. *[Chuckles.]* You know what I mean? 'Cause he has a beautiful body, and it would *[censored]* up his sex life. Iggy's like, "I don't give a *[censored]*." You know, where I am you. You know? And that's the rock and roll that I love, which—not like you're a god on a stage, but I'm in the *[censored]* mosh pit with you.

00:04:35 Jesse Host What's interesting to me about that time in rock history is like—it's the first time that you're really defining tributaries of rock. Right?

00:04:44 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Jesse:** Like, that rock isn't, uh—

00:04:46 Jesse Host **John:** Yes, it starts to become academic.
Yeah, that rock isn't a relatively monolithic force that also encompasses every other kind of popular music, basically.

[John affirms.]

00:05:03 John Guest And you know, I had—I had Rob Halford of Judas Priest on the show one time, who is the loveliest, most charming man.

00:05:04 Jesse Host Is that right? Oh my gosh. I'd love to meet him.
Oh! Just a joy and a delight, Rob Halford. And you know, like Rob Halford was making music that was being used by meatheads to beat up dweebs or whatever.

00:05:16 John Guest I know!

00:05:17 Jesse Host And he's just like, "Oh no, I was always this gay and always being this gay." Like, *[laughing]* there was no point where—

00:05:26 John Guest He made them, gay. You know, he brought the leather daddy in there, didn't he? But they didn't realize.

[Jesse agrees.]

00:05:33 Jesse Host Just like Freddie Mercury. You know, I mean, it's the same story with Little Richard. You know? He's bringing this insane revival tent drag act into *Ed Sullivan!*

00:05:44 John Guest Right! And before him, you know, Sister Rosetta Tharpe. You know, with her own queer energy. You know, a progenitor of rock and roll. So, people forget that rock comes from—you know, the super outsiders, including the queers. You know, every kind of race. You know, there's all kinds of rebellion in music, but the rock and roll one, which has so many forms—and it's gonna rise again. You know, the last ten years has been electronic pop as the main music of popularity. And only lately are some of these, you know, rock—some of these pop people, Halsey or Miley Cyrus, going, "Oh yeah, guitaaars. They can be effective." You know, with an audience. And kids are like, "Ooh, what's that thing?" *[Whispering.]* It's a guitar.

It's not a beat that's being created on the—you know, stolen off of YouTube. There's nothing wrong with stealing, but there's—you know, there is a power in the guitar that doesn't have to be patriarchal. It doesn't have to be what it was before. And the most exciting people working in rock now are non-male. You know, I love Mitski. I love, you know, Belinda Carlisle. I love Courtney Barnett. You know, there's so many—Hurray for the Riff Raff. These are women-based projects that excite me.

00:07:05 Jesse Host You grew up in a military family. Your father was literally a general. How much of your childhood did you spend in the United States and how much abroad?

00:07:16 John Guest About half and half. It was about 15 places when I grew up and my mom was Scottish. I lived in Scotland for a couple years in school. Germany for about six years. And then, you know—and had to keep changing my accent. So, like, I had a British accent when I moved to Junction City, Kansas. And you know, in my podcast series, *Anthem*—which we just rereleased on—so, you can get it anywhere now, for free. About half of *Anthem* is my life story. You know, up 'til I was 18. Going to boarding school, living around the world, general dad, artist super-religious mom, obsessed with the visions of the Virgin Mary, traveling the world to see the Virgin Mary. And the second half is a kind of alternate autobiography—just like what would happen if I had never left that small town. You know, I might still be creative, but—you know, crushed spiritually in a trailer park and then suddenly has a brain tumor, no insurance 'cause you're in Kansas, and he's crowdfunding his healthcare to get his tumor out.

So, it's been—the last few years have been interesting. You know, being 58—you know, about to hit 60. You tend to look back a bit. Your parents have started, you know, to go in your 50s. And you can't help but look back in anger, in relief, in gratitude. And that's when people start going, "Oh, okay. I realize what my parents had to go through even if, you know, I don't fully accept it." You know,

			like with me it was a beautiful thing to be able to look back and take care of my parents who both had Alzheimer's. You know? At first a burden and then a gift.
00:09:00	Jesse	Host	Did you like some of the places more than others? Or were they all just—
00:09:06	John	Guest	It wasn't about the place. It was about who was there.
00:09:08	Jesse	Host	—a school hallway.
00:09:09	John	Guest	Yeah, I still feel the same way. It's like, I love exploring. But it's about who's there witnessing it with you. And my best friend in Kansas was, you know, Brenda Riley and we hung out with the woman who inspired <i>Hedwig</i> and then we reconnected, you know, in our middle age. And we see each other once a year. And I went to my first high school reunion ever, you know, which was like the 35 th . And it was great! Because after 50, everybody's equalized. You know? When people do those reunions in their 20s and 30s, they're all comparing each other, right? "Oh my god, she's fat and he's got a big job." But after 50, it's like, "We're alive!" You know? We've seen loss. We've seen people disappear. We've survived. We've gotten through it. We've helped people out. And no matter whether you've made a film or you've gone through the Navy or you're just rescuing dogs, you are the same.
			And that's the great thing about the double-edged sword of age is that you do—if you allow yourself, you learn things and you start to accept things that you maybe should've accepted earlier. Youth is about not accepting and changing things and adult—you know, wisdom of age should be about, "Okay, I'm okay with—" Not that I don't wanna correct injustice, but I'm not as angry. I'm not—I can see things more clearly. I can see how they're interconnected, and I can see how people can err on their path and forgive them.
00:10:49	Jesse	Host	How did the fact that you lived in a different place every 18 months interface with your nascent queerness?
00:11:01	John	Guest	Well, I think it freed me up. Sometimes, you know, a lot of queerness—queer youth have some similarities in that there's a—either you're hiding something, and some people can't hide things. You know, like a very feminine boy can't hide that forever. You know what I mean? So, they're already put in a secondary—they're put in this slot that women are—even below women. You know, the second- or third-class place, at best. Okay, you're there. You're that guy. You're the queeny guy. You're the butch girl. Okay, we might have a slot for you, but it's certainly not—doesn't have a lot of power. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> You know. And in fact, can be dangerous.
00:11:41	Jesse	Host	Was that your circumstance?
00:11:42	John	Guest	No, because I—maybe it's because I was, you know—could pass. You know what I mean? And I moved around so much that I understood that I had to adapt. And it was part of—my queerness could use that if I wanted to hide. Which, in the '70s, you had to do.
00:12:02	Jesse	Host	Did you understand your own—? I mean, like if I was gonna guess—you know, obviously when you move every 18 months, it's possible to, you know, leave your reputation behind every 18 months.
00:12:14	John	Guest	Yes! You can reinvent yourself.
00:12:16	Jesse	Host	But I also find myself wondering like does that also mean that you don't have to deal with your own stuff that, if you had to stick with it for longer than that, you might have to deal with.

00:12:31 John Guest Maybe that was the case, too. You know, it's like being in a relationship with a drunk. You don't have to deal with your own *[censored]*. You know what I mean? If you—if you can keep moving and not have to focus on yourself, yeah. It can be not healthy. You're just kind of skating through and dilettante-ing through. And in my case, I think I was—the one thing that was steady, and my family wasn't very emotionally supportive, so—was my creative life. So, I always had that when I was alone. And that girded me. And it even informed me for my future queerness. So, I would read—you know, for me it was books. You know, now the internet. But it was certain books, John Ritchie and—you know, William Burroughs, and—you know, they weren't always the most mainstream ones, but that's where I—that's—I loved those queer outsiders.

And they prepared me for my eventual coming out. You know, when I was young, I knew I eventually would once I was free of certain bonds. So, I had a kind of—I—but I would even buy records that I knew I would like in the future that I didn't like now. You know? Like Thelonious Monk, I remember buying that as a kid. And *[chuckles]* you know, I was a preparer. I still am. You know, I wanna be prepared and then let go completely.

00:13:55 Jesse Host I mean, I feel like buying a Thelonious Monk record as a kid is just like—is aspiring—well, it is weird. But it's like aspiring to adulthood.

[John agrees.]

Like, knowing that like what you want is to have an adult life, which is both a remarkable thing to know you want when you're that age, but also like a little sad.

00:14:17 John Guest *[Chuckles.]* I know. I knew I'd choose the—'cause I put, you know, a Thelonious song on my actor's reel later in the '80s when I was doing, you know, *MacGyver* and stuff as score. And also, this outtake of the Beatles' thing where they're doing a funny voice. And only Stephen Trask, my—you know, composer in *Hedwig*—recognized the music, both pieces, when he saw it in the early '90s, my reel. He was like, "Thelonious Monk and the Beatles." I'm like how did you—? You know. So, I knew I had a kinship right there. And that was my journey. And it's often the journey of the queer person and creative person is finding your allies, finding your partners, maybe burning your bridges with some—you know, bodies of land that don't—aren't useful to you anymore, and then finding your people. You know? That will be your people forever, hopefully.

And the queer person generally feels—you can leave—you can leave where you're from. It's part of that. Not everyone can, but that's an option. Whereas our straight brothers and sisters like, "Well, I don't know. You know. There's stuff here already. I'm gonna get married, have a kid at 21." *[Chuckles.]* You know, it's like the queer person generally sees freedom and flight and new community elsewhere as their chosen family. So, that was very much the case for me.

00:15:54 Jesse Host At what point in your life did you find romance?

00:15:59 John Guest Well, when I was 10, I remember being in boarding school in Scotland and my first crush was the son of a lord. Lord McEwan. And weirdly, his cousin I met years later in New York. He was an

artist in New York. But he was just a beautiful, you know—a noble. *[Chuckles softly.]* So, my standards have remained very high, unfortunately. I certainly had crushes in high school. Brian Pacheco, if you're out there.

[Jesse laughs.]

Scott Moy. Danny Dillion was my first. Um. And that was in Albuquerque. Phil Mudd, who I immortalized in *Shortbus* and *Anthem*, I used his name.

[They laugh.]

00:16:56	Jesse	Host	But it was like, yeah. But those things are denied. You know? And love denied comes out in different ways and one of the ways is art. So, what about—what about actually functionally rather than aspirationally?
00:17:02	John	Guest	My first boyfriend?

[Jesse confirms.]

It was much later. It was in my 30s. 'Cause I was so afraid of being, I think, tied down after being tied down for most of my life. It was a guy named Jack, who I write about in *Anthem* and also in my ongoing concert series, *The Origin of Love*. Was Jack Steeb, and he was in the band—Stephen Trask band that I developed *Hedwig* with. And he was a wonderful, smart punk rocker with a great sense of humor who didn't have a lot of, you know, self-esteem. And he, uh, had an alcohol problem. And he ultimately died from it, in 2004. And just after we'd broken up. And it was a defining thing in my life and completely inspired both *Anthem* and *The Origin of Love Tour*.

And I—*Anthem* is really about loss and what do we do with death and not only the people we've lost but our own mortality. And there's a character there named Giro that's somewhat based on Jack.

00:18:21	Jesse	Host	Your 30s is a long time to... like—
00:18:24	John	Guest	Yeah. But you know, there's a—there's a late adolescence for gay men, often. Maybe less now, because you can be out earlier. But the 20s tends to be the teens for gay men. And then the 30s are your 20s, which is when a lot of straight people get together.
00:18:41	Jesse	Host	<i>[Chuckles.]</i> I mean, I imagine you were also dealing with the consequences of the fact that like right around when you came out as a young man was the AIDs crisis.
00:18:54	John	Guest	Yes. Right when I came out. Literally, uh, '84. You know, it was when I was coming out and AIDs was just hitting the headlines. And it was scary. But it was also the flush of optimism of coming out and I was also being safe in the beginning, luckily. That was one advantage of coming out later, at that time. I felt like we can—we can beat this! And you know, we can fight injustice and people's homophobia. And I had that, you know, unreasonable optimism of youth in the middle of it. You know. And the people—you know, of course I lost many friends, but I was strange—and felt kind of guilty about that, too. You know, that weird survivor's guilt thing that is hard to <i>[sighs]</i> —to justify.

But it really came home—you know, after the drugs came in, there was about 15 years that no one wanted to talk about AIDs, including gay men. And then you started getting a rush of unsafe sex and this was right before PrEP and it—there was a—you know. It was similar to what the Holocaust did for generations of Jewish people. You had survivors from AIDs who had the same PTSD symptoms of guilt and horror and panic that often was—you know, revived when COVID hit. Certain friends of mine who had been through AIDs—you know, it really freaked them out. And the same kind of ignorance, you know, in the face of a obvious health threat. You know. And often, malevolence, you know. Give them what they deserve. Let them die of AIDs.

So, I came out of that and have a healthy [chuckles] you know disrespect for leadership in terms of justice and health. But at the same time, I'm probably more of a believer that government can do stuff if it's the right government.

00:21:07 Jesse Host

Even more with John Cameron Mitchell after a quick break. Stay with us. It's *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](https://www.maximumfun.org) and NPR.

00:21:14 Music Transition

Thumpy synth with light vocalizations.

00:21:19 Jesse Host

Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. If you're just joining us, my guest is John Cameron Mitchell. John created and starred in the hit musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* along with the movie of the same name. He's also an actor. Maybe you've seen him on shows like *Girls*, *Shrill*, or *Mozart in the Jungle*. Lately, he's been recording a lot of new music. He's released it as a benefit album called *New American Dream*. Let's get back into our conversation.

Let's talk for a minute about *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, which is the show and film that you created, in which you were the star originally. And relatively recently. One of my absolute favorite things. It is a story about a child growing up behind the Berlin wall who is gender nonconforming, broadly. And in order to get to the other side of the wall, has a gender reassignment surgery that goes wrong, because he—then, eventually identifying as she—wants to get—needs to get married. Or her mom wants her to get married to get over the wall, to marry a GI. And you know, it's all a kind of complicated [chuckles] stew of... yeah.

00:22:42 John Guest

Complicated myth. You know, it's a fairytale.

00:22:45 Jesse Host

Yeah, exactly. It is very fairytale-like. When you started working on that show, it was in a performance space specifically for drag. Right?

00:22:58 John Guest

Yeah. Stephen Trask and I were hanging out at this amazing rock, drag, punk club called SqueezeBox. And it was the, you know, club of our dreams. It was finally a predominantly queer, you know, rock and drag and punk—you know—based place that was scary and fun. 'Cause I felt—you know, it felt like Max's Kansas City, but better. And you know, John Waters was hanging out and the Beastie Boys are scared of it. You know. It was like so much fun. And it was as New York was changing and Giuliani and there was a kind of rage in the air. And it was the last years of the major part of the AIDs crisis here, before the drugs came in. So, there was a lot of punk rage. You know? And Nirvana was ascendant and started in '94.

So, we wanted to develop it there rather than in a theater, which could tend to dampen the enthusiasm, the rock energy. We wanted to start creating the character in a kind of workshop-y way by doing gigs in clubs, the way Hedwig would have. And we did other places too. You know. And it eventually went to Fes and Westbeth. You know, these were places that were cabaret music. You know. The equivalent of Joe's Pub today, in New York. They were where the crazier stuff that was theatrical would start, would be. And great music. So, that was smart. You know. And we kept the energy and the band present until we—our director, Peter Askin, got us to—we had to build a theater for *Hedwig*, 'cause no one wanted us. We were too weird. Drag was considered low class. Punk was not considered theatre. And there was no way we were going to Broadway. So, who the hell's gonna invest? You know?

We found some intrepid investors and they—and they built a theatre in an old hotel, the Jane Street Theatre, which had a bar and it was like perfect for—you know, the Titanic survivors stayed at this flophouse hotel. You know. So, *Hedwig* would invoke their name. You know? They were washed up on strange shores. She's just washed up. You know? *[Chuckles.]*

00:25:14 Jesse

Host

Had you ever done drag when you started developing *Hedwig*?

00:25:17 John

Guest

No. I was—I had done a Joe Wharton play where I was in drag, but I was kind of scared of it. You know, 'cause I didn't like my feminine side. And drag queens were always—up to that point and even now—are kind of considered priests. You know, they're kind of—or, um, mascots. Gay mascots. So, they weren't necessarily given their full—I mean, it's a—it's an act. But it—you know, they were considered a little embarrassing sometimes. And certainly desexualized. And Hedwig, I wanted—you know, she was using—the character was using drag, but wouldn't call themselves a drag queen and wouldn't call themselves trans, either.

They say that they are caught in the middle. You know. They are the Berlin wall. They're neither here nor there. They're on the fence in life. They don't belong to—they're a gender of one and there's a sense of things having been forced on them in terms of gender, too. And certainly raped, metaphorically as well as literally. So, the whole journey is freeing themselves—and the drag is armor to—like a chrysalis. Inside, maybe you can develop under the armor. And I brought what I knew from playwrighting and from music and Stephen brought his incredible songs. So, it was an alchemy that I got to be not only a fake drag queen, but a fake rock star and could bring my traditional, you know, well-made play stuff to those forms, which was unusual.

00:27:07 Jesse

Host

So, drag as a form is—you know, encompasses a lot of different kinds of things. You know. If you watch *Paris is Burning* or whatever, you'll see people who are performing the kind of camp that you might see on *Ru Paul's Drag Race*. You'll also see people who are clearly, you know—if they had the opportunity to, would identify as transgender.

[John affirms.]

So, you know.

00:27:34	John	Guest	There's always been an intersection of drag and trans energies, but they're two very different things.
00:27:40	Jesse	Host	Right. Exactly. And I mean, even within drag that is—you know, being performed by people who are very comfortable identifying as men, there are a wide variety of tones. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> Um.
00:27:54	John	Guest	Yeah! From Dame Edna to, uh... John Kelly, you know, who's a real performance artist. You know.
00:27:02	Jesse	Host	So, when you first put on a Farrah Fawcett wig to be Hedwig, were you thinking about what kind of thing you wanted to perform? Because you weren't doing a Supremes song. You know? And you also—you know, you were performing some kind of liminal space and gender. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> You know? So, like were you like, "I can't be too camp." Were you like—?
00:28:33	John	Guest	No, I was using everything I learned from—tools of camp and tools of humor. Tools of aggression, crossing borders. You know, which is—you know, the word trans means crossing. And that I was seeing all around me. You know? And the flow of female/male energies, the way we define them—which are quite different in every culture—was what interested me. You know? And I like the fact that, you know, I saw Mistress Formika's wig fall off during a song and then she was like, "I can't just have no wig." So, she ripped her drag off and that inspired Hedwig's—you know, tearing off the drag. And to me, it was like—you know, and I have a—often traditionally a cis woman playing Yitzhak, who is a man who wants to dress as a woman.
			So, I like the flow and reminding people that there don't have to be rules when it comes to your own gender expression and journey. Often, there's trauma within it and we have to separate that out from what we need. You know? And just like the punk world—which was about freedom—suddenly, there was a list of rules that you—you know, if you violated them, you weren't punk. And there's a similar thing with gender, sometimes. It's like, "You can't just say you're part of our group, you have to have lived it." And it's like, well, there's also a world where we've all lived different experiences and we have certain things in common. Not everything. And we explore those places in the spirit of love, cooperation, and allyship. And that's my thing.
			You know, I'm—I was a freak. You know? And I love groups of freaks. You know? I love those chosen families. And even though I wasn't a drag queen, it was at first like, "You haven't paid your drag dues." I was like you're right and I need to do that, and I need to learn about it. But I wanna make a theatre piece rather than a drag act. But the tools of drag are useful for it.
00:30:41	Jesse	Host	So, the character was initially inspired by this woman you had known as a kid who was like—
00:30:45	John	Guest	Yes. My brother's babysitter. She was—
00:30:49	Jesse	Host	Yeah. A domestic worker and maybe a prostitute.
00:30:51	John	Guest	On the side, yeah. Helga.
00:30:52	Jesse	Host	Yeah. Um, well, was that on a base that you lived on?
00:30:56	John	Guest	Yeah, that was at Fort Riley, Kansas.
00:30:58	Jesse	Host	So, was she a—was she cis?

[John confirms.]

00:31:03	John	Guest	So— Divorced, cis, army wife.
00:31:06	Jesse	Host	What was it that you remembered vividly enough about her?
00:31:12	John	Guest	It was just her demeanor. It was like—you know, I talk about her as Marlene Dietrich in a tube top. You know, she was world weary in the '70s and [<i>chuckles</i>] you know, her cigarette was very long. And you know, she seemed to have seen more than we had. And you know, her—it was her smoky, weltenschmerz that attracted us.
00:31:36	Jesse	Host	You developed <i>Hedwig</i> over a long period of time. Was there a point where you felt like you had done it? Like, “I get it.”
00:31:46	John	Guest	Well, I never think of it as an endpoint. You know. It's just whatever we did that day. And there's always another show. You know? And I don't think “done”. You know? I can see “less interested”. You know? And I don't feel the need to do the musical as an actor anymore. But I am enjoying <i>The Origin of Love Tour</i> , where I'm pretty much myself in a kind of drag, telling the story of making <i>Hedwig</i> . Which is different. And popping into the character and out. It's just a part of me, not my alter ego anymore. I do love when other people have their own <i>Hedwig</i> ego and make something out of it and try something new. I hate when they imitate our production. It's just like, “Do something else.”
			In San Francisco, there was a production at the—uh, I forget the name of the theatre, but they had ten Hedwigs. You know, one for each song of different shapes and sizes and sexualities and genders. And I love that! She is an exquisite corpse. You know? She's made of all these different people. And even her clothes are patchwork. You know, quilt-like. So, to me, it's post-modern, do whatever you want with it. You know, don't cut anything, but add stuff! You know, make it your own. You know, I'm not <i>Rocky Horror</i> , where—you know, the creator needs to legislate exactly how it's done. To me, it's a great compliment when people wanna do something different.
00:33:10	Jesse	Host	I listened to an interview that you did on <i>Fresh Air</i> when the movie of <i>Hedwig</i> came out. So, Peter Clowney hosted the interview. Did a great job. At the end, he asks you what you're working on, what you wanna do. And you are so clear that you want to make the movie that became your movie <i>Shortbus</i> . And it is like you're ready with a manifesto about why there needs to be a movie about the real feelings of sex that is driven by sex, the ways that it can be great and transformational and bad and good and whatever. And it made me wonder like did he just have this written on a three-by-five card in his back pocket for 15 years? And he made it and he's like, “I got it!”
00:34:09	John	Guest	I think I was—no, I'd been thinking about it and because I have—you know, as a director, you often have to pitch to investors and producers and stuff. You gotta know what you're talking about and have your bullet points. And growing up very Catholic, you know, sex was just the worst. And queer sex was even worse. So, it was—and there were some films coming up at that time that were using real sex, but they were very dark. You know? And they were humorless. And I was like sex is not—you know. Sex is a lot of things.
00:34:41	Jesse	Host	And one of the things about your movie, <i>Shortbus</i> , was that it depicted actual sex. It wasn't simulated sex.

00:34:46	John	Guest	<p>Yes. No, it was all real. And the actors were very much a part of that. I was like, “We’re on a journey here to challenge ourselves, but also feel safe.” You know? And it was—I was the intimacy counselor. You know, I can image [chuckling] doing—I can’t imagine doing it, today! You know? I—we’re about to rerelease the 4K version of <i>Shortbus</i> this January, with oscilloscope. And we got an amazing—you know, re-transferred thing. We’re gonna have streaming in the theaters, IFC in New York, and Blu-ray. And people are like, “I wonder if you could make it today?” You know. “Could you get it financed?” You know?</p> <p>In the past, the resistance was from the religious side of the rightwing—you know, it was more like, “This is wrong to have sex on film. It’s porn and therefore not valid.” You know, I would say that it wasn’t porn, because I wasn’t turning anybody on. I—<u>planning</u> on turning anyone on. And that is the definition of porn. And also, so what if it is porn? You know? It’s like, I like good porn. But in this case, we actually kind of wanted to de-eroticize the sex and show what was behind it. But now adays, the resistance might come more from the so-called left, because it might be—you know, there’s a sense of exploit—if there’s any sex on film, it’s some kind of exploitation. You know? Anti-porn feminism is back.</p> <p>And a lot of young people are having less and less sex. And they’re more afraid of that—the messiness of those encounters, afraid of people being taken advantage of. Which I think is sometimes being reinforced by their own puritan, you know, prudery that comes from something deep—you know, the way they grow up and American Puritanism. So, I sadly—you know, sex has kind of disappeared from serious filmed entertainment and is now owned by Pornhub. You know? Which is not known for its empathy.</p> <p><i>[Jesse agrees.]</i></p>
00:36:55	Jesse	Host	And I’m not against it, but it’s like I think—it just kind of—
00:36:58	John	Guest	Commitment to the upliftment of, uh, the human experience.
00:37:02	Jesse	Host	Yeah! It’s a different upliftment, let’s say. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> For the guys.
			How—so, obviously, when you’re making a movie about actual sex, every—you know, you had announced what this movie is about. So, everybody who’s involved to some extent knows what it is.
00:37:15	John	Guest	Knows what it is, yeah. Yeah. And we wanted to write it with the actors so that they were very much—felt, you know, a part of it and a part of the—you know, creating the parameters of, you know, what they’re doing, what they’re interested in emotionally. They’re choosing their characters’ journeys, names, backgrounds. They would do a lot of improv. I would write a script and say, “You can’t learn the script. I still want it to be paraphrased. But if anything feels uncomfortable or you wanna move in a different direction, keep talking to me.” We worked together for two and a half years before shooting.
00:37:51	Jesse	Host	It’s like if Mike Lee made pornography.
00:37:53	John	Guest	Yes. And I read Mike Lee’s book. But again, I define pornography as something made for sexual arousal. And this—
00:38:01	Jesse	Host	Made to titillate.
00:38:02	John	Guest	This wasn’t. I’d say this—
00:38:03	Jesse	Host	Yeah. This is more <u>about</u> sex.

00:38:05 John Guest It's explicit. Yeah. That's all. Mike Lee—one of our actors actually told him about our project, how we were developing it. And he's like, *[with a dry Liverpudlian accent]* "I wouldn't touch that with a barge pole."

[They laugh.]

00:38:24 Jesse Host I was like, "A barge pole?"
So, what were you surprised to learn when you went into that collaborative process about what the other people around you were interested in about this idea? The other actors, the other artists who were involved in making this work?

00:38:41 John Guest Well, some were friends, and some were new to me. One couple already existed. Another was created by us. What I found—we did a lot of theatre games out of the Viola Spolin's famous theatre book, *Theater Games*. Just to define our characters. And you know, we were exaggerating elements of their lives. So, for example, the lead woman had had problems accessing her first orgasm. But I exaggerate it and made her what we call pre-orgasmic. She'd never had one. And she's a sex therapist. So, she's our way into this world, this salon, which is strange and she's the Alice in Wonderland.

The other lead is James, who is inscrutable and somewhat depressed. He's making a secret film. You're not sure what it's about. He uses a lot of metaphors. You know? He's naked and covered in band-aids. You know? And crying. You know, "What's going on?" You know, he is preparing for an act of self-harm, and this is a note to the—you know, to the—to those left behind and inspired by the film *Tarnation*, you know by Jonathan Caouette, who shot himself for decades and who has a cameo in the film.

So, it was—what was surprising was the actors—how little the sex had to do with anything. Sex was like the music in a musical. You use it, but it's not about music. Right? It's a form—it's a way of telling a story. And often has a universal energy. You know? Like, you don't speak a language with someone? You can listen to music together. You can have sex. They both communicate things without words. So, each of them had a journey they were on that I exacerbated. You know? Or exaggerated, not exacerbated. And we had two actors that dropped out who were quite young. And I—one of the challenges was, I said, you know, it's probably best if you don't get involved, unless you already are, with a costar. Because the long process, someone breaks up and things go wrong.

And I can't legislate that you don't have sex with another actor in this if you're not in the relationship, but two of them did and it did end—you know, like someone was hurt by it, felt bad, and they both dropped out. Oddly, they were the only two characters who were not supposed to have sex. *[Chuckles.]* So. But I adapted the direction of one of the characters for the character who became the dominatrix prostitute and who's quite lonely. And you know, so each of the actors wanted to follow certain paths. You know? What is it about a woman who can't have an orgasm in a man's world? What is it about the depressed guy in a good relationship? Does that... you know, where he wants to bring in a third person so that his

lover won't feel lonely when he leaves. You know? It's like all of these strange things aren't about sex, but the sex tells you how they're going about their lives.

00:41:58 Jesse Host It's been a long time since I've seen the movie. I saw it around when it came out. Do I remember correctly that you performed cunnilingus onscreen?

00:42:08 John Guest I do.

00:42:09 Jesse Host Yeah. Had you ever done that before? I mean, I don't think you'd done it onscreen before. Correct me if I'm wrong. *[Chuckles.]*

00:42:14 John Guest I hadn't done it—I had not done it before. I did it for my mother, so I could finally do something "normal".

[Jesse laughs.]

Um, no. She didn't see it, thank god. She's like, "It's in town and we'll go if you want us to."

I'm like, "No."

[Jesse laughs.]

[With a Scottish accent.] "Your father's very ill, but we'll go."

"I don't want you to go. It's snowing. Don't. Go."

I did, because one of the actors was like, "We're doing all this. You gotta, in solidarity, either get *[censored]* or you gotta eat some *[censored]*." And I'm like, weell, on the menu—I was like, "I haven't done the latter." And it just seemed like my boyfriend—in the scene where you see it happen, my boyfriend is involved too. So, I didn't feel too lonely. And the woman that was very enthusiastic—you know, was a hot lesbian who was—you know, liked femme boys. And again, it's like we had this flexibility and I wanted to remind people. You know, I wanted to make sure sex not bombs room was all sexualities, genders, ethnicities. You know, it's like—it can flow. You know? You don't have to be just the one thing anymore. And we have a trans man with a sex therapist in there, you know, *[censored]* her.

And it's all part of that world that we're from and to remind people there are—there are shades of flexibility here and we needn't label them all. You know? But the place is a place of respect. You know? And that's how we made the film was with respect, making sure everyone felt safe. In the orgy room, I made sure to play Al Green and that *[chuckling]* they had plenty of time to warm up. And they were mostly partners, already. You know. Which made it a lot easier.

00:44:06 Jesse Host We'll wrap up with John Cameron Mitchell. Still to come, we'll talk about the *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* revival on Broadway and how he sees the show differently now, 20 or so years later. It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR.

00:44:21 Music Transition Thumpy rock music.

00:44:25 Jesse Host It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. I'm talking with John Cameron Mitchell, the creator of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, *Anthem: Homunculus*, and more. Let' get back into our conversation.

You know, *Hedwig* had a revival on Broadway that was sort of you getting to get your flowers and your paychecks for that show.

[John affirms.]

You had a run as Hedwig, after a long run by Neil Patrick Harris. There was a bunch of other big stars who played the role. And I wonder, after that happened—like, when that was done—if you reevaluated where you were at in the context of the fact that you had done this retrospective thing? You know? You had done a thing that was looking at this piece that you had, by then, made 15, 20 years earlier.

00:45:20 John Guest Well, yeah. We found that it was still very—it didn't need much upgrading. You know, we just added a few jokes that were more modern. And it's always fun to—I feel like a technician of jokes. I like to go in and try stuff and fix things and add things. Tinker. What was interesting since then, coming from a kind of younger place, there was a little bit—we had a production in Australia, a large production of *Hedwig*, that got derailed because someone who identified as nonbinary trans said, "Oh, cis people can't play Hedwig. It's a trans role." Which is kind of odd, because the character to me doesn't really identify as trans and is coerced into a gender reassignment against their will to escape the patriarchy, in effect. And in fact, they get mutilated by the patriarchy—or the binarchy, I call it.

00:46:17 Jesse Host And I think Hedwig's identity and body both exist in a kind of mythical world.

00:46:24 John Guest A mythical kind of liminal world where they're neither here nor there. And—

00:46:30 Jesse Host It's not a representation of a particular kind of person that exists in real life, necessarily.

00:46:35 John Guest No. But it—but the character's a metaphor and the character is also a—would never identify as one thing or another. In fact, as my trans friend, Peppermint—they described it well as that the character's on a gender journey not necessarily of their own direction—you know—and control. But it's not exactly a trans journey; it's more of a drag journey. So, when they're forced into a gender assignment that they didn't really want and—you know, their passport—they're forced to be a woman, in effect, and abandoned in a trailer park in Kansas, they turn to drag. They see a wig. They turn to Laverne Baker and David Bowie and Lou Reed, and they create a persona, which is drag and rock and roll.

[Music fades in.]

And that is what saves them, is their self-invention of—that we call drag. And put on some makeup—you know, a wig in a box—is the beginning of that.

00:47:43 Music Music "Wig in a Box" from the album *Hedwig and the Angry Inch (Original Cast Recording)* by John Cameron Mitchell.

*I put on some makeup
And turn on the tape deck
And pull the wig back on my head
Suddenly, I'm Miss Midwest Midnight Checkout Queen
Until I head home, and I put myself to bed*

*I look back on where I'm from
Look at the woman I've become*

[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue then fades out.]

00:48:25 John Guest And that—you know, like Peppermint, who actually started out in drag and transitioned later, they're—that's the intersection, there. You know, many of the performers I know have—you know—been in that liminal space. So, it felt like I was the wrong target, there. You know? *[Chuckles.]* It's like to say, "Well, who's to decide? Are you trans enough to play Hedwig? Like, can a nonbinary person—?" You know, but the character's playing Tommy as well. You know, it's like, to me to limit who gets to play it goes against its message, which is one of healing, which is one of identifying with someone else, and which is a story of abuse and people telling you what you're supposed to be.

So, I'm nonbinary by default. You know what I mean? I don't feel the need to change my gender 'cause I'm too old. I have no memory. But you know, I completely reject people deciding who can play Hedwig. It can be any gender, ethnicity, age, sexuality. It is—as Toni Morrison said—in understanding something that is not you, that empathy begins.

00:49:39 Jesse Host You have recently released a song with—that you wrote with Stephen Trask, with whom you wrote *Hedwig*. The two of you had not at least released anything in 20 years or so. Was it something that you had talked about a long time or was it something that just one day you ran into each other in a coffee shop? *[Chuckles.]*

00:50:06 John Guest Well, we'd been touring off and on with this *Origin of Love Tour*. And I was doing songs from my new musical, *Anthem: Homunculus*. He was doing songs from his show, *This Ain't No Disco*. And during lockdown, I decided to make a remotely created album, called *New American Dream*, with friends. I would ask them to send me a musical track. I would write lyrics and a melody over it, and then we'd overdub. So, we did it all for free for three beneficiaries—a trans legal group, an MLK scholarship, and a COVID foodbank in Mexico.

So, my part two—and I worked with people like Ezra Furman, Hooray for the Riff Raff, Wynton Marsalis. You know, an incredible array of people with different styles. You know? Like, it's fun to do a jazz song and a country song and a punk song and a cabaret song. So, Stephen was a natural fit for part two and he sent me a track. I was talking to him about The Cure and—you know, REM and this Australian band I love, called Deck Chairs Overboard, which is a great name. They have a song called "That's the Way". Check it out. And I was—you know, and we were—you know, in this red/blue state nightmare in the last few years. And this song is, "I wanna be a nation of one. I've had it with the polarization. I've had it with my relationship. I've had it with governments. I've had it with—you know, rightwing and leftwing control. I wanna be a nation of one."

[Music fades in.]

And I think we can all relate to that right now.

00:51:57	Jesse	Host	Well, John Cameron Mitchell, what a dream to have you on the show. I'm so grateful to you for coming in. And thanks for your amazing work.
00:52:04	John	Guest	What a pleasure!
00:52:05	Music	Music	"Nation of One" by John Cameron Mitchell. <i>I've had it with presidents And I'm done with the news I'm finished with governments You know they give me the blues</i>
00:52:21	Jesse	Host	<i>[Volume decreases and continues under the dialogue.]</i> John Cameron Mitchell. His benefit album is called <i>New American Dream</i> . Proceeds from the sales of the record benefit nonprofits like Burritos Not Bombs foodbank, the TGI Justice Project, and the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Trust Fund. We'll have a link to buy the record on the <i>Bullseye</i> page at MaximumFun.org . Also. Be on the lookout for a new drama series, called <i>Joe Exotic</i> . It's set to stream later this year on Peacock, and it stars John Cameron Mitchell as the title character, the Tiger King himself.
00:52:54	Music	Music	<i>[Volume increases.]</i> <i>I don't want to be trapped in this Wanna be nation of one Oh, oh, oh, oh I wanna be a nation of one Oh, oh, oh, oh I wanna be a nation of one</i>
00:53:12	Music	Transition	<i>[Song fades out.]</i> Bright, chiming synth.
00:53:13	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is created from the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where just recently, my son Oscar and I donned our masks and hit up the Peterson Automotive Museum. And in the underground vault tour, we saw a car with claw marks from the Black Panther himself. It was a lot of fun. Also, one that Elvis shot holes into. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> 'Cause he was mad it wouldn't start. Our show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producer is Jesus Ambrosio. Production fellows at Maximum Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. Our thanks to our departing pal, Casey O'Brien, who helped us for many years. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is called "Huddle Formation". It was recorded by the group The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for sharing it.
00:54:23	Promo	Promo	You can also keep up with the show on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post all of our interviews there. I think that's about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff. Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR. <i>[Music fades out.]</i>

